

The Project Gutenberg eBook of Everyman's Land

This ebook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this ebook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you'll have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: Everyman's Land

Author: A. M. Williamson

Author: C. N. Williamson

Release date: November 14, 2006 [eBook #19806]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by V. L. Simpson, Suzanne Shell and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK EVERYMAN'S LAND ***

[Pg 1]

[Pg 2]

EVERYMAN'S LAND

By C. N. & A. M. WILLIAMSON

Author of

"The Lightning Conductor Discovers America,"

"Lady Betty Across the Water,"

"Set in Silver," Etc.

Frontispiece

A. L. BURT COMPANY

Publishers

New York

Published by arrangement with Doubleday, Page & Company

[Pg 3]

COPYRIGHT, 1918, BY

C. N. & A. M. WILLIAMSON

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED, INCLUDING THAT OF

TRANSLATION INTO FOREIGN LANGUAGES,

INCLUDING THE SCANDINAVIAN

COPYRIGHT, 1918, BY THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY

[Pg 4]

TO ALL SOLDIERS WHO HAVE FOUGHT
OR FIGHT FOR EVERYMAN'S LAND AND
EVERYMAN'S RIGHT; AND TO THOSE
WHO LOVE FRANCE



"I can't believe that the castle of Ham was as striking in its untouched magnificence, as now, in the rose-red splendour of its ruin!"

[Pg 8]

[Pg 7]

[Pg 6]

[Pg 5]

- [CHAPTER I](#)
- [CHAPTER II](#)
- [CHAPTER III](#)
- [CHAPTER IV](#)
- [CHAPTER V](#)
- [CHAPTER VI](#)
- [CHAPTER VII](#)
- [CHAPTER VIII](#)
- [CHAPTER IX](#)
- [CHAPTER X](#)
- [CHAPTER XI](#)
- [CHAPTER XII](#)
- [CHAPTER XIII](#)
- [CHAPTER XIV](#)
- [CHAPTER XV](#)
- [CHAPTER XVI](#)
- [CHAPTER XVII](#)
- [CHAPTER XVIII](#)
- [CHAPTER XIX](#)
- [CHAPTER XX](#)
- [CHAPTER XXI](#)
- [CHAPTER XXII](#)
- [CHAPTER XXIII](#)
- [CHAPTER XXIV](#)
- [CHAPTER XXV](#)
- [CHAPTER XXVI](#)
- [CHAPTER XXVII](#)
- [CHAPTER XXVIII](#)
- [CHAPTER XXIX](#)
- [CHAPTER XXX](#)
- [CHAPTER XXXI](#)
- [CHAPTER XXXII](#)
- [CHAPTER XXXIII](#)

CHAPTER I

Padre, when you died, you left a message for me. You asked me to go on writing, if I were in trouble, just as I used to write when you were on earth. I used to "confess," and you used to advise. Also you used to scold. *How* you used to scold! I am going to do now what you asked, in that message.

I shall never forget how you packed me off to school at Brighton, and Brian to Westward Ho! the year father died and left us to you—the most troublesome legacy a poor bachelor parson ever had! I'd made up my mind to hate England. Brian couldn't hate anything or anybody: dreamers don't know how to hate: and I wanted to hate you for sending us there. I wanted to be hated and misunderstood. I disguised myself as a Leprechaun and sulked; but it didn't work where you were concerned. You understood me as no one else ever could—or will, I believe. You taught me something about life, and to see that people are much the same all over the world, if you "take them by the heart."

You took *me* by the heart, and you held me by it, from the time I was twelve till the time when you gave your life [Pg 9]for your country. Ten years! When I tell them over now, as a nun tells the beads of her rosary, I realize what good years they were, and how their goodness—with such goodness as I had in me to face them—came through you.

Even after you died, you seemed to be near, with encouragement and advice. Remembering how pleased you were, when I decided to train as a nurse, added later to the sense of your nearness, because I felt you would rejoice when I was able to be of real use. It was only after you went that my work began to count, but I was sure you knew. I could hear your voice say, "Good girl! Hurrah for you!" when I got the gold medal for nursing the contagious cases; your dear old Irish voice, as it used to say the same words when I brought you my school prizes.

Perhaps I was "a good girl." Anyhow, I was a good nurse. Not that I deserved much credit! Brian was fighting, and in danger day and night. You were gone; and I was glad to be a soldier in my way, with never a minute to think of myself. Besides, somehow I wasn't one bit afraid. I *loved* the work. But, *Padre mio*, I am not a good girl now. I'm a wicked girl, wickeder than you or I ever dreamed it was in me to be, at my worst. Yet if your spirit should appear as I write, to warn me that I'm sinning an unpardonable sin, I should go on sinning it.

For one thing, it's for Brian, twin brother of my body, twin brother of my heart. For another thing, it's too late to turn back. There's a door that has slammed shut behind me.

Now, I'll begin and tell you everything exactly as it happened. Many a "confession-letter" I've begun in [Pg 10] just these words, but never one like this. I don't deserve that it should bring me the heartease which used to come. But the thought of you is my star in darkness. Brian is the last person to whom I can speak, because above all things I want him to be happy. On earth there is no one else. Beyond the earth there is—*you*.

When Brian was wounded, they expected him to die, and he was asking for me. The telegram came one day when we had all been rather overworked in the hospital, and I was feeling ready to drop. I must only have imagined my tiredness though, for when I heard about Brian I grew suddenly strong as steel. I was given leave, and disinfected, and purified as thoroughly as Esther when she was being made worthy of Ahasuerus. Then I dashed off to catch the first train going north.

St. Raphael was our railway station, but I hadn't seen the place since I took up work in the Hôpital des Épidémies. That was many months before; and meanwhile a training-school for American aviators had been started at St. Raphael. News of its progress had drifted to our ears, but of course the men weren't allowed to come within a mile of us: we were too contagious. They had sent presents, though—presents of money, and one grand gift had burst upon us from a young millionaire whose father's name is known everywhere. He sent a cheque for a sum so big that we nurses were nearly knocked down by the size of it. With it was enclosed a request that the money should be used to put wire-nettings in all windows and doors, and to build a roofed loggia for convalescents. If there were anything left over, we might buy deck-chairs and air-pillows. Of course it was easy [Pg 11] for any one to know that we needed all these things. Our lack was notorious. We sent a much disinfected, carbolic-smelling round robin of thanks to "James W. Beckett, Junior," son of the western railway king.

As I drove to the *gare* of St. Raphael, I thought of the kind boys who had helped our poor *poilus*, and especially of James Beckett. Whether he were still at the aviation camp, or had finished his training and gone to the front, I didn't know: but I wafted a blessing to our benefactor. I little dreamed then of the unforgivable injury I was fated to do him! You see, Padre, I use the word "*fated*." That's because I've turned coward. I try to pretend that fate has been too strong for me. But down deep I know you were right when you said, "Our characters carve our fate."

It was a long journey from the south to the north, where Brian was, for in war-days trains do what they like and what nobody else likes. I travelled for three days and nights, and when I came to my journey's end, instead of Brian being dead as I'd seen him in a hundred hideous dreams, the doctors held out hope that he might live. They told me this to give me courage, before they broke the news that he would be blind. I suppose they thought I'd be so thankful to keep my brother at any price, that I should hardly feel the shock. But I wasn't thankful. I wasn't! The price seemed too big. I judged Brian by myself—Brian, who so worshipped beauty that I used to call him "Phidias!" I was sure he would rather have gone out of this world whose face he'd loved, than stay in it without eyes for its radiant smile. But there I made a great mistake. Brian was [Pg 12] magnificent. Perhaps you would have known what to expect of him better than I knew.

Where you are, you will understand why he did not despair. I couldn't understand then, and I scarcely can now, though living with my blind Brian is teaching me lessons I feel unworthy to learn. It was he who comforted me, not I him. He said that all the beauty of earth was his already, and nothing could take it away. He wouldn't *let* it be taken away! He said that sight was first given to all created creatures in the form of a desire to see, desire so intense that with the developing faculty of sight, animals developed eyes for its concentration. He reminded me how in dreams, and even in

thoughts—if they're vivid enough—we see as distinctly with our brains as with our eyes. He said he meant to make a wonderful world for himself with this vision of the brain and soul. He intended to develop the power, so that he would gain more than he had lost, and I must help him.

Of course I promised to help all I could; but there was death in my heart. I remembered our gorgeous holiday together before the war, tramping through France, Brian painting those lovely "impressions" of his, which made him money and something like fame. And oh, I remembered not only that such happy holidays were over, but that soon there would be no more money for our bare living!

We were always so poor, that church mice were plutocrats compared to us. At least they need pay no rent, and have to buy no clothes! I'm sure, if the truth were known, the money Father left for our education and bringing up [Pg 13] was gone before we began to support ourselves, though you never let us guess we were living on you. As I sat and listened to Brian talk of our future, my very bones seemed to melt. The only thing I've been trained to do well is to nurse. I wasn't a bad nurse when the war began. I'm an excellent nurse now. But it's Brian's nurse I must be. I saw that, in the first hour after the news was broken, and our two lives broken with it. I saw that, with me unable to earn a penny, and Brian's occupation gone with his sight, we were about as helpless as a pair of sparrows with their wings clipped.

If Brian in his secret soul had any such thoughts, perhaps he had faith to believe that not a sparrow can fall, unless its fall is appointed by God. Anyhow, he said never a word about ways and means, except to mention cheerfully that he had "heaps of pay saved up," nearly thirty pounds. Of course I answered that I was rich, too. But I didn't go into details. I was afraid even Brian's optimism might be dashed if I did. Padre, my worldly wealth consisted of five French bank notes of a hundred francs each, and a few horrible little extra scraps of war-paper and copper.

The hospital where Brian lay was near the front, in the remains of a town the British had won back from the Germans. I called the place Crucifix Corner: but God knows we are all at Crucifix Corner now! I lodged in a hotel that had been half knocked down by a bomb, and patched up for occupation. As soon as Brian was able to be moved, the doctor wanted him to go to Paris to an American brain specialist who had lately come over and made astonishing cures. Brian's blindness was due to [Pg 14] paralysis of the optic nerve; but this American—Cuyler—had performed spine and brain operations which had restored sight in two similar cases. There might be a hundredth chance for my brother.

Of course I said it would be possible to take Brian to Paris. I'd have made it possible if I'd had to sell my hair to do it; and you know my curly black mop of hair was always my pet vanity. Brian being a soldier, he could have the operation free, if Doctor Cuyler considered it wise to operate; but—as our man warned me—there were ninety-nine chances to one against success: and at all events there would be a lot of expenses in the immediate future.

I sent in my resignation to the dear Hôpital des Épidémies, explaining my reasons: and presently Brian and I set out for Paris by easy stages. The cap was put on the climax for me by remembering how he and I had walked over that very ground three years before, in the sunshine of life and summer. Brian too thought of the past, but not in bitterness. I hid my anguish from him, but it gnawed the heart of me with the teeth of a rat. I couldn't see what Brian had ever done to deserve such a fate as his, and I began to feel wicked, *wicked*. It seemed that destiny had built up a high prison wall in front of my brother and me, and I had a wild impulse to kick and claw at it, though I knew I couldn't pull it down.

When we arrived in Paris, Doctor Cuyler saw us at once; but his opinion added another pile of flinty black blocks to the prison wall. He thought that there would be no hope from an operation. If there were any hope at all (he couldn't say there was) it lay in waiting, resting, [Pg 15] and building up Brian's shattered health. After months of perfect peace, it was just on the cards that sight might come back of itself, suddenly and unexpectedly, in a moment. We were advised to live in the country, and Doctor Cuyler suggested that it would be well for my brother to have surroundings with agreeable occupation for the mind. If he were a musician he must have a piano. There ought to be a garden for him to walk in and even work in. Motoring, with the slight vibration of a good car, would be particularly beneficial a little later on. I suppose we must have looked to Doctor Cuyler like millionaires, for he didn't appear to dream that there could be the slightest difficulty in carrying out his programme.

I sat listening with the calm mien of one to whom money comes as air comes to the lungs; but behind my face the wildest thoughts were raging. You've sometimes seen a row of tall motionless pines, the calmest, stateliest things on earth, screening with their branches the mad white rush of a cataract. My brain felt like such a screened cataract.

Except for his blindness, by this time Brian was too well for a hospital. We were at the small, cheap hotel on "*la rive gauche*" where we'd stayed and been happy three years ago, before starting on our holiday trip. When we came back after the interview with Doctor Cuyler, Brian was looking done up, and I persuaded him to lie down and rest. No one else could have slept, after so heavy a blow of disappointment, without a drug, but Brian is a law unto himself. He said if I would sit by him and read, he'd feel at peace, and would drop off into a [Pg 16] doze. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and I hadn't glanced yet at the newspaper we had bought in the morning. I took it up, to please Brian with the rustling of the pages, not expecting to concentrate upon a line but instantly my eyes were caught by a name I knew.

"Tragic Romance of Millionaire's Family," I read. "James W. Beckett brings his wife to France and Reads Newspaper Notice of Only Son's Death."

This was the double-line, big-lettered heading of a half column on the front page; and it brought to my mind a picture. I saw a group of nurses gazing over each other's shoulders at a blue cheque. It was a cheque for six thousand francs, signed in a clear, strong hand, "James W. Beckett, Junior."

So he was dead, that generous boy, to whom our hearts had gone out in gratitude! It could not be very long since he had finished his training at St. Raphael and begun work at the front. What a waste of splendid material it seemed, that he should have been swept away so soon!

I read on, and from my own misery I had an extra pang to spare for James Beckett, Senior, and his wife.

Someone had contrived to tear a fragmentary interview from the "bereaved railway magnate," as he was called in the potted phrase of the journalist. Apparently the poor, trapped man had been too soft-hearted or too dazed with grief to put up a forceful resistance, and the reporter had been quick to seize his advantage.

He had learned that Mr. and Mrs. James W. Beckett, Senior, had nearly died of homesickness for their son. They had thought of "running across to surprise Jimmy." And then a letter had come from him saying that in a fortnight his training would be over. He was to be granted eight days' leave, which he didn't particularly want, since he couldn't spend it with them; and immediately after he would go to the front.

"We made up our minds that Jimmy *should* spend that leave of his with us," the old man had said. "We got our papers in a hurry and engaged cabins on the first boat that was sailing. Unluckily there wasn't one for nearly a week, but we did the best we could. When everything was fixed up, I wired Jimmy to meet us at the Ritz, in Paris. We had a little breeze with a U-boat, and we ran into some bad weather which made my wife pretty sick, but nothing mattered to us except the delay, we were so crazy to see the boy. At Bordeaux a letter from him was waiting. It told how he was just as crazy to see *us*, but we'd only have twenty-four hours together, as his leave and orders for the front had both been advanced. The delay at sea had cost a day, and that seemed like hard lines, as we should reach Paris with no more than time to wish the lad God-speed. But in the train, when we came to look at the date, we saw that we'd miscalculated. Unless Jimmy'd been able to get extra leave we'd miss him altogether. His mother said that would be too bad to be true. We hoped and prayed to find him at the Ritz. Instead, we found news that he had fallen in his first battle."

The interviewer went on, upon his own account, to praise "Jimmy" Beckett. He described him as a young man of twenty-seven, "of singularly engaging manner and handsome appearance; a graduate with high honours from Harvard, an all-round sportsman and popular with a large circle of friends, but fortunately leaving neither a wife nor a fiancée behind him in America." The newly qualified aviator had, indeed, fallen in his first battle: but according to the writer it had been a battle of astonishing glory for a beginner. Single-handed he had engaged four enemy machines, manœuvring his own little Nieuport in a way to excite the highest admiration and even surprise in all spectators. Two out of the four German 'planes he had brought down over the French lines; and was in chase of the third, flying low above the German trenches, when two new Fokkers appeared on the scene and attacked him. His plane crashed to earth in flames, and a short time after, prisoners had brought news of his death.

"Mr. and Mrs. James W. Beckett will have the sympathy of all Europe as well as their native land, in these tragic circumstances," the journalist ended his story with a final flourish. "If such grief could be assuaged, pride in the gallant death of their gallant son might be a panacea."

"As if you could make pride into a balm for broken hearts!" I said to myself in scorn of this flowery eloquence. For a few minutes I forgot my own plight to pity these people whom I had never seen. The Paris *Daily Messenger* slid off my lap on to the floor, and dropped with the back page up. When I had glanced toward the bed, and seen that Brian still slept, my eyes fell on the paper again. The top part of the last page is always devoted to military snapshots, and a face smiled up at me from it—a face I had seen once and never forgotten.

My heart gave a jump, Padre, because the one tiny, abbreviated dream-romance of my life came from the original of that photograph. Although the man I knew (if people can know each other in a day's acquaintance) had been *en civile*, and this one was in aviator's uniform, I was sure they were the same. And even before I'd snatched up the paper to read what was printed under the picture, something—the wonderful inner Something that's never wrong—told me I was looking at a portrait of Jimmy Beckett.

CHAPTER II

I never mentioned my one-day romance to anybody. Only very silly, sentimental girls would put such an episode into words, and flatter themselves by calling it a romance. But now that you and Jimmy Beckett have both given your lives for the great cause, and are in the same mysterious Beyond while I'm still down here at Crucifix Corner, I can tell you the story. If you and he meet, it may make it easier for him to forgive me the thing I have done.

When Brian and I were having that great summer holiday of ours, the year before the war—one day we were in a delicious village near a cathedral town on the Belgian border. A piece of luck had fallen in our way, like a ripe apple tumbling off a tree. A rich Parisian and his wife came motoring along, and stopped out of sheer curiosity to look at a picture Brian was painting, under a white umbrella near the roadside. I was not with him. I think I must have been in the garden of our quaint old hotel by the canal side, writing letters—probably one to you; but the couple took such a fancy to Brian's "impression," that they offered to buy it. The bargain was struck, there and then. Two days later arrived a telegram from Paris asking for another picture to "match" the first at the same price. I advised Brian to choose out two or three sketches for the people to select from, and carry them to Paris himself, rather than trust the post. He went; and it was on the one day of his absence that my romance happened.

Ours was a friendly little hotel, with a darling landlady, who was almost as much interested in Brian and me as if she'd been our foster-mother. The morning after Brian left, she came waddling out to the adorable, earwiggy, rose-covered summer-house that I'd annexed as a private sitting room. "Mademoiselle," she breathlessly announced, "there is a young millionaire of a monsieur Anglais or Américain just arrived. What a pity he should be wasted because Monsieur your brother has gone! I am sure if he could but see one of the exquisite pictures he would wish to buy all!"

"How do you know that the monsieur is a millionaire, and what makes you think he would care about pictures?" I enquired.

"I know he is a millionaire because he has come in one of those grand automobiles which only millionaires ever have. And I think he cares for pictures because the first thing he did when he came into the hall was to stare at the old prints on the wall. He praised the two best which the real artists always praise, and complimented me on owning them" the

dear creature explained. "Besides, he is in this neighbourhood expressly to see the cathedral; and monsieur your brother has made a most beautiful sketch of the cathedral. It is now in his portfolio. Is there nothing we can do? I have already induced the monsieur to drink a glass of milk while I have come to consult Mademoiselle."

I thought hard for a minute, because it would be grand[Pg 22] if I could say when Brian came back, "I have sold your cathedral for you." But I might have saved myself brain fag. Madame Mounet had settled everything in her head, and was merely playing me, like a foolish fish.

"What I have thought of is this," she said. "I told the monsieur that he could see something better than my prints if he would give himself the pain of waiting till I could fetch the key of a room where an artist-client of ours has a marvellous exhibition. There is *no* such room yet, but there can be, and the exhibition can be, too, if Mademoiselle will make haste to pin her brother's pictures to the walls of the yellow *salon*. With a hammer and a few tacks—*voilà* the thing is done. What does Mademoiselle say?"

Mademoiselle said "Yes—yes!" to her part of the programme. But what of the millionaire monsieur? Would he not balk? Would he not refuse to be bothered?

Madame was absolutely confident that he would not do these disappointing things. She was so confident that I vaguely suspected she had something up her sleeve: but time pressed, and instead of Sherlock Holmesing I darted to my work. Afterward she confessed, with pride rather than repentance. She described graphically how the face of the monsieur had fallen when she asked him to look at an exhibition of pictures; how he had begun to make an excuse that he must be off at once to the cathedral; and how she had ventured to cut him short by remarking, "Mademoiselle the sister of the artist, she who will show the work, ah, it is a *jeune fille* of the most *romantic* beauty!" On hearing this, the monsieur had said[Pg 23] no more about the cathedral, but had ordered the glass of milk.

In fifteen minutes the exhibition (consisting of six sketches!) was ready in the showroom of the hotel, the yellow salon which had been occupied as a bedchamber one night by the Empress Eugénie, and was always kept locked except on gala occasions. I, not knowing how I had been over-praised to the audience, was also ready, quivering with the haste I had made in pinning up the pictures and opening the musty, close room to the air. Then came in a young man.

As I write, Padre, I am back again in that *salon jaune*, and he is walking in at the door, pausing a second on the threshold at sight of me. I will give you the little play in one act. We smile. The hero of the comedy-drama has a rather big mouth, and such white teeth that his smile, in his brown face, is a lightning-flash at dusk. It is a thin face with two dimples that make lines when he laughs. His eyes are gray and long, with the eagle-look that knows far spaces; deep-set eyes under straight black brows, drawn low. His lashes are black, too, but his short crinkly hair is brown. He has a good square forehead, and a high nose like an Indian's. He is tall, and has one of those lean, lanky loose-jointed figures that crack tennis-players and polo men have. I like him at once, and I think he likes me, for his eyes light up; and just for an instant there's a feeling as if we looked through clear windows into each other's souls. It is almost frightening, that effect!

I begin to talk, to shake off an odd embarrassment.

"Madame Mounet tells me you want to see my brother's[Pg 24] pictures," I say. "Here are a few sketches. He has taken all the rest worth looking at to Paris."

"It's good of you to let me come in," the hero of the play answers. Instantly I know he's not English. He has one of those nice American voices, with a slight drawl, that somehow sound extraordinarily frank. I don't speculate about his name. I don't stop to wonder who he is. I think only of *what* he is. I forget that Madame has exploited him as a millionaire. I don't care whether or not he buys a picture. I want nothing, except the pleasure of talking with him, and seeing how he looks at me.

I mumble some polite nonsense in return for his. He gazes at Brian's water-colours and admires them. Then he turns from the pictures to me. We discuss the sketches and the scenes they represent. "Oh, have you been *there*?" "Why, I was at that place a week ago!" "How odd!" "We must have missed each other by a day." And we drift into gossip about ourselves. Still we don't come to the subject of names. Names seem to be of no importance. They belong to the world of conventions.

We talk and talk—mostly of France, and our travels, and pictures and books we love; but our eyes speak of other things. I feel that his are saying, "You are beautiful!" Mine answer, "I'm glad you think that. Why do you seem so different to me from other people?" Then suddenly, there's a look too long between us. "I wish my brother were here to explain his pictures!" I cry; though I don't wish it at all. It is only that I must break the silence.[Pg 25]

This brings us back to the business in hand. He says, "May I really buy one of these sketches?"

"Are you sure you *want* to?" I laugh.

"Sure!" he answers. And I never heard that word sound so nice, even in my own dear Ireland.

He chooses the cathedral—which he hasn't visited yet. Do I know the price my brother has decided on? With that question I discover that he has Madame Mounet's version of our name. Brian and I have laughed dozens of laughs at her way of pronouncing O'Malley. "*Ommalee*" we are for her, and "Mees Ommalee" she has made me for her millionaire. For fun, I don't correct him. Let him find out for himself who we really are! I say that my brother hasn't fixed a price; but would six hundred francs seem *very* high? The man considers it ridiculously low. He refuses to pay less than twice that sum. Even so, he argues he will be cheating us, and getting me into hot water when my brother comes. We almost quarrel, and at last the hero has his way. He strikes me as one who is used to that!

When the matter is settled, an odd look passes over his face. I wonder if he has changed his mind, and doesn't know

how to tell me his trouble. Something is worrying him; that is clear. Just as I'm ready to make things easy, with a question, he laughs.

"I'm going to take you into my confidence," he says, "and tell you a story—about myself. In Paris, before I started on this tour, a friend of mine gave a man's dinner for me. He and the other chaps were chaffing because—oh, because of a silly argument we got into about—life in general, and mine in particular. On the strength of it[Pg 26] my chum bet me a thing he knew I wanted, that I couldn't go through my trip under an assumed name. I bet I could, and would. I bet a thing I want to keep. That's the silly situation. I hate not telling you my real name, and signing a cheque for your brother. But I've stuck it out for four weeks, and the bet has only two more to run. I'm calling myself Jim Wyndham. It's only my surname I've dropped for the bet. The rest is mine. May I pay for the picture in cash—and may I come back here, or wherever you are on the fifteenth day from now, and introduce myself properly? Or—you've only to speak the word, and I'll throw over the whole footling business this minute, and——"

I cut in, to say that I *won't* speak the word, and he mustn't throw the business over. It is quite amusing I tell him, and I hope he'll win his bet. As for the picture—he may pay as he chooses. But about the proper introduction—Heaven knows where I shall be in a fortnight. My brother loves to make up his mind the night beforehand, *where* to go next. We are a pair of tramps.

"You don't do your tramping on foot?"

"Indeed we do! We haven't seen a railway station since our first day out from Paris. We stop one day in a place we don't care for: three in a place we like: a week or more in a place we *love*."

"Then at that rate you won't have got far in fifteen days. I know the direction you've come from by what you've told me, and your brother's sketches. You wouldn't be here on the border of Belgium if you didn't mean to cross the frontier." [Pg 27]

"Oh, we shall cross it, of course. But where we shall go when we get across is another question."

"I'll find the answer, and I'll find you," he flings at me with a smile of defiance.

"Why should you give yourself trouble?"

"To—see some more of your brother's pictures," he says gravely. I know that he wishes to see me, not the pictures, and he knows that I know; but I let it go at that.

When the sketch has been wrapped up between cardboards, and the twelve hundred francs placed carelessly on a table, there seems no reason why Mr. Jim Wyndham shouldn't start for the cathedral. But he suddenly decides that the way of wisdom is to eat first, and begs me to lunch with him. "Do, *please*," he begs, "just to show you're not offended with my false pretences."

I yearn to say yes, and don't see why I shouldn't; so I do. We have *déjeuner* together in the summer-house where Brian and I always eat. We chat about a million things. We linger over our coffee, and I smoke two or three of his gold-tipped Egyptians. When we suppose an hour has gone by, at most, behold, it is half-past four! I tell him he must start: he will be too late for the cathedral at its best. He says, "Hang the cathedral!" and refuses to stir unless I promise to dine with him when he comes back.

"You mean in a fortnight?" I ask. "Probably we shan't be here."

"I mean this evening."

"But—you're not coming back! You're going another way. You told me——"

"Ah, that was before we were friends. Of course I'm coming back. I'd like to stay to-morrow, and——" [Pg 28]

"You certainly must not! I won't dine with you to-night if you do."

"Will you if I don't?"

"Perhaps."

"Then I'll order the dinner before I start for the cathedral. I want it to be a perfect one."

"But—I've said only perhaps."

"Don't you want to pour a little honest gold into poor old Madame Mounet's pocket?"

"Ye-es."

"If so, you mustn't chase away her customers."

"For her sake, the dinner is a bargain!"

"Not the least bit for my sake?"

"Oh, but yes! I've enjoyed our talk. And you've been so *nice* about my brother's pictures."

So it is settled. I put on my prettiest dress, white muslin, with some fresh red roses Madame Mounet brings me; and the dinner-table in the summer-house is a picture, with pink Chinese lanterns, pink-shaded candles, and pink geraniums.

Madame won't decorate with roses because she explains, roses anywhere except on my *toilette*, "spoil the unique effect of Mademoiselle."

The little inn on the canal-side buzzes with excitement. Not within the memory of man or woman has there been so important a client as Mr. Jim Wyndham. Most motoring millionaires dash by in a cloud of dust to the cathedral town, where a smart modern hotel has been run up to cater for tourists. This magnificent Monsieur Américain engages the "suite of the Empress Eugénie," as it grandly advertises itself, for his own use and that of his chauffeur, merely to bathe in, and rest in, though they [Pg 29] are not to stay the night. And the dinner ordered will enable Madame to show what she can do, a chance she rarely gets from cheeseparing customers, like Brian and me, and others of our ilk.

I am determined not to betray my childish eagerness by being first at the rendezvous. I keep to my hot room, until I spy a tall young figure of a man in evening dress striding toward the arbour. To see this sight, I have to be at my window; but I hide behind a white curtain and a screen of wistaria and roses. I count sixty before I go down. I walk slowly. I stop and examine flowers in the garden. I could catch a wonderful gold butterfly, but perhaps it is as happy as I am. I wouldn't take its life for anything on earth! As I watch it flutter away, my host comes out of the arbour to meet me.

We pass two exquisite hours in each other's company. I recall each subject on which we touch and even the words we speak, as if all were written in a journal. The air is so clear and still that we can hear the famous chimes of the cathedral clock, far away, in the town that is a bank of blue haze on the horizon. At half-past nine I begin to tell my host that he must go, but he does not obey till after ten. Then at last he takes my hand for good-bye—no, *au revoir*: he will not say good-bye! "In two weeks," he repeats, "we shall meet again. I shall have won my bet, and I shall bring *you* the thing I win."

"I won't take it!" I laugh.

"Wait till you see it, before you make sure."

"I'm not even sure yet of seeing you," I remind him.

"You may be sure if I'm alive. I shall scour the coun[Pg 30]try for miles around to find you. I shall succeed—unless I'm dead."

All this time he had been holding my hand, while I have pretended to be unconscious of the fact. Suddenly I seem to remember, and reluctantly he lets my fingers slip through his.

We bid each other *adieu* in the arbour. I do not go to "see him off," and I keep the picture of Jim Wyndham under the roof of roses, in the moon-and candle-light.

Just so I have kept it for more than three years; for we never met again. And now that I've seen the photograph of Jimmy Beckett, I know that we never shall meet.

Why he did not find us when the fortnight of his bet was over I can't imagine. It seems that, if he tried, he must have come upon our tracks, for we travelled scarcely more than twenty miles in the two weeks. Perhaps he changed his mind, and did not try. Perhaps he feared that my "romantic beauty" might lose its romance, when seen for the second time. Something like this must be the explanation; and I confess to you, Padre, that the failure of the prince to keep our tryst was the biggest disappointment and the sharpest humiliation of my life. It took most of the conceit out of me, and since then I've never been vain of my alleged "looks" or "charm" for more than two minutes on end. I've invariably said to myself, "Remember Jim Wyndham, and how he didn't think you worth the bother of coming back to see."

Now you know why I can't describe the effect upon my mind of learning that Jim Wyndham, the hero of my one-day romance, and Jimmy Beckett, the dead American aviator, were one. [Pg 31]

CHAPTER III

There could be no chance of mistake. The photograph was a very good likeness.

For a while I sat quite still with the newspaper in my hands, living over the day in the shabby old garden. I felt like a mourner, bereaved of a loved one, for in a way—a schoolgirl way, perhaps—I had loved my prince of the arbour. And always since our day together, I'd compared other men with him, to their disadvantage. No one else ever captured my imagination as he captured it in those few hours.

For a moment that little bit of Long Ago pushed itself between me and Now. I was grieving for my dead romance, instead of for Brian's broken life: but quickly I woke up. Things were as bad as ever again, and even worse, because of their contrast with the past I'd conjured up. Grief for the death of Jimmy Beckett mingled with grief for Brian, and anxieties about money, in the dull, sickly way that unconnected troubles tangle themselves together in nightmare dreams.

I'm not telling you how I suffered, as an excuse for what I did, dear Padre. I'm only explaining how one thing led to another.

It was in thinking of Jim Wyndham, and what might have happened between us if he'd come back to me as he promised, that the awful idea developed in my head. [Pg 32] The thought wasn't born full-grown and armoured, like Minerva when she sprang from the brain of Jupiter. It began like this:

"If I'd been engaged to him, I might have gone to his parents now. I should have comforted them by talking about their son, and they could have comforted me. Perhaps they would have adopted us as their children. We need never have

been lonely and poor. Jim would have wished us to live with his father and mother, for all our sakes."

When the thought had gone as far as this, it suddenly leaped to an enormous height, as if a devil in me had been doing the mango trick.

I *heard* myself thinking, "Why don't you go to see Mr. and Mrs. Beckett, and tell them you were engaged to marry their only son? The paper said he left no fiancée or wife in America. You can easily make them believe your story. Nobody can prove that it isn't true, and out of evil good will come for everyone."

Flames seemed to rush through my head with a loud noise, like the Tongues of Fire in the Upper Room. My whole body was in a blaze. Each nerve was a separate red-hot wire.

I rose to my feet, but I made no sound. Instinct reminded me that I mustn't wake Brian, but I could breathe better, think better standing, I felt.

"They are millionaires, the Becketts—millionaires!" a voice was repeating in my brain. They wouldn't let Brian or you want for anything. They'd be *glad* if you went to them. You could make them happy. You could tell them things they'd love to hear—and some[Pg 33] would be true things. You were in the hospital close to St. Raphael for months, while Jimmy Beckett was in the training camp. Who's to say you didn't meet? If you'd been engaged to him since that day years ago, you certainly would have met. No rules could have kept you apart. Go to them—go to them—or if you're afraid, write a note, and ask if they'll receive you. If they refuse, no harm will have been done."

Maybe, even then, if I'd stopped to tell myself what a wicked, cruel plan it was, I should have given it up. But it seemed a burning inspiration, and I knew that I must act upon it at once or never.

I subsided into my chair again, and softly, very softly, hitched it closer to the table which pretended to be a writing-desk. Inside a blotting-pad were a few sheets of hotel stationery and envelopes. My stylographic pen glided noiselessly over the paper. Now and then I glanced over my shoulder at Brian, and he was still fast asleep, looking more like an angel than a man. You know my nickname for him was always "Saint" because of his beautiful pure face, and the far-away look in his eyes. Being a soldier has merely bronzed him a little. It hasn't carved any hard lines. Being blind has made the far-away things he used to see come near, so that he walks in the midst of them.

I wrote quickly and with a dreadful kind of ease, not hesitating or crossing out a single word.

"Dear Mr. and Mrs. Beckett," I began (because I meant to address my letter to both). "I've just heard that you have come over from America, only in time to learn of your great loss. Is it an intrusion to tell you that your loss is mine too? I dearly[Pg 34] loved your son. I met him nearly four years ago, when my brother and I were travelling in France and Belgium. Our meeting was the romance of my life. I hardly dare to think he told you about it. But a few months ago I took up nursing at the Hôpital des Épidémies, near St. Raphael. As you know, he was there training. He sent us a cheque for our sufferers; and what was fated to happen did happen. We met again. We loved each other. We were engaged. He may have written to you, or he may have waited till he could tell you by word of mouth.

"I am in Paris, as you will see by this address. My soldier brother has lost his sight. I brought him here in the hope of a cure by your great American specialist Dr. Cuyler, but he tells me an operation would be useless. They say that one sorrow blunts another. I do not find it so. My heart is almost breaking. May I call upon you? To see *his* father and mother would be a comfort to me. But if it would be otherwise for you, please say 'no.' I will try to understand.

"Yours in deepest sympathy,

"Mary O'Malley."

As I finished, Brian waked from his nap, so I was able to leave him and run downstairs to send off the letter by hand.

When it had gone, I felt somewhat as I've felt when near a man to whom an anæsthetic is being given. The fumes of ether have an odd effect on me. They turn me into a "don't care" sort of person without conscience and without fear. No wonder some nations give soldiers a dash of ether in their drink, when they have to go "over the top!" I could go, and feel no sense of danger, even though my reason knew that it existed.

So it was while I waited for the messenger from our mean[Pg 35] little hotel to come back from the magnificent Ritz. Would he suddenly dash my sinful hopes by saying, "*Pas de réponse, Mademoiselle*"; or would he bring me a letter from Father and Mother Beckett? If he brought such a letter, would it invite me to call and be inspected, or would it suggest that I kindly go to the devil?

I was tremendously keyed up; and yet—curiously I didn't care which of these things happened. It was rather as if I were in a theatre, watching an act of a play that might end in one of several ways, neither one of which would really matter.

I read aloud to Brian. My voice sounded sweet and well modulated, I thought; but quite like that of a stranger. I was reading some moving details of a vast battle, which—ordinarily—would have stirred me to the heart. But they made no impression on my brain. I forgot the words as they left my lips. Dimly I wondered if there were a curse falling upon me already: if I were doomed to lose all sense of grief or joy, as the man in the old story lost his shadow when he sold it to Satan.

A long time passed. I stopped reading. Brian seemed inclined for the first time since his misfortune to talk over ways and means, and how we were to arrange our future. I shirked the discussion. Things would adjust themselves, I said evasively. I had some vague plans. Perhaps they would soon materialize. Even by to-morrow—

When I had got as far as that, tap, tap, came the long expected knock at the door. I sprang up. Suddenly the ether-like carelessness was gone. My life—my very soul—was at stake. I could hardly utter the little word "*Entrez!*" my throat was

so tight, so dry.[Pg 36]

The very young youth who opened the door was not the one I had sent to the Ritz. But I had no time to wonder why not, when he announced: "*Un monsieur et une dame, en bas, demandent à voir Mademoiselle.*"

My head whirled. Could it be?—but, surely no! They would not have come to see me. Yet whom did I know in Paris? Who had learned that we were at this hotel? Had the monsieur and the dame given their name? No, they had not. They had said that Mademoiselle would understand. They were in the *salon*.

I heard myself reply that I would descend *tout de suite*. I heard myself tell Brian that I should not be long away. I saw my face in the glass, deathly pale in its frame of dark hair, the eyes immense, with the pupils dilating over the blue, as an inky pool might drown a border of violets and blot out their colour. Even my lips were white. I was glad I had on a black dress—glad in a bad, deceitful way; though for a moment after learning who Jimmy Beckett was, I had felt a true thrill of loyal satisfaction because I was in mourning for my lost romance.

I went slowly down the four flights of stairs. I could not have gone fast without falling. I opened the door of the stuffy *salon*, and saw—the dearest couple the wide world could hold.[Pg 37]

CHAPTER IV

They sat together, an old-fashioned pair, on an old-fashioned sofa, facing the door. The thing I'd thought impossible had happened. The father and mother of Jim Beckett had come to me.

For some reason, they seemed as much surprised at sight of me as I at sight of them. We gazed at each other for an instant, all three without moving. Then the old man (he was old, not middle-aged, as most fathers are nowadays) got to his feet. He took a step toward me, holding out his hand. His eyes searched mine; and, dimmed by years and sorrow as they were, there was in them still a reminder of the unforgotten, eagle-gaze. From him the son had inherited his high nose and square forehead. Had he lived, some day Jim's face might have been chopped by Time's hatchet into just such a rugged brown mask of old-manliness. Some day, Jim's thick and smooth brown hair might have turned into such a snow-covered thatch, like the roof of a cottage on a Christmas card.

The old lady was thin and flat of line, like a bas-relief that had come alive and lost its background. She had in her forget-me-not blue eyes the look of a child who has never been allowed to grow up; and I knew at once that she was one of those women kept by their menfolk on a high shelf, like a fragile flower in a silver vase. She, too,[Pg 38] rose as I entered, but sank down again on the sofa with a little gesture at the same time welcoming and helpless.

"My daughter, no wonder he loved you!" said the old man. "Now we see you, we understand, don't we, Jenny?" Holding my hand, he turned and led me toward his wife, looking at me first, then at her. "We *had* to come. We're going to love you, for yourself—and for him."

Speaking, his face had a faintly perceptible quiver of strained nerves or old age, like a sigh of wind ruffling the calm surface of water. I felt how he fought to hide his emotion, and the answering thrill of it shot up through my arm, as our hands touched. My heart beat wildly, and the queer thought came that, if we were in the dark, it would send out pulsing lights from my body like the internal lamp of a firefly.

He called me his "daughter!" As I heard that word of love, which I had stolen, I realized the full shame and abomination of the thing I had done. My impulse was to cry out the truth. But it was only an impulse, such an impulse as lures one to jump from a height. I caught myself back from yielding, as I would have caught myself back from the precipice, lest in another moment I should lie crushed in a dark gulf. I waved before my eyes the flag of Brian's need, and my bad courage came back.

I let Mr. Beckett lead me to the sofa. I let his hand on my shoulder gently press me to sit down by his wife, who had not spoken yet. Her blue eyes, fixed with piteous earnestness on mine, were like those of a timid animal, when it is making up its mind whether to trust and "take to" a human stranger who offers advances. I seemed to[Pg 39] see her thinking—thinking not so much with her brain as with her heart, as you used to say Brian thought. I saw her ideas move as if they'd been the works of a watch ticking under glass. I knew that she wasn't clever enough to read my mind, but I felt that she was more dangerous, perhaps, than a person of critical intelligence. Being one of those always-was, always-will-be women—wife-women, mother-women she might by instinct see the badness of my heart as I was reading the simple goodness of hers.

Her longing to know the soul of me pierced to it like a fine crystal spear; and the pathos of this bereaved mother and father, who had so generously answered my call, brought tears to my eyes. I had not winced away from her blue searchlights, but tears gathered and suddenly poured over my cheeks. Perhaps it was the tragedy of my own situation more than hers which touched me, for I was pitying as much as hating myself. Still the tears were true tears; and I suppose nothing I could have said or done would have appealed to Jim Beckett's mother as they appealed.

"Oh! you *loved* him!" she quavered, as if that were the one question for which she had sought the answer. And the next thing I knew we were crying in each other's arms, the little frail woman and the cruel girl who was deceiving her. But, Padre, the cruel girl was suffering almost as she deserved to suffer. She *had* loved Jim Wyndham, and never will she love another man.

"There, there!" Mr. Beckett was soothing us, patting our shoulders and our heads. "That's right, cry together, but don't grudge Jim to the cause, either of you. I don't! I'm proud he went the way he did. It was a grand way[Pg 40]and a grand cause. We've got to remember how many other hearts in the world are aching as ours ache. We're not alone. I guess that helps a little. And Jenny, this poor child has a double sorrow to bear. Think of what she wrote about her brother,

who's lost his sight."

The little old lady sat up, and with a clean, lavender-scented handkerchief wiped first my eyes and then her own.

"I know—I know," she said. "But the child will let us try to comfort her—unless she has a father and mother of her own?"

"My father and mother died when I was a little girl," I answered. "I've only my brother in the world."

"You have us," they both exclaimed in the same breath: and though they bore as much physical likeness to one another as a delicate mountain-ash tree bears to the rocky mountain on which it grows, suddenly the two faces were so lit with the same beautiful inward light, that there was a striking resemblance between them. It was the kind of resemblance to be seen only on the faces of a pair who have loved each other, and thought the same thoughts long year after long year. The light was so warm, so pure and bright, that I felt as if a fire had been lit for me in the cold dark room. I didn't deserve to warm my hands in its glow; but I forgot my falseness for a moment, and let whatever was good in me flow out in gratitude.

I couldn't speak. I could only look, and kiss the old lady's tiny hand—ungloved to hold mine, and hung with loose rings of rich, ancient fashion such as children love to be shown in mother's jewel-box. In return, she kissed me on both cheeks, and the old man smoothed my hair, heavily.[Pg 41]

"Why yes, that's settled then, you belong to us," he said. "It's just as if Jimmy'd left you to us in his will. In his last letter the boy told his mother and me that when we met we'd get a pleasant surprise. We—silly old folks!—never thought of a love story. We supposed Jim was booked for promotion, or a new job with some sort of honour attached to it. And yet we might have guessed, if we'd had our wits about us, for we did know that Jimmy'd fallen in love at first sight with a girl in France, before the war broke out."

"He told you that!" I almost gasped. Then he *had* fallen in love, and hadn't gone away forgetting, as I'd thought! Or was it some other girl who had won him at first sight? This was what I said to myself: and something that was not myself added, "Now, if you don't lose your head, you will find out in a minute all you've been puzzling over for nearly four years."

"He told his mother," Mr. Beckett said. "Afterwards she told me. Jim wouldn't have minded. He knew well enough she always tells me everything, and he didn't ask her to keep any secret."

"It was when I was sort of cross one night, because he didn't pay enough attention to a nice girl I'd invited, hoping to please him," Mrs. Beckett confessed. "He'd just come back from Europe, and I enquired if the French girls were so handsome, they'd spoiled him for our home beauties. I let him see that his father and I wanted him to marry young, and give us a daughter we could love. Then he answered—I remember as if 'twas yesterday!—'Mother, you wouldn't want her unless I could love her too, would you?' 'Why no,' I answered. 'But you *would* love her!'[Pg 42] He didn't speak for a minute. He was holding my hand, counting my rings—these ones you see—like he always loved to do from a child. When he'd counted them all, he looked up and said, 'It wasn't a French girl spoiled me for the others. I'm not sure, but I think she was Irish. I lost her, like a fool, trying to win a silly bet.' Those were his very words. I know, because they struck me so I teased him to explain. After a while he did."

"Oh, do tell me what he said!" I begged.

At that minute Jim was alive for us all three. We were living with him in the past. I think none of us saw the little stuffy room where we sat. Only our bodies were there, like the empty, amber shells of locusts when the locusts have freed themselves and vanished. I was in a rose arbour, on a day of late June, in a garden by a canal that led to Belgium. The Becketts were in their house across the sea.

"Why," his mother hesitated, "it was quite a story. But when he found you again he must have told you it all."

"Ah, but do tell me what he told you!"

"Well, it began with a landlady in a hotel wanting him to see a picture. The artist was away, but his sister was there. That was you, my dear."

"Yes, it was I. My poor Brian painted such beautiful things before——"

"We know they were beautiful, because we've seen the picture," Father Beckett broke in. "But go on, Mother. We'll tell about the picture by and by. She'll like to hear. But the rest first!"

The little old lady obeyed, and went on. "Jimmy said[Pg 43] he was taken to a room, and there stood the most wonderful girl he'd ever seen in his life—his 'dream come alive.' That's how he described her. And there was more. Father, I never told you this part. But maybe Miss—Miss——"

"Will you call me 'Mary'?" I asked.

"Maybe 'Mary' would like to hear. Of course I never forgot one word. No mother could forget! And now I see he described you just right. When you hear, you'll know it was love made his talk about you poetry-like. Jimmy never talked that way to me of any one, before or since."

Padre, I am going to write down the things he said of me, because it is exquisite to know that he thought them. He said, I had eyes "like sapphires fallen among dark grasses." And my hair was so heavy and thick that, if I pulled out the pins, it would fall around me "in a black avalanche."

Ah, the joy and the pain of hearing these words like an echo of music I had nearly missed! There's no language for what I felt. But you will understand.

He had told his mother about our day together. He said, he kept falling deeper in love every minute, and it was all he could do not to exclaim, "Girl, I simply *must* marry you!" He dared not say that lest I should refuse, and there would be an end of everything. So he tried as hard as he could to make me like him, and remember him till he should come back, in two weeks. He thought that was the best way; and he would have let his bet slide if he hadn't imagined that a little mystery might make him more interesting in my eyes. Believing that we had met again, Mrs. Beckett supposed that he had explained[Pg 44] this to me. But of course it was all new, and when she came to the reason why Jim Wyndham had never come back, I thought for a moment I should faint. He was taken ill in Paris, three days after we parted, with typhoid fever; and though it was never a desperate case—owing to his strong constitution—he was delirious for weeks. Two months passed before he was well enough to look for me, and by that time all trace of us was lost. Brian and I had gone to England long before. Jim's friend—the one with whom he had the bet—wired to the Becketts that he was ill, but not dangerously, and they weren't to come over to France. It was only when he reached home that they knew how serious the trouble had been.

While I was listening, learning that Jim had really loved me, and searched for me, it seemed that I had a right to him after all: that I was an honest girl, hearing news of her own man, from his own people. It was only when Mr. Beckett began to draw me out, with a quite pathetic shyness, on the subject of our worldly resources that I was brought up short again, against the dark wall of my deceit. It *should* have been exquisite, it *was* heartbreaking, to see how he feared to hurt my feelings with some offer of help from his abundance. "Hurt my feelings!" And it was with the sole intention of "working" them for money that I'd written to the Becketts.

That looks horrible in black and white, doesn't it, Padre? But I won't try to hide my motives behind a dainty screen, from your eyes or mine. I had wanted and meant to get as much as I could for Brian and myself out of Jim Beckett's father and mother. And now, when I[Pg 45] was on the way to obtain my object, more easily than I had expected—now, when I saw the kind of people they were—now, when I knew that to Jim Wyndham I had been an ideal, "his dream come true." I saw my own face as in a mirror. It was like the sly, mean face of a serpent disguised as a woman.

I remember once saying to you, Padre, when you had read aloud "The Idylls of the King" to Brian and me as children, that Vivien was the worst *cad* I ever heard of since the beginning of the world! I haven't changed my mind about her since, except that I give her second place. I am in the first.

I suppose, when I first pictured the Becketts (if I stopped to picture them at all) I imagined they would be an ordinary American millionaire and millionairess, bow-fronted, self-important creatures; the old man with a diamond stud like a headlight, the old lady afraid to take cold if she left off an extra row of pearls. In our desperate state, anything seemed fair in love or war with such hard, worth-their-weight-in-gold people. But I ought to have known that a man like Jim Beckett couldn't have such parents! I ought to have known they wouldn't be in the common class of millionaires of any country; and that whatever their type they would be unique.

Well, I *hadn't* known. Their kindness, their dear humanness, their simplicity, overwhelmed me as the gifts of shields and bracelets from the Roman warriors overwhelmed treacherous Tarpeia. And when they began delicately begging me to be their adopted daughter—the very thing I'd prayed for to the devil!—I felt a hundred times wickeder than if Jim hadn't set me on a high pedes[Pg 46]tal, where they wished to keep me with their money, their love, as offerings.

Whether I should have broken down and confessed everything, or brazened it out in spite of all if I'd been left alone to decide, I shall never know. For just then the door opened, and Brian came into the room.[Pg 47]

CHAPTER V

Why Brian's coming should make all the difference may puzzle you, Padre, but I'll explain.

Ours is an amateurish hotel, especially since the war. Any one who happens to have the time or inclination runs it: or if no one has time it runs itself. Consequently mistakes are made. But what can you expect for eight francs a day, with *pension*?

I said that a very young youth brought up the news of the Becketts' arrival. He'd merely announced that "*un monsieur et une dame*" had called. Apparently they had given no names, no cards. But in truth there were cards, which had been mislaid, or in other words left upon the desk in the *bureau*, with the numbers of both our rooms scrawled on them in pencil. Nobody was there at the time, but when the concierge came back (he is a sort of unofficial understudy for the mobilized manager) he saw the cards and sent them upstairs. They were taken to Brian and the names read aloud to him. He supposed, from vague information supplied by the *garçon* (it was a *garçon* this time) that I wished him to come and join me in the *salon* with my guests. He hated the thought of meeting strangers (the name "Beckett" meant nothing to him), but if he were wanted by his sister, he never yet left her in the lurch.

He and I both knew the house with our eyes shut, before[Pg 48] the war; and now that Brian is blind, he practises in the most reckless way going about by himself. He refused to be led to the *salon*: he came unaided and unerring: and I thought when he appeared at the door, I'd never seen him look so beautiful. He *is* beautiful you know! Now that his physical eyesight is gone, and he's developing that mysterious "inner sight" of which he talks, there's no other adjective which truly expresses him. He stood there for a minute with his hand on the door-knob, with all the light in the room (there wasn't much) shining straight into his face. It couldn't help doing that, as the one window is nearly opposite the door; but really it does seem sometimes that light seeks Brian's face, as the "spot light" in theatres follows the hero or heroine of a play.

There was an asking smile on his lips, and—by accident, of course—his dear blind eyes looked straight at Mrs. Beckett.

We are enough alike, we twins, for any one to know at a glance that we're brother and sister, so the Becketts would have known, of course, even if I hadn't cried out in surprise, "Brian!"

They took it for granted that Brian would have heard all about their son Jim; so, touched by the pathos of his blindness—the lonely pathos (for a blind man is as lonely as a daylight moon!) Mrs. Beckett almost ran to him and took his hand.

"We're the Becketts, with your sister," she said. "Jimmy's father and mother. I expect you didn't meet him when they were getting engaged to each other at St. Raphael. But he loved your picture that he bought just before the war. He used to say, if only you'd signed it, his whole life might have been different. That was[Pg 49] when he'd lost Mary, you see—and he'd got hold of her name quite wrong. He thought it was Ommalee, and we never knew a word about the engagement, or her real name or anything, till the letter came to us at our hotel to-day. Then we hurried around here, as quick as we could; and she promised to be our adopted daughter. That means you will have to be our adopted son!"

I think Mrs. Beckett is too shy to like talking much at ordinary times. She would rather let her big husband talk, and listen admiringly to him. But this *wasn't* an ordinary time. To see Brian stand at the door, wistful and alone, gave her a pain in her heart, so she rushed to him, and poured out all these kind words, which left him dazed.

"You are very good to me," he answered, too thoughtful of others' feelings, as always, to blurt out—as most people would—"I don't understand. Who are you, please?" Instead, his sightless but beautiful eyes seemed to search the room, and he said, "Molly, you're here, aren't you?"

Now perhaps you begin to understand why his coming, and Mrs. Beckett's greeting of him, stopped me from telling the truth—if I would have told it. I'm not sure if I would, in any case, Padre; but as it was I *could* not. The question seemed settled. To have told the Becketts that I was an adventuress—a repentant adventuress—and let them go out of my life without Brian ever knowing they'd come into it was one thing. To explain, to accuse myself before Brian, to make him despise the only person he had to depend on, and so to spoil the world for him, was another thing.[Pg 50]

I accepted the fate I'd summoned like the genie of a lamp. "Yes, Brian, I'm here," I answered. And I went to him, and took possession of the hand Mrs. Beckett had left free. "I never told you about my romance. It was so short. And—and one doesn't put the most sacred things in letters. I loved a man, and he loved me. We met in France before the war, and lost each other.

"Afterward he came back to fight. A few days ago he fell—just at the time when his parents had hurried over from America to see him. I—I couldn't resist writing them a letter, though they were strangers to me. I——"

"That's not a word I like to hear on your lips—'strangers'," Mr. Beckett broke in, "even though you're speaking of the past. We're all one family now. You don't mind my saying that, Brian, or taking it for granted you'll consent—or calling you Brian, do you?"

"Mind!" echoed Brian, with his sweet, young smile. "How could I mind? It's like something in a story. It's a sad story—because the hero's gone out of it—no, he *hasn't* gone, really! It only seems so, before you stop to think. I've learned enough about death to learn that. And I can tell by both your voices you'll be friends worth having."

"Oh, you *are* a dear boy!" exclaimed Mrs. Beckett. "God is good to give you and your sister to us in our dark hour. I feel as if Jimmy were here with us. I do believe he is! I know he'd like me to tell you what he did with your picture, and what we've done with it since, his father and I."

Brian must have felt that it would be good for us all to talk of the pictures, just then, not of this "Jimmy" who[Pg 51] was still a mystery to him. He caught up the subject and said that he didn't understand. What picture was it of which they spoke? He generally signed his initials, but they'd mentioned that this was unsigned——

"Don't you remember," I explained, "the sketch I sold for you to Mr. Wyndham when we were tramping through France? You told me when you came back from Paris that it wasn't quite finished. You'd meant to put on a few more touches—and your signature. Well, 'Wyndham' was only the middle name. I never told you much about that day. I was half ashamed, because it was the day when my romance began and—broke. I hoped it might begin again sometime, but—but—you shall hear the whole story soon. Only—not now."

Even as I promised him, I promised myself to tell him nothing. I might have to lie in deeds to Brian. I wouldn't lie in words. Mrs. Beckett might give him her version of her son's romance—some day. Just at the moment she was relating, almost happily, the story of the picture: and it was for me, too.

Jim had had a beautiful frame made for Brian's cathedral sketch, and it had been hung in the best place—over his desk—in the special sanctum where the things he loved most were put. In starting for Europe his father and mother had planned to stop only a short time in a Paris hotel. They had meant to take a house, where Jim could join them whenever he got a few days' leave: and as a surprise for him they had brought over his favourite treasures from the "den." Among these was the unsigned picture painted by the brother of *The Girl*. They had even chosen the house, a small but charming old château to[Pg 52] which Jim had taken a fancy. It was rather close to the war zone in these days, but that had not struck them as an obstacle. They were not afraid. They had wired, before sailing, to a Paris agent, telling him to engage the château if it was still to let furnished. On arriving the answer awaited them: the place was theirs.

"We thought it would be such a joy to Jim," Mrs. Beckett said. "He fell in love with that château before he came down with typhoid. I'll show you a snapshot he took of it. He used to say he'd give anything to live there. And crossing on the ship we talked every day of how we'd make a 'den' for him, full of his own things, and never breathe a word till he opened the door of the room. We're in honour bound to take the house now, whether or not we use it—without Jim. I don't know what we *shall* do, I'm sure! All I know is, I feel as if it would kill me to turn round and go home with our broken hearts."

"We've got new obligations right here, Jenny. You mustn't forget that," said Mr. Beckett. "Remember we've just adopted a daughter—and a son, too. We must consult them about our movements."

"Oh, I hadn't forgotten!" the old lady cried. "They—they'll help us to decide, of course. But just now I can't make myself feel as if one thing was any better than another. If only we could think of something *Jim* would have liked us to do! Something—patriotic—for France."

"Mary has seen Jim since we saw him, dear. Perhaps from talk they had she'll have a suggestion to make."

"Oh no!" I cried. "I've no suggestion."

"And you, Brian?" the old man persisted.

Quickly I answered for my brother. "They never met! [Pg 53] Brian couldn't know what—Jim would have liked you to do."

"It's true, I can't know," said Brian. "But a thought has come into my head. Shall I tell it to you?"

"Yes!" the Becketts answered in a breath. They gazed at him as if they fancied him inspired by their son's spirit. No wonder, perhaps! Brian *has* an inspired look.

"Are you very rich?" he asked bluntly, as a child puts questions which grown-ups veil.

"We're rich in money," answered the old man. "But I guess I never quite realized till now, when we lost Jimmy, how poor you can be, when you're only rich in what the world can give."

"I suppose you'll want to put up the finest monument for your son that money can buy," Brian went on, as though he had wandered from his subject. But I—knowing him, and his slow, dreamy way of getting to his goal—knew that he was not astray. He was following some star which we hadn't yet seen.

"We've had no time to think of a monument," said Mr. Beckett, with a choke in his voice. "Of course we would wish it, if it could be done. But Jim lies on German soil. We can't mark the place—"

"It doesn't much matter—to him—where his body lies," Brian went on. "*He* is not in German soil, or in No Man's Land. Wouldn't he like to have a monument in *Everyman's Land*?"

"What do you mean?" breathed the little old lady. She realized now that blind Brian wasn't speaking idly.

"Well, you see, France and Belgium together will be Everyman's Land after the war, won't they?" Brian said. [Pg 54]

"Every man who wants the world's true peace has fought in France and Belgium, if he could fight. Every man who has fought, and every man who wished to fight but couldn't, will want to see those lands that have been martyred and burned, when they have risen like the Phoenix out of their own ashes. That's why I call France and Belgium Everyman's Land. You say your Jim spent some of his happiest days there, and now he's given his life for the land he loved. Wouldn't you feel as if he went with you, if you made a pilgrimage from town to town he knew in their days of beauty—if you travelled and studied some scheme for helping to make each one beautiful again after the war? If you did this in his name and his honour, could he have a better memorial?"

"I guess God has let Jim speak through your lips, and tell us his wish," said Mr. Beckett. "What do you think, Jenny?"

"I think what you think," she echoed. "It's right the word should come to us from the brother of Jim's love." [Pg 55]

CHAPTER VI

That is the story, Padre, as far as it has gone. No sign from you, no look in your eyes, could show me myself in a meaner light than shines from the mirror of my conscience. If Jim hadn't loved me, it would be less shameful to trade on the trust of these kind people. I see that clearly! And I see how hateful it is to make Brian an innocent partner in the fraud.

I'm taking advantage of one man who is dead, and another who is blind. And it is as though I were "betting on a certainty," because there's nobody alive who can come forward to tell the Becketts or Brian what I am. I'm safe, *brutally* safe!

You'll see from what I have written how Brian turned the scales. The plan he proposed developed in the Becketts' minds with a quickness that could happen only with Americans—and millionaires. Father Beckett sees and does things on the grand scale. Perhaps that's the secret of his success. He was a miner once, he has told Brian and me. Mrs. Beckett was a district school teacher in the Far West, where his fortune began. They married while he was still a poor man. But that's by the way! I want to tell you now of his present, not of his past: and the working out of our future from Brian's suggestion. Ten minutes after the planting of the seed a tree had grown up, and was [Pg 56] putting forth leaves and blossoms. Soon there will be fruit. And it will come into existence *ripe*! I suppose Americans are like that. They manage their affairs with mental intensive culture.

The Becketts are prepared to love me for Jim's sake; but Brian they worship as a supernatural being. Mr. Beckett says he's saved them from themselves, and given them an incentive to live. It was only yesterday that they answered my S. O. S. call. Now, the immediate future is settled, for the four of us; settled for us *together*.

Father Beckett is asking leave to travel *en automobile* through the liberated lands. In each town and village Jim's parents will decide on some work of charity or reconstruction in his memory, above all in places he knew and loved.

They can identify these by the letters he wrote home from France before the war. His mother has kept every one. Through a presentiment of his death, or because she couldn't part from them, she has brought along a budget of Jim's letters from America. She carries them about in a little morocco hand-bag, as other women carry their jewels.

The thought of Brian's plan is for the two old people like an infusion of blood in emptied veins. They say that they would never have thought of it themselves, and if they had, they would not have ventured to attempt it alone, ignorant of French as they are. But this is their generous way of making us feel indispensable! They tell us we are needed to "see them through"; that without our help and advice they would be lost. Every word of kindness is a new stab for me. Shall I grow callous as time goes on, and accept everything as though I really were what they call [Pg 57] me—their "daughter"? Or—I begin to think of another alternative. I'll turn to it if I grow desperate.

The bright spot in my darkness is the joyful change in the Becketts. They feel that they've regained their son; that Jim will be with them on their journey, and that they've a rendezvous with him at "*his* château," when they reach the journey's end. They owe this happiness not to me, but to Brian. As for him, he has the air of calm content that used to enfold him when he packed his easel and knapsack for a tramp. Blindness isn't blindness for Brian. It's only another kind of sight.

"I shan't see the wreck and misery you others will have to see," he says. "Horrors don't exist any more for my eyes. I shall see the country in all its beauty as it was before the war. And who knows but I shall find my dog?" (Brian lost the most wonderful dog in the world when he was wounded.) He is always hoping to find it again!

He doesn't feel that he accepts charity from the Becketts. He believes, with a kind of modest pride, that we're really indispensable. Afterward—when the tour is over—he thinks that "some other scheme will open." I think so too. The Becketts will propose it, to keep us with them. They will urge and argue, little dreaming how I drew them, with a grappling-hook resolve to become a barnacle on their ship!

To-morrow we move to the Ritz. The Becketts insist. They want us near them for "consultations"! This morning the formal request was made to the French authorities, and sent to headquarters. On the fourth day the answer will come, and there's little doubt it will be "yes." [Pg 58]

Can I bear to go on deceiving Jim Beckett's father and mother, or—shall I take the other alternative? I must decide to-night.

Since I wrote that last sentence I have been out, alone—to decide. Padre, it was in my mind never to come back.

I walked a long, long way, to the Champs-Élysées. I was very tired, and I sat down—almost dropped down—on a seat under the high canopy of chestnut trees. I could not think, but I had a sense of expectation as if I were waiting for somebody who would tell me what to do. Paris in the autumn twilight was a dream of beauty. Suddenly the dream seemed to open, and draw me in. Some one far away, whom I had known and loved, was *dreaming me*! What I should decide about the future, depended no longer on myself, but upon the dreamer. I didn't know who he was; but I knew I should learn by and by. It was he who would come walking along the road of his own dream, and take the vacant place by me on the seat.

Being in the dream, I didn't belong to the wonderful, war-time Paris which was rushing and roaring around me. Military motors, and huge *camions* and ambulances were tearing up and down, over the gray-satin surface of asphalt which used to be sacred to private autos and gay little taxis bound for theatres and operas and balls. For every girl, or woman, or child, who passed, there were at least ten soldiers: French soldiers in *bleu horizon*, Serbians in gray, Britishers and a sprinkling of Americans in khaki. There was an undertone of music—a tune in the making—in the tramp, tramp, of the soldiers' feet, the rumble and [Pg 59] whirr of the cars-of-war, the voices of women, the laughing cries of children.

I thought how simple it would be, to spring up and throw myself under one of the huge, rushing *camions*: how easily the thing might be taken for an accident if I stage-managed it well. The Becketts would be angels to Brian when I was gone! But the dreamer of the dream would not let me stir hand or foot. He put a spell of stillness upon me; he shut me up in a transparent crystal box, while outside all the world moved about its own affairs.

The mauve light of Paris nights filtered up from the gleaming asphalt, as if through a roof of clouded glass over a subterranean ballroom lit with blue and purple lanterns. Street lamps, darkly shaded for air-raids, trailed their white lights downward, long and straight, like first-communion veils. Distant trees and shrubs and statues began to retreat into the dusk, as if withdrawing from the sight of fevered human-folk to rest. Violet shadows rose in a tide, and poured through the gold-green tunnel of chestnut trees, as sea-water pours into a cave. And the shadow-sea had a voice like the whisper of waves. It said, "The dream is Jim Wyndham's dream." I felt him near me—still in the dream. The one I had waited for had come.

I was free to move. The transparent box was broken.

What the meaning of my impression was I don't know. But it must have a meaning, it was so strong and real. It has made me change my mind about—the other alternative. I want to live, and find my way back into that dream. [Pg 60]

CHAPTER VII

Padre, you were right. My greatest comfort, as of old, is in turning to you.

I think you had a glimpse of the future when you left me that last message: "Write to me, in the old way, just as if I were

alive and had gone on a long journey."

When I lock my door, and get out this journal, it seems as if a second door—a door in the wall—opened, to show you smiling the good smile which made your face different from any other. I don't deserve the smile. Did I ever deserve it? Yet you gave it even when I was at my worst. Now it seems to say, "In spite of all, I won't turn my back on you. I haven't given you up."

When I first began to write in this book (the purple-covered journal which was your last present to me), I meant just to relieve my heart by putting on paper, as if for you, the story of my wickedness. Now the story is told, I can't stop. I can't shut the door in the wall! I shall go on, and on. I shall tell you all that happens, all I feel, and see, and think. That must have been what you meant me to do.

When Brian and I were away from home a million years ago, before the war, we wrote you every day, if only a few paragraphs, and posted our letters at the end of a week. You said those letters were your "magic carpet," on which you travelled with us. Poor Padre, you'd no time nor [Pg 61] money for other travelling! You never saw France, till the war called you. And after a few bleak months, that other great call came. I shall write to you about France, and about myself, as I should have written if you were back at home.

First—about myself! A few pages ago I said that there was no one alive who could prove me a liar, to the Becketts or Brian: that I was "safe—brutally safe." Well, I was mistaken. I am *not* safe. But I will go back to our start.

Everyone warned the Becketts that they would get no automobile, no essence, and no chauffeur. Yet they got all three, as magically as Cinderella got her coach and four. The French authorities played fairy godmother, and waved a wand. Why not, when in return so much was to be done for France?

The wand gave a permit for the whole front (counting in the American front!) from Lorraine to Flanders. It produced a big gray car, and a French soldier to drive it. The soldier has only one leg: but he can do more with that one than most men with two. Thus we set forth on the journey Brian planned, the Becketts so grateful—poor darlings—for our company, that it was hard to realize that I didn't *belong*.

It was a queer thought that we should be taking the road to Germany—we, of all people: yet every road that leads east from Paris leads to Germany. And it was a wonderful thought, that we should be going to the Marne.

Surely generations must pass before that name can be heard, even by children, without a thrill! We said it over and over in the car: "The Marne—the Marne! We shall see the Marne, this autumn of 1917." [Pg 62]

Meanwhile the road was a dream-road. It had the unnatural quietness of dreams. In days of peace it would have been choked with country carts bringing food to fill the wide-open mouth of Paris. Now, the way to the capital was silent and empty, save for gray military motors and lumbering army *camions*. The cheap bowling alleys and jerry-built restaurants of the suburbs seemed under a spell of sleep. There were no men anywhere, except the very old, and boys of the "class" of next year. Women swept out the gloomy shops: women drove omnibuses: women hawked the morning papers. Outside Paris we were stopped by soldiers, appearing from sentry-boxes: our papers were scanned; almost reluctantly we were allowed to pass on, to the Secret Region of Crucifix Corner, which spying eyes must not see—the region of aeroplane hangars, endless hangars, lost among trees, and melting dimly into a dim horizon, their low, rounded roofs "camouflaged" in a confusion of splodged colours.

There was so much to see—so much which was abnormal, and belonged to war—that we might have passed without glancing at a line of blue water, parallel with our road at a little distance, had not Brian said, "Have we come in sight of the Ourcq? We ought to be near it now. Don't you know, the men of the Marne say the men of the Ourcq did more than they to save Paris?"

The Becketts had hardly heard of the Ourcq. As for me, I'd forgotten that part in the drama of September, 1914. I knew that there was an Ourcq—a canal, or a river, or both, with a bit of Paris sticking to its banks: knew it vaguely, as one knows and forgets that one's friends' faces have profiles. But Brian's words brought [Pg 63] back the whole story to my mind in a flash. I remembered how Von Kluck was trapped like a rat, in the *coulair* of the Ourcq, by the genius of Gallieni, and the glorious coöperation of General Manoury and the dear British "contemptibles" under General French.

It was a desperate adventure that—to try and take the Germans in the flank; and Gallieni's advisers told him there were not soldiers enough in his command to do it. "Then we'll do it with sailors!" he said. "But," urged an admiral, "my sailors are not trained to march."

"They will march without being trained," said the defender of the capital. "I've been in China and Madagascar, I know what sailors can do on land."

"Even so, there will not be enough men," answered the pessimists.

"We'll fill the gaps with the police," said the general, inspired perhaps by Sainte-Geneviève.

So the deed was dared; and in a panic at sight of the mysteriously arriving troops, Von Kluck retreated from the Ourcq to the Aisne. It was when he heard how the trick had been played and won by sheer bravado, that he cried out in rage, "How could I count on such a *coup*? Not another military governor in a hundred would have risked throwing his whole force sixty kilometres from its base. How should I guess what a dare-devil fool Gallieni would turn out? But if Trochu, in '70, had been the same kind of a fool, we should never have got Paris!"

Half the ghosts in history seemed to haunt this Route de Strasbourg, and to meet us as we passed. You know how you see the characters in a moving-picture play, and behind them the "fade ins" that show their life history, [Pg 64] visions that change on the screen like patterns in a kaleidoscope? So on this meadow-bordered road, peaceful in the autumn

sunlight, we saw with our minds' eyes the soldiers of 1914: behind them the soldiers of 1870: farther in the background Napoleon the Great with his men: and fading into the distance, processions of kings who had marched along the Marne, since the day Sainte-Geneviève ordered the gates of Paris to be shut in the face of Attila.

Such a gay, gold-sequined blue-green ribbon of a river it looked! Almost impudent in gaiety, as if it wished to forget and be happy. But souls and rivers never really forget. When they know what the Marne knows, they are gay only on the surface!

It was at Meaux where we had our first close meeting with the Marne: Meaux, the city nearest Paris "on the Marne front," where the Germans came: and even after three years you can still see on the left bank of the river traces of trench—shallow, pathetic holes dug in wild haste. We might have missed them, we creatures with mere eyes, if Brian hadn't asked, "Can't you see the trenches?" Then we saw them, of course, half lost under rank grass, like dents in a green velvet cushion made by a sleeper who has long ago waked and walked away.

From a distance the glistening gray roofs of Meaux were like a vast crowd of dark-winged doves; but as we ran into the town it opened out into dignified importance, able to live up to its thousand years of history. There was no work for the Becketts there, we thought, for the Germans had time to do little material harm to Meaux in 1914: and at first sight there seemed to be no need of alms. But Jim had loved Meaux. His mother took from her blue[Pg 65] morocco bag his letter describing the place, mentioning how he had met the bishop through a French friend.

"Do you think," she asked me timidly, "we might call on the bishop? Who knows but he remembers our Jimmy?"

"He's a famous bishop," said Brian. "I've heard *poilus* from Meaux tell stories of how the Germans were forced to respect him, he was so brave and fine. He took the children of the town under his protection, and no harm came to one of them. There were postcard photographs going round early in the war, of the bishop surrounded by boys and girls—like a benevolent Pied Piper. It's kindness he's famous for, as well as courage, so I'm sure we may call."

Near the beautiful old cathedral we passed a priest, and asked him where to find the bishop's house. "You need not go so far; here he comes," was the answer. We looked over our shoulders, almost guiltily, and there indeed he was. He had been in the cathedral with two French officers, and in another instant the trio would have turned a corner. Our look and the priest's gesture told the bishop that we were speaking of him. He paused, and Mr. Beckett jumped out of the stopped car, agile as a boy in his excitement.

"Oh, I forgot, I can't talk French! Mary, you must see me through!" he pleaded.

I hurried to the rescue, and together we walked up to the bishop. Off came Mr. Beckett's hat; and both officers saluted us. One was a general, the other a colonel.

If I'd had time to rehearse, I might have done myself some credit. As it was, I stammered out some sort of explanation and introduced Jim's father.[Pg 66]

"I remember young Monsieur Beckett," the bishop said. "He was not one to be forgotten! Besides, he was generous to Meaux. He left a noble present for our poor. And now, you say, he has given his life for France? What is there I can do to prove our gratitude? You have come to Meaux because of his letters? Wait a few minutes, till these brave messieurs have gone, and I myself will show you the cathedral. Oh, you need not fear! It will be a pleasure."

He was as good as his word, and better. Not only did he show the splendid Gothic cathedral, pride of the "fair Île-de-France," but the bishop's house as well. Bossuet had lived there, the most famous bishop Meaux had in the past. It was dramatic to enter his study, guided by the most famous bishop of the present; to see in such company the room where Bossuet penned his denunciation of the Protestants, and then the long avenue of yews where he used to walk in search of inspiration. We saw his tomb, too—in the cathedral (yes, I believe Brian saw it more clearly than we!), one of those grand tombs they gave prelates in the days of Louis XIV: and when the Becketts had followed Jim's example in generosity, we bade adieu to the—oh, *ever* so much kinder heir of the great controversialist. I'm afraid, to tell the truth, the little old lady cared more to know that her Jim's favourite cheese—Brie—was made in Meaux, than anything else in the town's history. Nevertheless, she listened with a charmed air to Brian's story of Meaux's great romance—as she listens to all Brian's stories. It was you, Padre, who told it to Brian, and to me, one winter night when we'd been reading about Gaston, de Foix, "Gaston le[Pg 67] Bel." Our talk of his exploits brought us to Meaux, at the time of the Jacquerie, in the twelfth century. The common people had revolted against the nobles who oppressed them, and all the Île-de-France—adorable name!—seethed with civil war. In Meaux was the Duchess of Orleans, with three hundred great ladies, most of them beautiful and young. The peasants besieged the Duchess there, and she and her lovely companions were put to sore straits, when suddenly arrived brave Gaston to save them. I don't quite know why he took the trouble to come so far, from his hill-castle near the Spanish frontier, but most likely he loved one of the shut-up ladies. Or perhaps it was simply for love of all womanhood, since Gaston was so chivalrous that Froissart said, "I never saw one like him of personage, nor of so fair form, nor so well made."

From Meaux our road (we were going to make Nancy our centre and stopping place) followed the windings of the green ribbon Marne to Château-Thierry, on the river's right bank. There's a rather thrilling ruin, that gave the town its name, and dominates it still—the ruin of a castle which Charles Martel built for a young King Thierry. The legend says that this boy differed from the wicked kings Thierry, sons and grandsons of the Frankish Clovis; that he wanted to be good, but "Fate" would not let him. Perhaps it's a judgment on those terrible Thierry kings, who left to their enemies only the earth round their habitations—"because it couldn't be carried away"—that the Germans have left ruins in Château-Thierry more cruel than those of the crumbling castle. In seven September days they added more *monuments historiques* than a thousand years had given the ancient Marne city.[Pg 68]

Jim Beckett had written his mother all about the town, and sent postcard pictures of its pride, the fortress-like, fifteenth-century church with a vast tower set upon a height. He liked Château-Thierry because Jean de la Fontaine was born there, and called it "a peaceful-looking place, just right for the dear fable-maker, who was so child-like and sweet-

natured, that he deserved always to be happy, instead of for ever in somebody's debt." A soldier having seen the wasted country at the front, might still describe Château-Thierry as a "peaceful-looking place." But it was the first glimpse the Becketts had had of war's abominable destruction. I took up nursing in the south of France before the Zeppelins made much visible impression on London; and as I volunteered for a "contagious" hospital, I've lived an isolated life far from all horrors save those in my own ward, and the few I saw when I went to nurse Brian. Perhaps it was well for us to begin with Château-Thierry, whose gaping wounds are not mortal, and to miss tragic Varreddes. Had Sermaize-les-Bains, which burst upon us later, been our first experience, the shock might have been too great for Mrs. Beckett. As it was, we worked slowly to the climax. Yet even so, we travelled on with a hideous mirage of broken homes, of intimacies brutally laid bare, floating between the landscape and our eyes. We could not get rid of this mirage, could not brush it away, though the country was friendly and fair of face as a child playing in a waterside meadow. The crudely new bridges that crossed the Marne were the only open confessions of what the river had suffered. But the Marne spirit had known wars enough to learn "how sweet it is to live, forgetting." With her bits of villages[Pg 69] scattered like strewn flowers on her green flood, she floats in a dream of her adventurous past and the glorious future which she has helped to win for France.

It was hard to realize that the tiny island villages and hamlets on the level shores had seen the Germans come and go; that under the gray roofs—furry-soft as the backs of Maltese cats—hearts had beaten in agony of fear; that along the white road, with its double row of straight trees like an endless army on parade, weeping fugitives had fled.

We were not aiming to reach Nancy that night, so we paused at Épernay. The enemy behaved better there than in most Marne towns, perhaps because Wagner once lived in it, or, more likely, under the soothing influence of Épernay's champagne, which has warmed the cockles of men's hearts since a bishop of the ninth century made it famous by his praise. Nevertheless, there are ruins to see, for the town was bombarded by the Germans after they were turned out. All the quarter of the rich was laid waste: and the vast "Fabrique de Champagne" of Mercier, with its ornamental frieze of city names, is silent to this day, its proud façade of windows broken. Not a big building of the town, not a neighbouring château of a "Champagne baron" has a whole window-pane visible, though three years have rolled on since the cannonading did its work! Nowadays glass is as dear as diamonds in France, and harder to get.

Outside Champagnopolis, in the wide wooden village of hospital huts, a doctor told us a war ghost story. One night the Germans made a great haul of champagne, of a good year, in a castle near by. They had knocked off[Pg 70] the heads of many bottles, naming each for a French general of yesterday or to-day, when some officer who knew more history than the rest remembered that Henri IV had taken Épernay in 1592. He named his bottle for Henri de Navarre, and harangued his comrades on the superiority of Wilhelm von Hohenzollern. As the speechmaker cracked the neck with his sword, the bottle burst in a thousand pieces, drenching everyone with wine. A bit of glass struck the electric lamp over the table, and out went the light. For an instant the room was black. Then a white ray flickered on the wall, as if thrown through the window by a searchlight. Out of its glimmer stepped a man, with a long, laughing face and a pointed beard. Round his neck was a high ruff. He wore a doublet of velvet, and shining silk hose. In his hand was a silver goblet, frothing over the top with champagne. "He drinks best who drinks last!" cried he in French, and flung the goblet at the face of him who named the bottle. At the same second there was a great explosion, and only one soldier escaped; he who told the story.

Think, Padre, it was near Châlons that Attila was defeated, and forced to fly from France for ever! I ought to say, Attila the first, since the self-named Attila II hasn't yet been beaten back beyond the Rhine.

We—you, and Brian and I—used to have excited arguments about reincarnation. You know now which of us was right! But I cling to the theory of the spiral, in evolution of the soul—the soul of a man or the soul of the world. It satisfies my sense of justice and my reason both, to believe that we must progress, being made for progression; but that we evolve upward slowly, with a spiral[Pg 71] motion which brings us at certain periods, as we rise, directly above the last earth-phase in our evolution. If it's true, here, after nearly thirteen centuries, are the Huns overrunning Europe once more. Learned Huns, scientific Huns, but always Huns, repeating history on a higher scale, barbarously bent on pulling down the liberty of the world by the power of brute force. Again they're destined to be conquered as before, at a far bigger price. What will the next turn of their spiral bring, I wonder? A vast battle of intellect, perhaps, when wars of blood have been forgotten. And I wonder, too, where has Attila been, since he was beaten in this Champagne country of the Marne, and died two years later at his wedding-feast in Hungary!

Did he appear in our world again, in the form of some great, cruel general or king, or did his soul rest until it was reincarnated in the form that claims his name to-day?

I could scarcely concentrate upon Châlons, though it's a noble town, crowded with grand old buildings. My mind was busily travelling back, back into history, as Peter Ibbetson travelled in his prison-dreams. It didn't stop on its way to see the city capitulate to the Allies in 1814, just one hundred years before the great new meaning came into that word "allies." I ran past the brave fifteenth-century days, when the English used to attack Châlons-sur-Marne, hoping to keep their hold on France. I didn't even pause for Saint-Bernard, preaching the Crusade in the gorgeous presence of Louis VII and his knights. It was Attila who lured me down, down into his century, buried deep under the sands of Time. I heard the ring of George Meredith's words: "Attila, my Attila!" But[Pg 72] I saw the wild warrior Attila, fighting in Champagne, not the dead man adjured by Ildico, his bride. I saw him "short, swarthy, broad-chested," in his crude armour, his large head, "early gray," lifted like a wolf's at bay. I saw his fierce, ugly face with its snub nose and little, deep-set eyes, flushed in the fury of defeat as he ordered the famous screen of chariots to be piled up between him and the Romano-Gauls. I saw him and his men profiting by the strange barrier, and the enemy's exhaustion, to escape beyond the Rhine, with eyes yearning toward the country they were to see no more.

History calls that battle "one of the decisive battles of the world," yet it lasted only a day, and engaged from a hundred and seventy-four thousand to three hundred thousand men. Oh, the spiral of battles has climbed high since then!

I think I should have had a presentiment of the war if I'd lived at Châlons, proud city of twenty-two bridges and the Canal Rhine-Marne. The water on stormy days must have whispered, "They are coming. Take care!"

At Vitry-le-François there is also that same sinister canal which leads from the Marne to the Rhine, the Rhine to the Marne. The name has a wicked sound in these days—Rhine-Marne; and at Vitry-le-François of all places. The men from over the Rhine destroyed as much as they had time to destroy of the charming old town planned by Francis I, and named for him. All the villages round about the new Huns broke to pieces, like the toy towns of children: Revigny, sprayed from hand pumps with petrol, and burnt to the ground: Sermaize-les-Bains, loved by Romans and Saracens, obliterated; women drowned in [Pg 73] the river by laughing German soldiers, deep down under yellow water-lilies, which mark their resting place to-day: everywhere, through the fields and forests, low wooden crosses in the midst of little votive gardens, telling their silent tale.

Ah, but it is good that Mother Beckett saw Château-Thierry first, or she might have covered her eyes and begged to go back to Paris! Here all speaks of death and desolation, save the busy little hut-villages of the Quakers. The "Friends" quietly began their labour of love before the Battle of the Marne was ended, and they're "carrying on" still. The French translate them affectionately into "*les Amis*."

It was at Bar-le-Duc that I met disaster face to face in so strange a way that it needs a whole letter to tell you what happened. [Pg 74]

CHAPTER VIII

There were so many things to see by the way, and so many thoughts to think about them, that Father Beckett and Brian decided on an all night stop at Bar-le-Duc. The town hadn't had an air raid for weeks, and it looked a port of peace. As well imagine enemy aeroplanes over the barley-sugar house of the witch in the enchanted forest, as over this comfortable home of jam-makers!

"Jim always asked for currant jam of Bar-le-Duc on his birthdays, ever since he was a little, little boy," Mrs. Beckett remembered aloud. "And even when he was grown up! But then, he wouldn't wait for birthdays. He wanted it every day for breakfast; and for tea at those grand New York hotels, where I wouldn't go without him, any sooner than in a lion's den. Oh, it will be nice to stay at Bar-le-Duc! If there's been a jam factory blown up, we'll help build it again, to please Jim."

Father Beckett was shrewdly of opinion that the jam factories could take care of themselves, which rather disappointed his wife. She was vaguely disappointed too, in Bar-le-Duc. I think she expected to smell a ravishing fragrance of Jim's favourite *confiture* as we entered the town. It had been a tiring day for her, with all our stops and sightseeing, and she had less appetite for history than for jam. We had passed through lovely country since [Pg 75] Châlons, decorated with beautiful tall trees, high box hedges, and distant, rolling downs golden with grain and sunlight. Also, whenever our road drew near the railway, we'd caught exciting glimpses of long trains "camouflaged" in blurry greens and blues, to hide themselves from aeroplanes. Nevertheless, Mother Beckett had begun to droop. Her blue eyes hardly brightened to interest when Brian said we were in the famous region of the Meuse, part of the Austrian Empire in Charlemagne's day: that somewhere hereabout Wittekind, the enslaved Saxon, used to work "on the land," not dreaming of the kingly house of Capet he was to found for France, and that Bar-le-Duc itself would be our starting-point for Verdun, after Nancy and the "Lorraine Front."

For her Bar-le-Duc had always represented jam, endless jam, loved by Jim, and talk of the dukes of Bar brought no thrill to Jim's mother. She cared more to see the two largest elms in France of which Jim had written, than any ruins of ducal dwellings or tombs of Lorraine princes, or even the house where Charles-Edouard the Pretender lived for years.

Fortunately there was a decent hotel, vaguely open in the upper town on the hill, with a view over the small tributary river Ornain, on which the capital city of the Meuse is built. One saw the Rhine-Marne Canal, too, and the picturesque roofs of old fifteenth-century houses, huddled together in lower Bar-le-Duc, shut in among the vine-draped valleys of Champagne.

As we left the car and went into the hotel (I lingering behind to help Brian) I noticed another car behind us. It was more like a taxi-cab than a brave, free-born auto [Pg 76] mobile, but it had evidently come a long way, as it was covered with dust, and from its rather ramshackle roof waved a Red Cross flag.

In the good days before the war I should have thought it the most natural thing on earth if a procession of twenty motors had trailed us. But war has put an end to joy-rides. Besides, since the outskirts of Paris, we had been in the *zone de guerre*, constantly stopped and stared at by sentinels. The only cars we passed, going east or west, were occupied by officers, or crowded with *poilus*, therefore the shabby little taxi became of almost startling interest. I looked back, and saw that it was slowing down close behind our imposing auto, from which a few small pieces of luggage for the night were being removed.

The Red Cross travellers were evidently impatient. They did not wait for our chauffeur to drive away. The conductor of the car jumped down and opened the door of his nondescript vehicle. I made out, under a thick coat of dust, that he wore khaki of some sort, and a cap of military shape which might be anything from British to Belgian. He gave a hand to a woman in the car—a woman in nurse's dress. A thick veil covered her face, but her figure was girlish. I noticed that she was extremely small and slim in her long, dust-dimmed blue cloak: a mere doll of a creature.

The man's back was turned toward me as he aided the nurse; but suddenly he flung a glance over his shoulder, and stared straight at me, as if he had expected to find me there.

He was rather short, and too squarely built for his age, which might be twenty-eight or thirty at most; but his [Pg 77] great dark eyes were splendid, so gorgeously bright and significant that they held mine for a second or two. This vexed me, and I turned away with as haughty an air as could be put on at an instant's notice.

The hotel had no private sitting rooms, but the landlord offered Mr. Beckett for our use a small *salle de lecture*, adjoining the *salon public*. There were folding doors between, for a wonder with a lock that worked. By the time we'd bathed, and dressed again, it was the hour for dinner, and Mr. Beckett suggested dining in our own "parlour," as he called it.

The landlord himself brought a menu, which Mother Beckett accepted indifferently up to the entremets "*omelette au rhum*." This she wished changed for something—anything—made with Jim's favourite jam. "He would want us to eat it at Bar-le-Duc," she said, with her air of taking Jim's nearness and interest in our smallest acts for granted.

So "*omelette à la confiture de groseilles*" was ordered; and just as we had come to the end of it and our meal, some one began to play the piano in the public drawing room next door. At the first touch, I recognized a master hand. The air was from Puccini's "La Tosca"—third act, and a moment later a man's voice caught it up—a voice of velvet, a voice of the heart—an Italian voice.

We all stopped eating as if we'd been struck by a spell. We hardly breathed. The music had in it the honey of a million flowers distilled into a crystal cup. It was so sweet that it hurt—hurt horribly and deliciously, as only Italian music can hurt. Other men sing with their brains, with their souls, but Italians sing with their blood,[Pg 78] their veins, the core of their hearts. They *are* their songs, as larks are.

The voice brought Jim to me, and snatched him away again. It set him far off at a hopeless distance, across steep purple chasms of dreamland. It dragged my heart out, and then poured it full, full of an unknown elixir of life and love, which was mine, yet out of reach forever. It showed me my past hopes and future sorrows floating on the current of my own blood like ships of a secret argosy sailing through the night to some unknown goal. So now, when I have told you what it did to me, you will know that voice was like no voice I ever heard, except Caruso's. It *was* like his—astonishingly like; and hardly had the last note of "Mario's" song of love and death dropped into silence when the singer began anew with one of Caruso's own Neapolitan folk-songs, "Mama Mia."

I had forgotten Mother and Father Beckett—even Brian—everyone except my lost Jim Wyndham and myself. But suddenly a touch on my hand made me start. The little old lady's, small, cool fingers were on mine, "My daughter, what do the words mean?" she asked. "What is that boy saying to his mama?" Her eyes were blue lakes of unshed tears, for the thought of her son knocked at her heart.

"It isn't a boy who sings, dear," I said. "It's supposed to be a young man who tries to tell his mother all about his love, but it is too big for any words he can find. He says she must remember how she felt herself when she was in love, and then she will understand what's in his heart."

"Oh, it's wonderful!" she whispered. "How *young* it[Pg 79] sounds! Can it be a *man* singing? It seems too beautiful for anything but a gramophone!"

We broke out laughing, and the little lady blushed in shame. "I mean, it's like one of the great singers they make records of," she explained. "There, he's stopped. Oh, James, don't let him go! We *must* hear him again. Couldn't you go next door and thank him? Couldn't you beg him to sing some more?"

An Englishman would sooner have died a painful death than obey; but, unabashed, the American husband flung wide open the folding doors.

At the piano sat the short, square-built young man of the Red Cross taxi. Leaning with both elbows on the instrument stood the doll-like figure of his companion, the girl in nurse's dress. His back and her profile were turned our way, but at the sound of the opening door he wheeled on the stool, and both stared at Mr. Beckett. Also they stared past him at me. Why at me, and not the others, I could never have guessed then.

Our little room was lit by red-shaded candles on the table, while the *salon* adjoining blazed with electricity. As the doors opened, it was like the effect of a flashlight for a photograph. I saw that the man and the girl resembled each other in feature; nevertheless, there was a striking difference between the two. It wasn't only that he was squarely built, with a short throat, and a head shaped like Caruso's, whereas she was slight, with a small, high-held head on a slender neck. The chief difference lay in expression. The man—who now looked younger than I had thought—had a dark, laughing face, gay and defiant as a Neapolitan street boy. It might be evil, it[Pg 80] might be good. The girl, who could be no more than twenty, was sullen in her beauty as a thundercloud.

The singer jumped up, and took a few steps forward, while the girl stood still and gloomed.

"I hope I didn't disturb you?" The question was asked of Mr. Beckett, and thrown lightly as a shuttlecock over the old man's head to us in the next room. It was asked in English, with a curiously winning accent, neither Italian nor Irish, but suggesting both.

"Disturbed!" Father Beckett explained that his errand was to beg for more music. "It's like being at the opera!" was the best compliment he had to give.

The young man smiled as if a light had been turned on behind his eyes and his brilliant white teeth. "Delighted!" he said. "I can't sing properly nowadays—shell shock. I suppose I never shall again. But I do my best."

He sat down once more at the piano, and without asking his audience to choose, began in a low voice an old, sweet, entirely banal and utterly heartbreaking ballad of Tosti's, with words by Christina Rossetti:

"When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me,
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree.

Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet,
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.
I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not feel the rain;[Pg 81]
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on as if in pain.
And dreaming through the twilight
That does not rise nor set,
Haply I may remember,
And haply may forget."

The words were of no great depth or worth, and the music was too intentionally heart-wringing to be sincerely fine, yet sung by that man's voice, the piano softly touched by his hands, the poor old song took my self-control and shivered it like thin glass. Tears burst from Mrs. Beckett's eyes, and she hid her face on my shoulder, sobbing beneath her breath: "Oh, Jim—Jim!"

When the singer had finished he looked at her, not in surprise, but thoughtfully. "Perhaps I oughtn't to have sung that stuff, Mr. Beckett," he said. "But your son liked it at St. Raphael. We knew each other there, very well."

As he spoke his eyes turned to me, deliberately, with meaning. There was a gentle, charming smile on his southern face, but I knew, as if he had told me in so many words, that my secret was his.

Involuntarily I glanced at the girl. She had not moved. She stood as before, her elbows on the piano, her small face propped between her hands. But she, too, was looking at me. She had no expression whatever. Her eyes told as little as two shut windows with blinds drawn down. The fancy flashed through me that a judge might look thus waiting to hear the verdict of the jury in a murder case.

"These two have followed us on purpose to denounce me," I thought. Yet it seemed a stupidly melodramatic[Pg 82] conclusion, like the climax of a chapter in an old-fashioned, sentimental story. Besides, the man—evidently the leader—had not at all the face of Nemesis. He looked a merry, happy-go-lucky Italian, only a little subdued at the moment by the pathos of his own nightingale voice and the memory of Jim Beckett. I was bewildered. My reason did not know what to make of him. But my instinct warned me of danger.

Mother Beckett dried her eyes with one of her dainty handkerchiefs which always smell like lavender and grass pinks—her leitmotif in perfume. "You knew our Jim?" she exclaimed, choking back tears. "Why, then, perhaps you and Mary—Miss O'Malley——"

What would have happened if she had finished her sentence I shall never know, for just then came a crash as if the house were falling. Window-glass shivered. The hotel shook as though in an earthquake. Out went the electric light, leaving only our candles aglow under red shades.

Bar-le-Duc was in for an air raid.[Pg 83]

CHAPTER IX

For a moment we thought the house had been struck by a bomb, and were astonished that it stood. In the uproar of explosions and crashings and jinglings, the small silence of our room—with its gay chrysanthemums and shaded candles—was like that of a sheltered oasis in a desert storm.

Not one of us uttered a sound. Father Beckett took his wife in his arms, and held her tight, her face hidden in his coat. Brian had not even got up from his chair by the table. He'd lighted a cigarette, and continued to smoke calmly, a half-smile on his face, as if the bombardment carried him back to life in the trenches. But the beautiful sightless eyes searched for what they could not see: and I knew that I was in his thoughts. I would have gone to him, after the first petrifying instant of surprise, but the singing-man stopped me. "Are you afraid?" I heard his voice close to my ear. Perhaps he shouted. But in the din it was as if he whispered.

"No!" I flung back. "Had you not better go and take care of your sister?"

He laughed. "My sister! Look at her! Does she need taking care of?"

The girl had come from the suddenly darkened *salon* into our room. As he spoke, she walked to the table, helped herself to a cigarette from Brian's silver case which[Pg 84] lay open, and asked its owner for a light. It struck me that she did not realize his blindness.

Certainly the young woman did not "need taking care of." Nor did I! Deliberately I turned my back upon the man; but he snatched at the end of a scarf I wore. "No one's looking," he said. "Take this—for your own sake." And he thrust into a little outside pocket of my dress a folded bit of paper. Then he let me go, stepping back to prevent my returning the note.

For a second I hesitated, not knowing which of two evils to choose; but the woman who hesitates is inevitably lost. Before I could make up my mind, the door opened and the landlord appeared, apologizing for the raid as if it had been an accident of his kitchen. We must have no fear. All danger was over. The avion—only one!—had been chased out of our neighbourhood. The noise we heard now was merely shrapnel fired by anti-aircraft guns. We would not be disturbed

again, that he'd guarantee from his experience!

Mrs. Beckett emerged from her husband's coat. Mr. Beckett laughed, and patting his wife's shoulder, complimented her courage. "I'm not sure we haven't behaved pretty well for our first air raid," he said. "The rest of you were fine! But I suppose even you ladies have seen some of these shows before? As for you, Brian, my boy, you're a soldier. What we've been through must seem a summer shower to you. And you, sir"—he turned to the singing-man—"I think you mentioned you'd had shell shock——"

"Yes," the other answered quickly. "It cost me my voice." [Pg 85]

"Cost you your voice?" Father Beckett echoed. "If it was better than it is now, why, it must have been a marvel! We're ignorant in the music line, my wife and I, so if we ought to know who you are——"

The young man laughed. "Oh, don't be afraid of hurting my feelings! If you were an Italian, or a Britisher—but an American! I sang in New York only part of last winter, and then I—came over here, like everyone else. My name is Julian O'Farrell, but my mother was an Italian of Naples, once a prima donna. She wished me to make my professional début as Giulio di Napoli."

The name appeared to mean nothing for the Becketts, but instantly I knew who the man was, if little about him. I remembered reading of the sensation he created in London the summer that Brian and I tramped through France and Belgium. The next I heard was that he had "gone back" to Italy. I had of course supposed him to be an Italian. But now he boasted—or confessed—that he was an Irishman. Why, then, had he left England for Italy when the war broke out? Why had he been singing in New York after Italy joined the Allies? Above all, what had happened since, to put him on my track, with a Red Cross flag and a taxi-cab?

These questions asked themselves in my head, while I could have counted "One—two—three." Meantime, Brian had spoken to the girl, and she had answered shortly, in words I could not hear, but with a sullen, doubtful look, like a small trapped creature that snaps at a friendly hand. The landlord was helping a white-faced waiter to clear a place on the table for a tray of coffee and liqueurs; and [Pg 86] outside the noise of shrapnel had died in the distance. The air-raid incident was closed. What next?

"You'll both have coffee with us, won't you, Signor di Napoli—or Mr. O'Farrell? Or should I say Lieutenant or Captain?" Father Beckett was urging. "You were a friend of our son's, and my wife and I——"

"Plain Mister O'Farrell it is," the other broke in. "Thanks, it would be a pleasure to stay, but it's best to refuse, I'm sure, for my sister's sake. You see by her dress what her work has been, and she's on leave because she's tired out. She faints easily—and what with the air raid—maybe you'll let us pay our respects before you leave to-morrow? Then we'll tell you all you want to know. Anyhow, we may be going on for some time in your direction. I saw by a Paris paper a few days ago you were making a tour of the Fronts, beginning at the Lorraine end."

His eyes were on me as he spoke, bright with imp-like malice. He looked so like a mischievous schoolboy that it was hard to take him seriously. Yet everything warned me to do so, and his allusion to the Paris newspapers explained much. For the second time a reporter had caught Father Beckett, and got out of him the statement that "My dead son's fiancée, Miss Mary O'Malley, who's been nursing in a 'contagious' hospital near St. Raphael, will be with us: and her brother."

So that was how the man had heard about me, and for some reason found it worth while to follow, waving the sword of Damocles! His note burned my pocket. And I burned to know what it said. No doubt it would explain why he did not cut off my head at once, and have it over! [Pg 87]

"I think," he was going on, "that the sooner I can get this poor little girl" (a tap on his sister's shoulder) "to her room and to bed the better it will be."

Any one apparently less likely to faint, or less in need of rest, than the "poor little girl" indicated, it would be difficult to find, I thought: but the kindly Becketts were the last creatures to be critical. They sympathized, and changed their invitation from after-dinner coffee to breakfast at nine. This was accepted by O'Farrell for himself and his sister, and taking the girl's arm, the ex-singer swept her off in a dramatic exit.

When they had gone, it was Brian who asked me if I had known them in the south; and because no incentive could make me lie to Brian, I promptly answered "No." As I spoke, it occurred to me that now, if ever, was the moment when I might still succeed in spoking the wheel of Mr. and Miss O'Farrell before that wheel had time to crush me. I could throw doubt upon their good faith. I could hint that, if they had really been doing Red Cross or other work at St. Raphael, I should certainly have heard of them. But I held my peace—partly through qualms of conscience, partly through fear. Unless the man had proofs to bring of his *bona fides* where Jim Beckett was concerned, he would scarcely have followed us to claim acquaintance with the parents and confound the alleged fiancée. That he had followed us on purpose I was sure. Not for a second did I believe that the arrival of the taxi-cab in our wake was a coincidence!

We drank our coffee, talking of the raid and of the O'Farrells, and—as always—of Jim. Then Father Beckett noticed that his wife was pale. "She looks as if she [Pg 88] needed bed a good sight more than that little girl did," he said in the simple, homely way I've learned to love.

Presently we had all bidden each other good-night, even Brian and I. Then—in my own room—I was free to take that folded bit of paper from my pocket. [Pg 89]

CHAPTER X

To my surprise, there were only three lines, scribbled in pencil.

"Come to the *salon* for a talk when the rest of your party have gone to bed. I'll be waiting, and won't keep you long."

"Impudent brute!" I said out aloud. But a moment later I had decided to keep the appointment and learn the worst. Needs must, when the devil drives!—if you're in the power of the devil. I was. And, alas! through my fault, so was Brian. After going so far, I could not afford to be thrown back without a struggle; and I went downstairs prepared to fight.

It was not yet late; only a few minutes after ten o'clock; and though the Becketts and Brian were on the road to sleep, the hotel was awake, and even lively in its wakefulness. The door of the public *salon* stood open, and the electric light had come on again. At the table, in the centre of the room, sat Mr. Julian O'Farrell, *alias* Giulio di Napoli, conspicuously interested in an illustrated paper. He jumped up at sight of me, and smiled a brilliant smile of welcome, but did not speak. A sudden, obstinate determination seized me to thwart him, if he meant to force the first move upon me. I bowed coolly, as one acknowledges the existence of an hotel acquaintance, and passing to the other end of the long table, picked up a *Je Sais Tout* of a date two years before the war.[Pg 90]

I did not sit down, but assumed the air of hovering for a moment on my way elsewhere. This manœuvre kept the enemy on his feet; and as the cheap but stately clock on the mantel ticked out second after second, I felt nervously inclined to laugh, despite the seriousness of my situation. I bit my lip hard to frighten away a smile that would have spoilt everything. "If it goes on like this for an hour," I said to myself, "I won't open my mouth!"

Into the midst of this vow broke an explosion of laughter that made me start as if it announced a new bombardment. I looked up involuntarily, and met the dark Italian eyes sparkling with fun. "I beg your pardon!" the man gurgled. "I was wondering which is older, your *Je Sais Tout* or my *Illustration*? Mine's the Christmas number of 1909."

"Yours has the advantage in age," I replied, without a smile. "Mine goes back only to 1912."

"Ah! I'm glad to score that one point," he said, still laughing. "Dear Miss O'Malley, won't you please sit down? I'm a lazy fellow, and I'm so tired of standing! Now, don't begin by being cross with me because I call you 'dear.' If you realized what I've done for you, and what I'm ready to do, you'd say I'd earned *that* right, to begin with!"

"I don't understand you at all, or why you should claim any right," I hedged. But I sat down, and he sank so heavily into an ancient, plush-covered chair that a spray of dust flew up from the cushions.

"I'm afraid I'm rather too fat!" he apologized. "But I always lose flesh motoring, so you'll see a change for the better, I hope—in a week or two. I expect our lines will be[Pg 91] cast in the same places for some time to come—if you're as wise as—as you are pretty. If not, I'm afraid you and Mr. O'Malley won't be long with our party. I say, you are gorgeous when you're in a rage! But why fly into a fury? You told me you didn't understand things. I'm doing my best to explain."

"Then your best is very bad," I said.

"Sorry! I'll begin another way. Listen! I'm going to be perfectly frank. Why not? We're birds of a feather. And the pot can't call the kettle black. Maybe my similes are a bit mixed, but you'll excuse that, as we're both Irish. Why, my being Irish—and Italian—is an explanation of me in itself, if you'd take the trouble to study it. But look here! I don't *want* you to take any trouble. I don't want to *give* you any trouble. Now do you begin to see light?"

"No!" I threw at him.

"I don't believe you, dear girl. You malign your own wits. You pay yourself worse compliments than I'd let any one else do! But I promised not to keep you long. And if I break my promise it will be your fault—because you're not reasonable. You're the pot and I'm the kettle, because we're both tarred with the same brush. By the way, *are* pots and kettles blacked with tar? They look it. But that's a detail. My sister and I are just as dead broke and down and out as you and your brother are. I mean, as you *were*, and as you may be again, if you make mistakes."

"I'd rather not bring my brother into this discussion," I said. "He's too far above it—and us. You can do as you choose about your sister."

"I can make *her* do as *I* choose," he amended. "That's[Pg 92] where my scheme came in, and where it still holds good. When I read the news of Pa and Ma Beckett arriving in Paris, it jumped into my head like a—like a——"

"Toad," I supplied the simile.

"I was leaving it to you," said he. "I thought you ought to know, for by a wonderful coincidence which should draw us together, the same great idea must have occurred to you—in the same way, and on the same day. I bet you the first hundred francs I get out of old Beckett that it was so!"

"Mr. O'Farrell, you're a Beast!" I cried.

"And you're a Beauty. So there we are, cast for opposite parts in the same play. Queer how it works out! Looks like the hand of Providence. Don't say what you want to say, or I shall be afraid you've been badly brought up. North of Ireland, I understand. We're South. Dierdre's a Sinn Feiner. You needn't expect mercy from her, unless I keep her down with a strong hand—the Hidden Hand. She hates you Northerners about ten times worse than she hates the Huns. Now you look as if you thought her name *wasn't* Dierdre! It is, because she took it. She takes a lot of things, when I've showed her how. For instance, photographs. She has several snapshots of Jim Beckett and me together. I have some of him and her. They're pretty strong cards (I don't mean a pun!) if we decide to use them. Don't you agree?"

"I neither agree nor disagree," I said, "for I understand you no better now than when you began."

"You're like Mr. Justice What's-his-name, who's so innocent he never heard of the race course. Well, I must adapt myself to your child-like intelligence! I'll go back[Pg 93] a bit to an earlier chapter in my career, the way novels and cinemas do, after they've given the public a good, bright opening. It was true, what I said about my voice. I've lost everything but my middle register. I had a fortune in my throat. At present I've got nothing but a warble fit for a small drawing room—and that, only by careful management. I knew months ago I could never sing again in opera. I was coining money in New York, and would be now—if they hadn't dug me out as a slacker—an *embusqué*—whatever you like to call it. I was a conscientious objector: that is, my conviction was it would be sinful to risk a bullet in a chest full of music, like mine—a treasure-chest. But the fools didn't see it in that light. They made America too hot to hold either Giulio di Napoli or Julian O'Farrell. I'm no coward—I swear to you I'm not, my dear girl! You've only to look me square in the face to see I'm not. I'm full of fire. But ever since I was a boy I've lived for my voice, and you can't die for your voice, like you can for your country. It goes—pop!—with you. I managed to convince the doctors that my heart was too jumpy for the trenches. I see digitalis in your eye, Miss Trained Nurse! It wasn't. It was strophantis. But they *would* set me to driving a motor ambulance—cold-hearted brutes! I got too near the front line one day—or rather the front line got too near me, and a shell hit my ambulance. The next thing I knew I was in hospital, and the first thing I thought of was my voice. A frog would have disowned it. I hoped for a while it might come right; but they sent me to St. Raphael for a sun cure, and—it didn't work. That was last spring. I'm as well as I ever was, except in my throat, and there the specialists say I need[Pg 94] never expect to be better. I'd change with your brother, Miss O'Malley. My God, I would. If I could lose my eyes and have my voice again—my voice!"

His flippancy broke down on those words, with one sincere and tragic note that touched me through my contempt. Watching, he saw this, and catching at self-control, he caught also at the straw of sympathy within his reach.

"I wanted to die for a while," he went on. "But youth is strong, even when you're down on your luck—down at the deepest. My sister came to St. Raphael to be with me. It may seem queer to you, but I'm her idol. She's lost everything else—or rather she thinks she has, which is much the same—everything that made her life worth living. She wanted to be a singer. Her voice wasn't strong enough. She wanted to be an actress. She knew how to act, but—she *couldn't*, Heaven knows why. She's got temperament enough, but she couldn't let herself out. You see what she's like! She failed in America, where she'd followed me against our mother's will. Mother died while we were there. Another blow! And a man Dierdre's been half engaged to was killed in Belgium. She didn't love him, but he was made of money. It would have been a big match! She took to nursing only after I was called up. You know in France a girl doesn't need much experience to get into a hospital. But poor little Dare wasn't more of a success at nursing than on the stage. Not enough self-confidence—too sensitive. People think she's always in the sulks—and so she is, these days. I'd been trying for six months' sick leave, and just got it when I read that stuff in the paper about Beckett being killed, and his parents hearing the news the day they arrived. It[Pg 95] struck me like drama: things do. I was born dramatic—took it from my mother. The thought came to me, how dead easy 'twould be for some girl to pretend she'd been engaged to Beckett, and win her wily way to the hearts and pockets of the old birds. Next I thought: Why not Dierdre? And there wasn't *any* reason why not! I told her it would be good practice in acting. (She hasn't quite given up hope of the stage yet.) We started for Paris on the job; and then I read in a later copy of the same paper about the smart young lady who'd stepped in ahead of us. If old Beckett hadn't been bursting with pride in the heroic girl who'd got a medal for nursing infectious cases in a hospital near St. Raphael, I'd have given up the game for a bad job. I'd have taken it for granted that Jim and the fiancée had met before we met him at St. Raphael. But when the paper said they'd made acquaintance there, and gave your name and all, I knew you were on the same trail with us. You'd walked in ahead, that was the only difference. And we had the snapshots. We could call witnesses to swear that no nurse from your hospital had come near St. Raphael, and to swear that none of the chaps in the aviation school had ever come near them. Dierdre hadn't been keen at first, but once she was in, she didn't want to fail again; especially for a North of Ireland girl like you. She was ready to go on. But the newspaper gushed a good deal over your looks, you remember. My curiosity was roused. I was—sort of obsessed by the thought of you. I decided to see what your head was like to look at before chopping it off. And anyhow, you'd already started on your jaunt. Through a rich chap I knew in New York, who's over here helping the[Pg 96] Red Cross, I got leave to carry supplies to the evacuated towns, provided I could find my own car. Well, I found it—such as it is. All I ask of it is not to break down till the Becketts have learned to love me as their dear, dead son's best friend. As for Dare—what she was to the dear dead son depends on you."

"Depends on me?" I repeated.

"Depends on you. Dare's not a good Sunday-school girl, but she's good to her brother—as good as you are to yours, in her way. She'll do what I want. But the question is Will *you*?"

For a moment I did not speak. Then I asked, "What do you want?"

"Only a very little thing," he said. "To live and let live, that's all. Don't you try to queer my pitch, and I won't queer yours."

"What is your pitch?" I asked.

He laughed. "You're very non-committal, aren't you? But I like your pluck. You've never once admitted by word or look that you're caught. All the same, you know you are. You can't hurt me, and I can hurt you. Your word wouldn't stand against my proofs, if you put up a fight. You'd go down—and your brother with you. Oh, I don't think he's in it! The minute I saw his face I was sure he wasn't; and I guessed from yours that what you'd done was mostly or all for him. Now, dear Miss O'Malley, you know where you are with me. Isn't that enough for you? Can't you just be wise and promise to let me alone on my 'pitch,' whatever it is?"

"I won't have Mr. and Mrs. Beckett made fools of in any way." [Pg 97]

He burst out laughing. "That's good—from *you*! I give you leave to watch over their interests, if you let me take care of mine. Is it a bargain?"

I did not answer. I was thinking—thinking furiously, when the landlord came to the door to put out the lights.

O'Farrell sprang to his feet. "We're ready to go. We can leave the room free, can't we, Miss O'Malley?" he said in French.

Somehow, I found myself getting up, and fading out of the room as if I'd been hypnotized. I walked straight to the foot of the stairs, then turned at bay to deliver some ultimatum—I scarcely knew what. But O'Farrell had cleverly accomplished a vanishing act, and there was nothing left for me to do save go to my own room.[Pg 98]

CHAPTER XI

Thinking things over in the night, I decided to wait until after breakfast before making up my mind to anything irrevocable. Breakfast being the appointed rendezvous, O'Farrell would then lay his cards on the table. If he slipped some up his sleeve, I must make it my business to spot the trick and its meaning for the Becketts.

As I offered this sop to my conscience, I could almost hear O'Farrell saying, with one of his young laughs, "That's right. Set a thief to catch a thief!"

At ten o'clock we were to start for Nancy via Commercy, so there would be little time to reflect, and to act on top of reflection; but my strait being desperate, I resolved to trust to luck; and to be first on the field of battle, I knocked at Brian's door at half-past eight.

He was already dressed, and to look at his neat cravat and smoothly brushed hair no one would have guessed that his toilet had been made by a blind man. We had not yet exchanged opinions of the O'Farrell family, and I had come early to get his impressions. They were always as accurate and quickly built up as his sketches; but since he has been blind, he seems almost clairvoyant.

"What do you think of those two?" I asked. "Or rather, what do you think of the man? I know you have to judge by voices; and as the girl hardly opened her mouth you can't——"[Pg 99]

"Queer thing—and I don't quite understand it myself," said Brian; "but I see Miss O'Farrell more clearly than her brother."

He generally speaks of "seeing people," quite as a matter of course. It used to give me a sharp pain at my heart; but I begin to take his way for granted now. "There's something about O'Farrell that eludes me—slips away like quicksilver. One is charmed with his voice and his good looks——"

"Brian! Who told you he was good-looking?" I broke in.

Brian laughed. "I told myself! His manner—so sure of his power to please—belongs to good looks. Besides, I've never known a tenor with any such quality of voice who hadn't magnificent eyes. Why they should go together is a mystery—but they do. Am I right about this chap?"

"Yes, you're right," I admitted. "But go on. I'm more interested in him than in his sister."

"Are you? I've imagined her the more interesting—the more repaying—of the two. I see O'Farrell, not a bad fellow, but—not *sure*. I don't believe he's even sure of himself, whether he wants to be straight or crooked. How he turns out will depend—on circumstances, or perhaps on some woman. If he travels with us, he'll be a pleasant companion, there's no doubt. But——"

"But—what?"

"Well, we must always keep in mind that he's an actor. We mustn't take too seriously anything he says or does. And you, Molly—you must be more careful than the rest."

"I! But I told you I'd never met him at St. Raphael. I never set eyes on him till last night."[Pg 100]

"I know. Yet I felt, when he 'set eyes' on you—oh, I don't know how to express what I felt! Only—if it had happened on the stage, there'd have been music for it in the orchestra."

"Brian, how strange you are!" I almost gasped. "Ought we to let the man and his sister go on with us, if that's their aim? Their Red Cross flag may be camouflage, you know! Very likely they're adventurers, after the Beckett's money. We could advise Father and Mother Beck——"

"Let's follow a famous example, and 'wait and see'—if only for the girl's sake."

"Oh, you think so well of her!"

"Not well, exactly," Brian hesitated. "I don't know what to think of her yet. But—I think *about* her. I feel her, as I feel electricity before a thunderstorm bursts."

"A thunderstorm expresses her!" I laughed. "I thought of that myself. She's sullen—brooding, dark as a cloud. Yet the *tiniest* thing! One could almost break her in two."

"I held out my hand for good-night," Brian said. "She had to give hers, though I'm sure for some reason she didn't want to. It was small and—crushable, like a child's; and hot, as if she had fever."

"She didn't want to take yours, because we're North of Ireland and she's a fierce Sinn Feiner," I explained. Luckily Brian did not ask how I'd picked up this piece of information! He was delighted with it, and chuckled. "So she's a Sinn Feiner! She's very pretty, isn't she?"

"In a cross-patch way. She looks ready to bite at a touch." [Pg 101]

"Poor child! Life must have gone hard with her. She's probably got a grouch, as the American boys over here say. We must try and do something to soften her down, and make her see things through rosier spectacles, if she and her brother join on to our party for a while."

"Ye-es."

"You don't like her, Molly?"

"Oh, I've hardly thought of her, dear. But you seem to have made up for that."

"Thunderstorms *make* you think about them. They electrify the atmosphere. I see this girl so distinctly somehow: little, white thing; big, gloomy eyes like storms in deep woods, and thin eyelids—you know, that transparent, flower-petal kind, where you fancy you see the iris looking through, like spirit eyes, always awake while the body's eyes sleep; and—and lots of dark hair without much colour—hair like smoke. I see her a suppressed volcano—but not extinct."

"The day may come when we'll wish she were extinct. But really you've described her better than I could, though I stared quite a lot last night. Come along, dear. It's six minutes to nine. Let's trot down to breakfast."

We trotted; but early as I'd meant to be, and early as we were, the O'Farrells and the Becketts were before us. How long they had been together I don't know, but they must have finished their first instalment of talk about Jim, for already they had got on to the subject of plans.

"Well, it will be noble of you to help us with supplies. The promise we've got from our American Red Cross man in Paris is limited," O'Farrell was saying in his voice to charm a statue off its pedestal, as we came in. He [Pg 102] sprang to shut the door for us, and gave me the look of a cherubic fox, as much as to say, "You see where we've got to! But it's all for the good cause. There's more than one person not as black as he's painted!"

"Molly's watch must be slow," said Brian. "She thought it was only six minutes to nine."

"She's right. But it seems the big clock in the hall outside our door is fast," explained Father Beckett. "We heard it strike nine, so we hurried down. The same thing happened with Mr. and Miss O'Farrell."

Another glance at me from the brilliant eyes! "Smart trick, eh?" they telegraphed. I had to turn away, or I should have laughed. Surely never before, on stage or in story—to say nothing of real life—was the villain and blackmailer a mischievous, schoolboy imp, who made his victims giggle at the very antics which caught them in his toils! But, come to think of it, *I* am a villain, and next door to a blackmailer! Yet I always see myself (unless I stop to reflect on my sins) as a girl like other girls, even better-natured and more agreeable and intelligent than most. Perhaps, after all, villains don't run in types!

I soon learned that Father and Mother Beckett were rejoicing in the acquisition of Jim's two friends as travelling companions. The celebrated snapshots were among the cards O'Farrell had kept up his sleeve. No doubt he'd waited to make sure of my attitude (though he appeared to take it for granted) before deciding what use to make of his best trumps. Seeing that I let slip my one and only chance of a denunciation-scene, he flung away his also, with an air of dashing chivalry which his sister and I alone were in a position to appreciate. For me it had been a case of [Pg 103] "speak now, or forever after hold your peace." For him, a decision was not irrevocable, as he could denounce me later, and plead that I had been spared at first, through kindness of heart. But I did not stop to consider that detail. I saw the man and myself as accomplices, on an equal footing, each having given quarter to the other. As for the girl, I still thought of her hardly at all, in spite of Brian's words. She was an unknown quantity, which I would waste no time in studying, while the situation that opened bade me sharpen my wits.

In the five or ten minutes before we joined them the Becketts had consented—or offered—to help finance the Red Cross crusade. To achieve this was worthy of the Irish-Italian's talents. But the little dining room was littered with samples of the travellers' goods: clothing for repatriated refugees, hospital supplies; papier-mâché splints, and even legs; shoes, stockings, medicines; soup-tablets, and chocolates. The O'Farrells might be doing evil, but good would apparently come from it for many. I could hardly advise the Becketts against giving money, even though I suspected that most of it would stick to O'Farrell's fingers—even though I knew that the hope of it consoled Signor Giulio di Napoli for leaving me in my safe niche. Yes, that was his consolation, I realized. And—there might be something more which I did not yet foresee. Still, being no better than he was, I was coward enough to hold my peace.

This was the situation when we set out for Nancy, our big car running slowly, in order not to outpace the rickety Red Cross cab. We were not allowed by the military authorities to enter Toul, so our way took us through [Pg 104] delightful old Commercy, birthplace of Madeleines. Of course the town had things to make it famous, long before the day of the shell-shaped cakelets which all true sons and daughters of France adore. Somebody founded it in the ninth century, when the bishops of Metz were the great overlords of its lords. It was a serious little city then, and Benedictine monks had a convent there in the Middle Ages. The fun began only with the building of the château, and the coming of the Polish Stanislas, the best loved and last Duke of Lorraine. He used to divide his years between Nancy, Lunéville, and Commercy; and once upon a time, in the third of these châteaux, the *chef* had a *chère amie* named Madeleine. There was to be a fête, and the lover of Madeleine was racking his tired brain to invent some new dainty for it. "*I* have thought of something which can make you famous," announced the young woman, who was a budding genius as a cook. "But, *mon cher*, it is my secret. Even to you I will not give it for nothing. I will sell it at a price."

The *chef* feigned indifference; but each moment counted. The Duke always paid in praise and gold for a successful new dish, especially a cake, for he was fond of sweets. When Madeleine boasted that her "inspiration" took the form of a cake, the man could resist no longer. The price asked was marriage—no less, and paid in advance! But it turned out not excessive. The feather-light, shell-shaped cakes were the success of the feast; and when Duke Stanislas heard their history, he insisted that they should be named Madeleines—"after their mother."

Even in war days, "Madeleines de Commercy" is the first cry which greets the traveller entering town. Jim, it [Pg 105] seems, had a charming habit of sending to his mother at home a specimen of the cake, or confiture, or bonbon, for which each place he visited abroad was famed. These things used to reach her in jars or boxes adorned with the coat-of-arms and photographs of the city concerned—a procession of surprises: and I think as she bought Madeleines of Commercy she moistened them with a few tears.

I expected to find Nancy beautiful, since for so long it was the capital of proud Lorraine, but I hadn't guessed how beautiful or individual. Now I shall always in future see the details of each splendid square and park by shutting my eyes and calling the vision to come—as Brian does.

We drove straight to the door of a fascinating, old-fashioned hotel in the most celebrated square of all, the Place Stanislas; but we didn't go in. We couldn't stolidly turn our backs upon the magic picture, lit by a sudden radiance of sunshine, for in another moment the fairy-like effect might fade. Yes, "fairy-like" is the word; and as our two cars drew up—like Dignity and Impudence—I had the feeling that we'd arrived in the capital of fairyland to visit the king and queen.

It was I who described the scene to Brian: the eighteenth-century perfection of the buildings, each one harmoniously proportioned to suit the others; the town hall, with its wonderful clock; the palace; the theatre, and the rest of the happy architectural family reared by Duke Stanislas; each with its roof-decoration of carved stone vases, and graceful statues miraculously missed so far by German bombs; the lace-like filigree of wrought iron and gold on flag-hung balconies or gates; the gilded Arch of Triumph [Pg 106] leading into the garden of the Place Carrière—a gorgeous glitter of decoration which won for Nancy her *alias*, "City of Golden Doors," and now has to be "camouflaged" for enemy aeroplanes. It was I who made the list of stage properties, but it was Brian who filled the stage with actors and actresses, in their proper parts.

He called upon the bronze statue of Stanislas to come down from its high pedestal, and appear before us in flesh, happy to be Duke of Lorraine, after all the dethronings and abdications in Poland; a most respectable-looking monarch despite his adventures and disguises of the past. We saw him in a powdered perruque, on his way to the ducal palace, after some religious ceremony that had attracted crowds of loyal Catholic Lorrainers: beside him, his good wife of bourgeoisie soul but romantic name, Catherine Opalinska, a comfortable woman, too large for the fashionable *robe à paniers*; with the pair, their daughter Marie, proud of the fate foretold by a fortune-teller, that she should be queen of France; the Royal family, and the aristocrats of their northern court; the smart Polish officers in uniform; the pretty, coquettish women, and dark-faced musicians of Hungary; the Swedish philosophers, the long-haired Italian artists; and above all, the beautiful Marquise de Boufflers—rival of the Queen—with her little dogs and black pages; all these "belonged" to the sunlit picture, where our modern figures seemed out of place and time. The noble square, with its vast stretch of gray stone pavement—worn satin-smooth—its carved gray façades of palaces, picked out with gold, and its vista of copper beeches rose-red against a sky of pearl, had been designed as a sober background for the colour and fantastic [Pg 107] fashion of the eighteenth century, whereas we and others like us but added an extra sober note.

I noticed, as Brian sketched us his little picture of the past, that Dierdre O'Farrell gazed at him, as if at some legendary knight in whose reality she did not believe. It was the first time I had seen any change in the sullen face, but it was a change to interest rather than sympathy. She had the air of saying in her mind: "You look more like a St. George, stepped down from a stained-glass window, than an ordinary man of to-day. You seem to think about everyone else before yourself, and to see a lot more with your blind eyes than we see. You pretend to be happy, too, as if you wanted to set everybody a good example. But it's all a pose—a pose! I shall study you till I find you out, a trickster like the rest of us."

I felt a sudden stab of dislike for the girl, for daring to put Brian on a level with herself—and me. I wanted to punish her somehow, wanted to make the little wretch pay for her impertinent suspicions. I pushed past her brusquely to stand between her and Brian. "Let's go into the hotel," I said. "It's more important just now to see what our rooms are like than to play with the ghosts of dukes."

As if the slighted ghosts protested, there came a loud, reproachful wail out of space. Everyone started, and stared in all directions. Then the soberly clad, modern inhabitants of Nancy glanced skyward as they crossed the square of Stanislas. Nobody hurried, yet nobody stopped. Men, women, and children pursued their way at the same leisurely pace as before, except that their chins were raised. I realized then that the ghostly wail was the warning cry of a siren: "Take cover! Enemy aeroplanes sighted!" But [Pg 108] there was the monotony of boredom in the voice, and in the air with which passers-by received the news.

"Oh, lord, here I go again!" the weary siren sighed.

"Third time to-day, *mon Dieu!*" grumbled a very old man to a very blasé porter, who dutifully shot out of the hotel to rescue our luggage, if not us, from possible though improbable danger. We let him haul in our bags, but remained glued to the pavement, utterly absorbed and fascinated, waiting for the show to begin.

We had not long to wait! For an instant the pearl-pale zenith shone serenely void. Then, heralded by a droning noise as of giant bees, and a vicious spitting of shrapnel, high overhead sailed a wide-winged black bird, chased by four other birds bigger, because nearer earth. They soared, circling closer, closer—two mounting high, two flying low, and so passed westward, while the sky was spattered with shrapnel—long, white streaks falling slow and straight, like tail-

feathers of a shot eagle.

There was scant time to speak, or even draw an excited breath after the birds had disappeared, because they were back again, hovering so high that they were changed to insects.

We ought to have scuttled into the hotel, but somehow we didn't move, although people in the square seemed suddenly to realize the wisdom of prudence. Some vanished into doorways, others walked faster—though not one of those haughty Lorrainers would condescend to run. Forgetful of ourselves, I was admiring their pride, when an angry voice made me jump.

"You pretend that everything you do, good or bad, is for your brother's sake, yet you let him risk his life—a[Pg 109] *blind* man!—out here in the street with bombs and shrapnel dropping every instant!"

It was Dierdre O'Farrell who spoke, and we glared into each other's eyes like two Kilkenny cats—or a surprised Kilkenny cat and a spitfire Kilkenny kitten.

A moment before, I had been longing to strike at her. Now it was she who struck at me; and it was too much, that it should be in defence of my own brother! The primitive fishwife within me rose to the surface. "Mind your own business!" I rudely flung at her: and slipping my arm under Brian's, in a voice of curdled cream begged him to come with me indoors.

The others followed, and about three seconds later a bomb fell in front of the hotel. It was a "dud," and did not explode, but it made a hole in the pavement and sent a jet of splintered stone into the air.

Perhaps the girl had saved us from death, or at least from disfiguring wounds, but I was in no mood to thank her for that. I was *glad* I had been a fishwife, and I thought Brian lacked his usual discernment in attributing hidden qualities to such a person as Dierdre O'Farrell.

"Something's bound to break, if we don't part soon!" I told myself.[Pg 110]

CHAPTER XII

Nancy is one of "Jim's towns," as Mother and Father Beckett say. When, with Brian's help, they began mapping out their route, they decided to "give something worth while" to the place, and to all the ruined region round about, when they had learned what form would be best for their donation to take. Some friend in Paris gave them a letter to the Préfet, and we had not been in Nancy an hour when he and his wife called.

I'd never met a real, live préfet. The word sounded stiff and official. When Mother Beckett tremulously asked me to act as interpreter, I dimly expected to meet two polite automata, as little human as creatures of flesh and blood can be. Instead, I saw a perfectly delightful pair of Parisians, with the warm, kind manner one thinks of as southern. They were frankly pleased that a millionaire's purse promised to open for Nancy. Monsieur le Préfet offered himself to the Becketts as guide on a sightseeing expedition next day, and Madame, the Préfet's wife, proposed to exhibit her two thousand children, old and young, refugees housed in what once had been barracks. "The Germans pretend to believe they are barracks still, full of soldiers, as an excuse for bombs," she said. "But you shall see! And if you wish—if you have time—we will take you to see also what[Pg 111] the Boches have done to some of our other towns—ah, but beautiful towns, of an importance! Lunéville, and Gerbévillers, and more—many more. You should know what they are like before you go on to the Grande Couronne, where Nancy was saved in 1914."

Of course the Becketts "wished." Of course they had time. "Molly, tell Mr. and Mrs. Préfet we've got more time than anything else!" said the old man eagerly. "Oh, and I guess we've got a little money, too, enough to spread around among those other places, as well as here. This is going to be something like what Jim would want at last!"

When the Préfet and his wife rose to go, they invited not only the Becketts but Brian and me to dine at their house that night. Mother Beckett, on the point of accepting for us all, hesitated. The hesitation had to be explained: and the explanation was—the O'Farrells. I had hoped we might be spared them, but it was not to be. Our host and hostess, hearing of the travellers of the Red Cross, insisted that they must come, too. Mrs. Beckett was sure they would both be charmed, but as it turned out, she was only half right. Mr. O'Farrell was charmed. His sister had a headache, and intended to spend the evening in her room.

Padre, if I wrote stories, I should like to write one with that préfet and his whole family for the heroes and heroines of it!

There is a small son. There are five daughters, each prettier than the others, the youngest a tiny *fillette*, the eldest twenty at most; and the mother in looks an elder sister. When the war broke out they were living in[Pg 112] Paris, the father in some high political post: but he was by ancestry a man of Lorraine, and his first thought was to help defend the home of his forbears. The Meurthe-et-Moselle, with Nancy as its centre and capital, was a terrible danger zone, with the sword of the enemy pointed at its heart, but the lover of Lorraine asked to become préfet in place of a man about to leave, and his family rallied round him. There at Nancy, they have been ever since those days, through all the bombardments by Big Berthas and Taubes. When houses and hotels were being blown to bits by naval guns, thirty-five kilometres away, the daily life of the family went on as if in peace. As a man, the Préfet longed to send his wife and children far away. As a servant of France he thought best to let them stop, to "set an example of calmness." And if they had been bidden to go, they would still have stayed.

The Préfet's house is one of the eighteenth-century palaces of the Place Stanislas; and in the story I'd like to write, I should put a description of their drawing room, and the scene after dinner that night.

Imagine a background of decorative walls, adorned with magnificent portraits (one of the best is Stanislas, and better still is Louis XVI, a proud baby in the arms of a handsome mother); imagine beautiful Louis XV chairs, tables, and sofas scattered about, with the light of prism-hung chandeliers glinting on old brocades and tapestries: flowers everywhere, in Chinese bowls and tall vases; against this background a group of lovely girls multiplied by many mirrors into a large company; be-medalled officers in pale blue uniforms, handing coffee to the ladies, or taking from silver dishes carried by children the delicious maca[Pg 113]roons which are to Nancy what Madeleines are to Commercy. Imagine long windows opening into a garden: rosy lamplight streaming out, silver moonlight streaming in; music; the wonderful voice of a man (Julian O'Farrell) singing the "Marseillaise," the "Star-Spangled Banner," and "Tipperary." Then into the midst of this breaking the tiresome whine of the siren.

"What? A fourth time to-day?" cries somebody. "These creatures will wear out their welcome if they're not careful!"

A laugh follows, to drown the bark of shrapnel, and a general shrugging of the shoulders. But suddenly comes a cry that *la petite*—the baby daughter of the house, sitting up in our honour—has run into the garden.

The elder girls are not afraid for themselves, the great bombardments have given them a quiet contempt of mere Taubes. But for the little sister!—that is different. Instantly it seems that all the bombs Germany has ever made may be falling like iron rain on that curly head out there among the autumn lilies. Everybody rushes to the rescue: and there is the child, sweet as a cherub and cool as a cucumber, in the din. She stands on the lawn, chin in air, baby thumb on baby nose for the Taube caught in a silver web of searchlights.

"*Sale oiseau!*" her defiant cry shrills up. "Just like you, to come on my grown-up evening! But you shan't spoil it. No, sister, I don't want to go in. I came out to say good-night to the chickens and rabbits, and tell them not to be afraid."

Behind the lilies and late roses and laurels is quite a menagerie of domestic animals, housed among growing[Pg 114] potatoes, beans, and tomatoes. *C'est la guerre!* But rabbits and chickens are robbed of their consolation; the baby is bundled into the house; and, once she is safe—safe as any one can be safe in bombarded Nancy!—nobody thinks about the air raid. *Que voulez-vous?* If one thought about these things, smiles a blonde girl in white, they might really get upon one's nerves, and that would never do!

"It is this moonlight," she explains. "They will be back again once or twice to-night, perhaps. But the streets will be as full as ever of *poilus en permission*, walking with their sweethearts, in spite of the hateful things!"

One makes one's adieux early in war times; but the moonlight was so wonderful on that Taube-ridden night that Brian said he felt it like a cool silver shower on his eyelids. "I believe I'm developing night-eyes!" he laughed to me, as we walked ahead of the Becketts and Julian O'Farrell, on our way across the gleaming square to our hotel. "Surely there won't be another raid for an hour or two? Let's take a walk. Let's go into the old town, and try to see some ghosts."

"Yes, let's!" I echoed.

I said good-night sweetly to the Becketts and stiffly to O'Farrell. Brian was equally cordial to all three, and I feared that O'Farrell might be encouraged to offer his company. But his self-assurance stopped short of that. He went meekly into the darkened hotel with the old couple, and I turned away triumphant, with my arm in Brian's.

The clock of the Town Hall struck ten, chimed, waited for the church clock to approve and confirm, then repeated all that it had said and sung a minute before.[Pg 115]

We were going to look for ghosts of kings and dukes and queens; and like ghosts ourselves, we stepped from moonlit shores into pools of shadow, and back to moonlit shores again; past the golden Arch of Triumph, which Stanislas built in honour of his daughter's marriage with Louis XV; through the Carrière, where the tops of tall copper-beeches caught the light with dull red gleams, like the glow of a carbuncle; past the sleeping palace of Stanislas, into the old "nursery garden" of the Pepinière, to the sombre Porte de la Craffe whose two huge, pointed towers and great wall guard the old town of Duke René II.

There we stopped, because of all places this dark corner was the place for Nancy's noblest ghost to walk, René the Romantic, friend of Americo Vesputius when Americo needed friends; René the painter, whose pictures still adorn old churches of Provence, where he was once a captive: René, whose memory never dies in Nancy, though his body died 500 years ago.

What if he should rise from his tomb in the church of the Cordeliers, or come down off his little bronze horse in the Place St. Epvre as ghosts may by moonlight, to walk with his fair wife Isabella through the huddled streets of the old town, gazing at the wreckage made by the greatest war of history? What would he think of civilization, he who held his dukedom against the star warrior of the century, Charles the Bold? War was lawless enough in his day. When avenging a chancellor's murder, the Nancians hanged 100 Burgundian officers on a church tower for the besiegers outside the city wall to see. But the "noble Gauls" whom Julius Cæsar called "knights of chivalry," would have drawn the line then at showering bombs from[Pg 116] the bay on women and children. We fancied, Brian and I, that after a walk round Nancy René and Isabella would retire, sadder and wiser ghosts, content to have finished their lives in gentler times than ours. Back into the shadows might they fade, to sleep again, and take up their old dream where the noise of twentieth-century shrapnel had snapped its thread. Their best dream must be, we thought, of their battle of Nancy: Charles the Bold on his black war-horse, surrounded by Burgundian barons in armour, shouting, and waving their banners with standards of ivory and gold; Charles of the dark locks, and brilliant eyes which all men feared and some women loved; Charles laughing with joy in the chance of open battle at last, utterly confident of its end, because the young duke—once his prisoner—had reinforced a small army with mercenaries, Swiss and Alsatians. At most René had 15,000 soldiers, and Charles believed his equal band of Burgundians worth ten times the paid northerners, as man to man.

From the church tower where Charles's men had hung—where St. Epvre stands now—René could see the enemy troops

assembling, headed by the Duke of Burgundy, in his glittering helmet adorned with its device of an open-jawed lion. He could even see the gorgeous tent whose tapestried magnificence spies had reported (a magnificence owned by Nancy's museum in our day!), and there seemed to his eyes no end to the defile of spears, of strange engines for scaling walls, and glittering battle-axes. One last prayer, a blessing by the pale priest, and young René's own turn to lead had come—a slight adversary for great Charles, but with a heart as bold! The trumpet blast of [Pg 117] La Rivière, sounding the charge of Lorraine, went to his head like wine. He laughed when Herter's mountain men began to sing "Le taureau d'Uri" and "La vache d'Unterwald," to remind the proud Burgundian of his defeats at Granson and Morat. Then came the crash of armour against armour, blade against blade, and the day ended for Nancy according to René's prayers. The southerners fled and died; and two days later, René was gazing down at the drowned body of Charles the Bold, dragged out of a pond. Yes, a good dream for ghosts of the chivalrous age to retire into, and shut the door! But for us, in our throbbing flesh and blood, this present was worth suffering in for the glory of the future.

There were other ghosts to meet in Nancy's old town of narrow streets where moonlight trickled in a narrow rill. Old, old ghosts, far older than the town as we saw it: Odebric of the eleventh century, who owned the strongest castle in France and the most beautiful wife, and fought the bishops of Metz and Treves together, because they did not approve of the lady; Henri VI of England riding through the walled city with his bride, Marguerite, by his side: ghostly funeral processions of dead dukes, whose strange, Oriental obsequies were famed throughout the world; younger and more splendid ghosts: Louis XIII and Richelieu entering in triumph when France had fought and won Lorraine, only to give it back by bargaining later; ghosts of stout German generals who, in 1871, had "bled the town white"; but greater than all ghosts, the noble reality of Foch and Castlenau, who saved Nancy in 1914, on the heights of La Grande Couronne.

As we walked back to the new town, dazed a little by our [Pg 118] deep plunge into the centuries, I heard my name called from across the street. "Miss O'Malley—wait, please! It's Julian O'Farrell. Have you seen my sister?"

Brian and I stopped short, and O'Farrell joined us, panting and out of breath. "She's not with you?" he exclaimed. "I hoped she would be. I've been searching everywhere—she wasn't in the hotel when I got home, and it's close to midnight." [Pg 119]

CHAPTER XIII

I felt unsympathetic, and wouldn't have cared if Miss Dierdre O'Farrell had flown off on a broomstick, or been kidnapped by a German aviator. My heart, however, was sure that nothing had happened and I suspected that her brother had trumped up an excuse to join us. It vexed me that Brian should show concern. If only he knew how the girl had looked at him a few hours ago!

"Couldn't they tell you in the hotel at what time she went out?" he enquired.

But no! According to O'Farrell, his sister had not been seen. He had found her door unlocked, the room empty, and her hat and coat missing. "She told me she was going to bed," he added. "But the bed hasn't been disturbed."

"Nor need you be, I think," said I. "Perhaps your sister wants to frighten you. Children love that sort of thing. It draws attention to themselves. And sometimes they don't outgrow the fancy."

"Especially Suffragettes and Sinn Feiners," O'Farrell played up to me, unoffended. "Still, as a brother of one, I'm bound to search, if it takes all night. A sister's a sister. And mine is quite a valuable asset." He tossed me this hint with a Puck-like air of a private understanding established between us. Yes, "Puck-like" describes him: a Puck at the same time merry and malicious, never to be counted upon! [Pg 120]

"I feel that Miss O'Farrell went out to take a walk because she was restless, and perhaps not very happy," Brian reproached us both. "Something may have happened—remember we're in the war zone."

"No one in Nancy's likely to forget that!" said I, dully resenting his defence of the enemy. "Brushing bombs out of their back hair every ten minutes or so! And listen—don't you hear big guns booming now, along the front? The German lines are only sixteen kilometres from here."

Brian didn't answer. His brain was pursuing Dierdre O'Farrell, groping after her through the night. "If she went out before that air raid, while we were at the Préfet's," he suggested, "she may have had to take refuge somewhere—she may have been hurt—"

"By Jove!" Puck broke in. "It scares me when you say that. You're a—a sort—of *prophet*, you know! I must find out what hospitals there are—"

"We'll go with you to the hotel," Brian promised. "They'll know there about the hospitals. And if the Préfet's still up, he'll phone for us officially, I'm sure."

"It's you who are the practical one, after all!" cried O'Farrell. And I guessed from a sudden uprush of Irish accent that his anxiety had grown sincere.

We hurried home; Brian seeming almost to guide us, for without his instinct for the right way we would twice have taken a wrong turning. As we came into the Place Stanislas, still a pale oasis of moonlight, I saw standing in front of the hotel two figures, black as if cut out of velvet. One, that of a man, was singularly tall and thin, as a Mephistopheles of the stage. The other was that of a woman in a long cloak, small and slight as a child of fourteen. Dierdre [Pg 121] O'Farrell, of course! It could be no one else. But who was the man? A dim impression that the figure was vaguely familiar, or had been familiar long ago, teased my brain. But surely I could never have seen it before.

"Hurrah! There she is!" cried O'Farrell, "alive and on her pins!"

At the sound of his voice, the velvet silhouettes stirred. They had turned to look at us, and a glint of moonlight made the two faces white and blank as masks. O'Farrell waved his hand, and I was obliged to quicken my steps to keep pace with Brian: "I suppose she got lost—serve her right!—and the beanpole has escorted her home," grumbled Puck; but as he spoke, the beanpole in question hurriedly made a gesture of salute, and stalked away with enormous strides. In an instant he was engulfed by a shadow-wave and his companion was left to meet us alone. I thought it would be like her to whisk into the hotel and vanish before we could arrive, but she did not. She stood still, with a fierce little air of defiance; and as we came near I saw that under the thrown-back cloak her left arm was in a white sling.

Her brother saw it also. "Hullo, what have you been up to?" he wanted to know. "You've given us the scare of our lives!"

"Thank you," the girl said. "Please speak for yourself!"

"He may speak for us, too," Brian assured her. "We thought of the air raid. And even now, I don't feel as if we'd been wrong. Your voice sounds as if you were in pain. You've been hurt!"

"It's nothing at all," she answered shortly, but her tone [Pg 122] softened slightly for Brian. Even *she* had her human side, it seemed. "A window splintered near where I was, and I got a few bits of glass in my arm. They're out now—every one. A doctor came, and looked after me. You see, Jule!" and she nodded her head at the sling. "Now I'm going in to bed. Good-night!"

"Wait, and let my sister help you," Brian proposed. "She's a splendid nurse. I know she'll be delighted."

"Sweet of her!" sneered the girl. "But *I'm* a trained nurse, too, and I can take care of myself. It's only my left arm that's hurt, and a scratch at that. I don't need any help from any one."

"Was that man we saw the doctor who put you in your sling?" asked "Jule," in the blunt way brothers have of catching up their sisters.

"Yes, he was," she grudged.

"Why did he run away? Didn't he want to be thanked?"

"He did not. Besides——"

"Besides—what?"

"He particularly didn't wish to meet—one of our party. Now, I shan't say a word more about him. So you needn't ask questions. I'm tired. I want to go to bed."

With this ultimatum, she bolted into the hotel, leaving the three of us speechless for a few seconds. I suppose each was wondering, "Am *I* the one the doctor didn't want to meet?" Then I remembered my impression of having known that tall, thin figure long ago, and I was seized with certainty that the mysterious person had fled from me. At all events, I was sure Miss O'Farrell wished me to think so by way of being as aggravating as she possibly could. [Pg 123]

"Well, I'm *blessed*!" Puck exploded.

"Are you?" I doubted. And I couldn't resist adding, "I thought your sister always did what you wanted?"

"In the end she does," he upheld his point. "But—just lately—she's bewitched! Some saint is needed to remove the ban."

I thought the saint was only too near her hand! Whether that hand would scratch or strike I couldn't guess; but one gesture was as dangerous as the other.

What with thinking of my own horridness and other people's, wondering about the shadow-man, and being roused by the usual early morning air raid, bed didn't mother me with its wonted calming influence. Excitement was a tonic for the next day, however; and a bath and coffee braced me for an expedition with the Préfet's wife and daughters, and the Becketts. They took us over the two huge *casernes*, turned into homes of refuge for two thousand people from the invaded towns and villages of Lorraine: old couples, young women (of course the young men are fighting), and children. We saw the skilled embroiderers embroidering, and the unskilled making sandbags for the trenches; we saw the schools; and the big girls at work upon trousseaux for their future, or happily cooking in the kitchens. We saw the gardens where the refugees tended their own growing fruit and vegetables. We saw the church—once a gymnasium—and an immense cinema theatre, decorated by the ladies of Nancy, with the Préfet's wife and daughters at their head. On the way home we dropped into the biggest of Nancy's beautiful shops, to behold the work of last night's bombs. The whole skylight-roof had been smashed at dawn; but the glass had [Pg 124] been swept away, and pretty girls were selling pretty hats and frocks as if nothing had happened—except that the wind of heaven was blowing their hair across their smiling eyes.

After luncheon at which Dierdre O'Farrell didn't appear, the Préfet took us to the streets which had suffered most from the big gun bombardment—fine old houses destroyed with a completeness of which the wickedest aeroplane bombs are incapable. "Any minute they may begin again," the Préfet said. "But sufficient for the day! We suffered so much in a few hours three years ago, that nothing which has happened to us since has counted. Nancy was saved for us, to have and hold. Wounded she might be, and we also. But she was saved. We could bear the rest."

We made him tell us about those "few hours" of suffering: and this was the story. It was on the 7th of September, 1914, when the fate of Nancy hung in the balance. An immense horde of Germans came pouring along the Seille, crossing the river by four bridges: Chambley, Moncel, Brin, and Bioncourt. Everyone knew that the order was to take Nancy at any

price, and open the town for the Kaiser to march in, triumphant, as did Louis XIII of France centuries ago. William was said to be waiting with 10,000 men of the Prussian Guard, in the wood of Morel, ready for his moment. Furiously the Germans worked to place their huge cannon on the hills of Doncourt, Bourthecourt, and Rozebois. Villages burned like card houses. Church bells tolled as their towers rocked and fell. Forests blazed, and a rain of bombs poured over the country from clouds of flame and smoke. Amance[Pg 125] was lost, and with it hope also; for beyond, the road lay open for a rush on Nancy, seemingly past the power of man to defend. Still, man *did* defend! If the French could hold out against ten times their number for a few hours, there was one chance in a thousand that reinforcements might arrive. After Velaine fell next day, and the defile between the two mountain-hills of Amance swarmed with yelling Uhlans, the French still held. They did not hope, but they fought. How they fought! And at the breaking point, as if by miracle, appeared the reinforcing *tirailleurs*.

"This," said the Préfet, "was only one episode in the greatest battle ever fought for Nancy, but it was the episode in which the town was saved.

"You know," he went on, "that Lorrainers have been ardent Catholics for centuries. In the Church of Bon-Secours there's a virgin which the people credit with miraculous power. Many soldiers in the worst of the fighting were sure of victory, because the virgin had promised that never should Nancy be taken again by any enemy whatever."

It was late when we came back to the hotel, and while I was translating the Becketts' gratitude into French for the Préfet, the O'Farrells arrived from another direction. The brother looked pleased to see us; the sister looked distressed. I fancied that she had been forced or persuaded to point out the scene of last night's adventure, and was returning chastened from the visit. To introduce her to the Préfet was like introducing a dog as it strains at the leash, but Puck performed the rite, and explained her sling.[Pg 126]

"Hurt in the air raid?" the Préfet echoed. "I hope, Mademoiselle, that you went to a good doctor. That he——"

"The doctor came to her on the spot," replied Puck, in his perfect French. "It seems you have doctors at Nancy who walk the streets, when there's a raid, wandering about to pick up jobs, and refusing payment."

The Préfet laughed. "Can it be," he exclaimed, "that Mademoiselle has been treated by the Wandering Jew? Oh, not the original character, but an extraordinary fellow who has earned that name in our neighbourhood since the war."

"Was that what he called himself?" O'Farrell turned to Dierdre. I guessed that Puck's public revelations were vengeance upon her for unanswered questions.

"He called himself nothing at all," the girl replied.

"Ah," said the Préfet, "then he *was* the Wandering Jew! Let me see—I think you are planning to go to Gerbéviller and Lunéville and Vitrimont to-morrow. Most likely you'll meet him at one of those places. And when you hear his story, you'll understand why he haunts the neighbourhood like a beneficent spirit."

"But must we wait to hear the story? Please tell us now," I pleaded. "I'm so curious!"

This was true. I burned with curiosity. Also, fatty degeneration of the heart prompted me to annoy Dierdre O'Farrell. To spite *me*, she had refused to talk of the doctor. I was determined to hear all about him to spite *her*. You see to what a low level I have fallen, dear Padre!

The Préfet said that if we would go home with him and[Pg 127] have tea in the garden (German aeroplanes permitting) he would tell us the tale of the Wandering Jew. We all accepted, save Dierdre, who began to stammer an excuse; but a look from her brother nipped it in the bud. He certainly has an influence over the girl, against which she struggles only at her strongest. To-day she looked pale and weak, and he could do what he liked with her.

He liked to make her take tea at the Préfet's, doubtless because he'd have felt bound to escort the invalid to her room, had she insisted on going there!

The story of the Wandering Jew would be a strange one, anywhere and anyhow. But it's more than strange to me, because it is linked with my past life. Still, I won't tell it from my point of view. I'll begin with the Préfet's version.

The "Wandering Jew" really *is* a Jew, of the best and most intellectual type. His name is Paul Herter. His father was a man of Metz, who had brought to German Lorraine a wife from Lunéville. Paul is thirty-five now, so you see he wasn't born when the Metz part of Lorraine became German. His parents—French at heart—taught him secretly to love France, and hate German domination. As he grew up, Paul's ambition was to be a great surgeon. He wished to study, not in Germany, but in Paris and London. These hopes, however, were of the "stuff that dreams are made of," for when the father died, the boy had to work at anything he could get for a bare livelihood. It wasn't till he was over twenty-five that he'd scraped together money for the first step toward his career. He went to Paris: studied and starved; then to London. It was there I met him, but that bit of the story fits in later.[Pg 128] He was thought well of at "Bart's," and everybody who knew him was surprised when suddenly he married one of the younger nurses, an English girl, and vanished with her from London. Presently the pair appeared in Metz, at the mother's house. Herter seemed sad and discouraged, uncertain of his future, and just at this time, through German Lorraine ran rumours of war "to begin when the harvests should be over." Paul and his mother took counsel. Both were French at heart. They determined to leave all they had in the world at Metz, rather than Paul should be called up to serve Prussia. The three contrived to cross the frontier. Paul offered himself to the Foreign Legion; his wife volunteered to nurse in a military hospital at Nancy; and Madame Herter, mère took refuge in her girlhood's home at Lunéville, where her old father still lived.

Then came the rush of the Huns across the frontier. Paul's wife was killed by a Zeppelin bomb which wrecked her hospital. At Lunéville the mother and grandfather perished in their own house, burned to the ground by order of the Bavarian colonel, Von Fosbender.

Paul Herter had not been in love with his wife. There was a mystery about the marriage, but her fate filled him with rage and horror. His mother he had adored, and the news of her martyrdom came near to driving him insane. In the madness of grief he vowed vengeance against all Bavarians who might fall into his hands.

He was fighting then in the Legion; but shortly after he was gravely wounded. His left foot had to be amputated; and from serving France as a soldier, he began to serve as a surgeon. He developed astonishing skill in throat and chest operations, succeeding in some which older and more experienced men refused to attempt. Months passed, and into his busy life had never come the wished-for chance of vengeance; but all who knew him knew that Herter's hatred of Bavarians was an obsession. He was not one who would forget; and when a lot of seriously wounded Bavarians came into the field-hospital where he was at work, the two young doctors under him looked one another in the eyes. Even the stretcher-bearers had heard of Herter's vow, but there was nothing to do save to bring in the stream of wounded, and trust the calm instinct of the surgeon to control the hot blood of the man. Still, the air was electric with suspense, and heavy with dread of some vague tragedy: disgrace for the hospital, ruin for Herter.

But the Jewish surgeon (he wasn't called "the Wandering Jew" in those days) caught the telepathic message of fear, and laughed grimly at what men were thinking of him. "You need not be afraid," he said to his assistants. "These *canaille* are sacred for me. They do not count as Bavarians."

Nevertheless, the young doctors would have tended the wounded prisoners themselves, leaving Herter to care for his countrymen alone. But one of the Bavarians was beyond their skill: a young lieutenant. His wound was precisely "Herter's specialty"—a bullet lodged in the heart, if he was to be saved, Herter alone could save him. Would Herter operate? He had only to say the case was hopeless, and refuse to waste upon it time needed for others.

Perhaps he knew what suspicion would dog him through life if he gave this verdict. At all events, he chose to operate. "Bring me the brute," he growled: and reluctantly the brute was brought—a very youthful brute, with a face of such angelic charm that even Herter was struck by it. He had steeled himself to get through a hateful job; but for him—like most men of his race—beauty held a strong appeal. Suddenly he wished to save the boy with the fair curly hair and arched dark brows. Here was a German—a Bavarian—who could have no vileness in him yet!

The surgeon got ready his instruments for the operation, which must be done quickly, if at all. The boy was unconscious, but every moment or two he broke out in convulsive delirium, giving answers to questions like a man talking in sleep. "Hilda! Hilda!" he cried again and again. "My Hilda, do not ask me that. Thou wouldst not love me if I told thee! Thou wouldst hate me forever!"

"What have you done that Hilda should hate you?" Paul enquired, as he waited for the anæsthetic. Ether was running short. The wounded had to take their turn that day.

"Lunéville! Lunéville!" shrieked the Bavarian.

Everyone heard the cry. The two young doctors, knowing Herter's history, turned sick. This was worse than their worst fears! But they could do nothing. To speak, to try to act, would be to insult the surgeon. They saw that he was ghastly pale. "What happened at Lunéville?" he went on.

"Here is the ether," a voice spoke in haste. But Paul heard only the Bavarian.

"Oh, God, the old woman! Her face at the window. I can't forget. Hilda—she wouldn't come out. It wasn't my fault. The Colonel's orders. An old man, too. We saw them in the fire. We had to pass on. Hilda, forgive!"

"Was it a corner house of the Rue Princesse Marie?" asked Herter.

"Yes—yes, a corner house," groaned the boy of the beautiful face.

Herter gave a sign to the man who had brought the ether. A moment more, and the ravings of the Bavarian were silenced. The operation began.

The others had their hands full of their own work, yet with a kind of agonized clairvoyance they were conscious of all that Herter did. The same thought was in the minds of both young doctors. They exchanged impressions afterward. "He'll cut the boy's heart out and tread it underfoot!"

But never had the Jewish surgeon from Metz performed a major operation with more coolness or more perfect skill. Had he chosen to let his wrist tremble at the critical second, revenge would easily have been his. But awaiting the instant between one beat of the heart and another, he seized the shred of shrapnel lodged there, and closed up the throbbing breast. The boy would live. He had not only spared, but saved, the life of one who was perhaps his mother's murderer.

During the whole day he worked on untiringly and—it seemed—unmoved. Then, at the end of the last operation, he dropped as if he had been shot through the brain.

This was the beginning of a long, peculiar illness which no doctor who attended him could satisfactorily diagnose. He was constantly delirious, repeating the words of the Bavarian: "Hilda—Hilda!—the corner house—Rue Prin[
132]cesse Marie—Lunéville!" and it was feared that, if he recovered, he would be insane. After many weeks, however, he came slowly back to himself—a changed self, but a sane self. Always odd in his appearance—very tall and dark and thin—he had wasted to a walking skeleton, and his black hair had turned snow-white. He had lost his self-confidence, and dreaded to take up work again lest he should fail in some delicate operation. Long leave was granted, and he was advised by doctors who were his friends to go south, to sunshine and peace. But Herter insisted that the one hope for ultimate cure was to stay in Lorraine. He took up his quarters in what was left of a house near the ruin of his mother's old home, in Lunéville, but he was never there for long at a time. He was provided with a pass to go and come as he

liked, being greatly respected and pitied at headquarters; and wherever there was an air raid, there speedily and mysteriously appeared Paul Herter among the victims.

His artificial foot did not prevent his riding a motor-bicycle, and on this he arrived, no matter at what hour of night or day, at any town within fifty miles of Lunéville, when enemy airmen had been at work. He gave his services unpaid to poor and rich alike; and owing to the dearth of doctors not mobilized, the towns concerned welcomed him thankfully. All the surgeon's serene confidence in himself returned in these emergencies, and he was doing invaluable work. People were grateful, but the man's ways and looks were so strange, his restlessness so tragic, that they dubbed him "le Juif Errant."

Now, Padre, I have come to the right place to bring in my part of this story.[Pg 133]

While I was training at "Bart's," I met a doctor named Paul Herter. Some of the girls used to call him the "German Jew" but we all knew that his Germanness was only an accident of fate, through a war before he was born, and that he was passionately French at heart. He was clever—a genius—but moody and queer, and striking to look at. He would have been ugly but for a pair of beautiful brown eyes, wistful sometimes as a dog's. One of our nurses was in love with him, but he used to keep out of her way when he could. He was said not to care for women, and I was a little flattered that a man so well thought of "at the top" should take notice of me. When I look back on myself, I seem to have been very young then!

Dr. Herter used to meet me, as if by accident, when I was off duty, and we went for long walks, talking French together; I enjoyed that! Besides, there was nothing the man didn't know. He was a kind of encyclopædia of all the great musicians and artists of the world since the Middle Ages; and was so much older than I, that I didn't think about his falling in love. I knew I was pretty, and that beauty of all sorts was a cult with him. I supposed that he liked looking at me—and that his fancy would end there. But it didn't. There came a dreadful day when he accused me of encouraging him purposely, of leading him on to believe that I cared. This was a real shock. I was sorry—sorry! But he said such horrid things that I was hurt and angry, too. I said horrid things in my turn. This scene happened in the street. I asked him to leave me, and he did at once, without looking back. I can see him now, striding off in the twilight! No wonder the tall black silhouette in the [Pg 134] Place Stanislas looked familiar. But the man is thinner now, and walks with a slight limp.

The next thing I heard of him after our break was that he'd married Nurse Norman (the one who was in love with him) and that they'd left England. Whether he'd married the girl in a rage against me, or because he was sorry for her (she'd just then fallen into deep disgrace, through giving a patient the wrong medicine), I didn't know. I can't say I didn't care, for I often thought of the man and wondered what had become of him, though I don't remember ever writing about him to you. He was but indirectly concerned with my life, and maybe it was in the back of my mind that I might get a scolding from you if I told you the tale.

The moment the name of "Paul Herter" was mentioned in that pleasant garden at Nancy, the whole episode of those old days at "Bart's" came back, and I guessed why the tall figure had darted away from Dierdre O'Farrell as we came in sight. He must have offered to see the girl safely home, after dressing her wound (probably at some chemist's), and she had told him about her fellow-travellers. Naturally my name sent him flying like a shot from a seventy-five! But I can't help hoping we may meet by accident. There's a halo round the man's head for me since I've heard that tragic story. Before, he was only a queer genius. Now, he's a hero. Will he turn away, I wonder, if I walk up to him and hold out my hand?

I am longing, for a double reason, to see Vitrimont and Gerbéviller and Lunéville, since I've learned that at one of those places Paul Herter may appear.[Pg 135]

CHAPTER XIV

We were three automobiles strong when we went out of Nancy, along what they call the "Lunéville road." That was yesterday, as I write, and already it seems long ago! The third and biggest car belonged to the Préfet; gray and military looking, driven by a soldier in uniform; and this time Dierdre O'Farrell was with us. I was wondering if she went "under orders," or if she wished to see the sights we were to see—among them, perhaps, her elusive doctor!

We turned south, leaving town, and presently passed—at Dombasle—astonishingly huge salt-works, with rubble-heaps tall as minor pyramids. On each apex stood a thing like the form of a giant black woman in a waggling gas-mask and a helmet. I could have found out what these weird engines were, no doubt, but I preferred to remember them as mysterious monsters.

At a great, strange church of St. Nicolas, in the old town of St. Nicolas-du-Port, we stopped, because the Préfet's daughters had told us of a magic stone in the pavement which gives good fortune to those who set foot on it. Only when several of us were huddled together, with a foot each on the sacred spot, were we told that it meant marriage before the new year. If the spell works, Dierdre O'Farrell, Brian, and I will all be married in less than four months. But St. Nicolas is a false prophet [Pg 136] where we are concerned. Brian and I will never marry. Even if poor Brian should fall head over ears in love, he wouldn't ask a girl to share his broken life: he has told me this. As for me, I can never love any man after Jim Beckett. The least penance I owe is to be faithful forever to his memory and my own falsehood!

St. Nicolas is the patron saint of the neighbourhood, so it's right that from his little town and his big church all the country round should open out to the eye, as if to do him homage.

From the hill of Léomont we could see to the south the far-off, famous Forest of Parroy; away to the north, the blue heights of La Grande Couronne, where the fate of Nancy was decided in 1914; to the west, a purple haze like a mourning wreath of violets hung over the valley of the Meurthe, and the tragic little tributary river Mortagne; beyond,

we could picture with our mind's eyes the Moselle and the Meuse.

But Léomont was not a place where one could stand coldly thinking of horizons. It drew all thoughts to itself, and to the drama played out upon its miniature mountain. There was fought one of the fiercest and most heroic single battles of the war.

We had to desert the cars, and walk up a rough track to the ruined farmhouse which crowned the hill; a noble, fortified farmhouse that must have had the dignity of a château before the great fight which shattered its ancient walls. Now it has the dignity of a mausoleum. Long ago, in Roman days when Diana, Goddess of the Moon, was patron of Lunéville and the country round, a temple of stone and marble in her honour and a soaring fountain [Pg 137] crowned the high summit of Léomont, for all the world to see. Her influence is said to reign over the whole of Lorraine, from that day to this, St. Nicholas being her sole rival: and a prophecy has come down through the centuries that no evil may befall Diana's citadels, save in the "dark o' the moon," when the protectress is absent. Lunéville was overrun in the "dark o' the moon"; and it was then also that the battle of Léomont was fought, ending in the vast cellars, where no man was left alive.

In these days of ours, it's a wonderful and romantic mountain, sacred as a monument forever, to the glory of the French soldiers who did not die in vain. The scarred face of the ruined house—its stones pitted by shrapnel as if by smallpox—gazes over Lorraine as the Sphinx gazes over the desert: calm, majestic, sad, yet triumphant. And under the shattered walls, among fallen buttresses and blackened stumps of oaks, are the graves of Léomont's heroes; graves everywhere, over the hillside; graves in the open; graves in sheltered corners where wild flowers have begun to grow; their tricolour cockades and wooden crosses mirrored in the blue of water-filled shell-holes; graves in the historic cellars, covered with a pall of darkness; graves along the slope of the hill, where old trenches have left ruts in the rank grass.

An unseen choir of bird-voices was singing the sweetest requiem ever sung for the dead; yet Léomont in its majestic loneliness saddened us, even the irrepressible Puck. We were sad and rather silent all the way to Vitrimont; and Vitrimont, at first glance, was a sight to make us sadder than any we had seen. There had been a Vitrimont, a happy little place, built of gray and rose-red stones; [Pg 138] now, of those stones hardly one lies upon another, except in rubble heaps. And yet, Vitrimont isn't sad as others of the ruined towns are sad. It even cheered us, after Léomont, because a star of hope shines over the field of desolation—a star that has come out of the west. Some wonderful women of San Francisco decided to "adopt" Vitrimont, as one of the little places of France which had suffered most in the war. Two of them, Miss Polk and Miss Crocker—girls rather than women—gave themselves as well as their money to the work. In what remains of Vitrimont—what they are making of Vitrimont—they live like two fresh roses that have taken root in a pile of ashes. With a few books, a few bowls of flowers, pictures, and bits of bright chintz they have given charm to their poor rooms in the half-ruined house of a peasant. This has been their home for many months, from the time when they were the only creatures who shared Vitrimont with its ghosts: but now other homes are growing under their eyes and through their charity; thanks to them, the people of the destroyed village are trooping back, happy and hopeful. The church has been repaired (that was done first, "because it is God's house") with warm-coloured pink walls and neat decoration; and plans for the restoring of the whole village are being carried out, while the waiting inhabitants camp in a village of toy-like bungalows given by the French Government. I never saw such looks of worshipping love cast upon human beings as those of the people of Vitrimont for these two American girls. I'm sure they believe that Miss Crocker and Miss Polk are saints incarnated for their sakes by "*la Sainte Vierge*." One old man said as much!

He was so old that it seemed as if he could never have [Pg 139] been young, yet he was whistling a toothless but patriotic whistle, over some bit of amateur-carpenter work, in front of a one-room bungalow. Inside, visible through the open door, was the paralyzed wife he had lately wheeled "home" to Vitrimont, in some kind of a cart. "Oh, yes, we are happy!" he stopped whistling to say. "We are fortunate, too. We think we have found the place where our *street* used to be, and these Angels—we do not call them Demoiselles, but Angels—from America are going to build us a new home in it. We have seen the plan. It is more beautiful than the old!"

Wherever we passed a house on the road to Lunéville, and in town itself, as we came in, we saw notices—printed and written—to remind us that we were in the war-zone, if we forgot for an instant. "*Logement militaire*," or "*Cave voûtée, 200 places—400 places*." Those hospitable cellars advertising their existence in air raids and bombardments must be a comforting sight for passers-by, now and then; but no siren wailed us a warning. We drove on in peace; and I—disappointed at Vitrimont—quietly kept watch for a tall, thin figure of a man with a slight limp. At any moment, I thought, I might see him, for at Lunéville he lives—if he lives anywhere!

I was so eager and excited that I could hardly turn my mind to other things; but Brian, not knowing why I should be absent-minded, constantly asked questions about what we passed. Julian O'Farrell had exchanged his sister for Mr. and Mrs. Beckett, whom he had persuaded to take the short trip in his ramshackle taxi. His excuse was that Mother Beckett would deal out more wisely than Dierdre his Red Cross supplies to the returned refugees; so we had [Pg 140] the girl with us; and I caught reproachful glances if I was slow in answering my blind brother. She herself suspects him as a *poseur*; yet she judges me careless of his needs—which I should find funny, if it didn't make me furious! Just to see what Dierdre would do, and perhaps to provoke her, sometimes I didn't answer at all, but left her to explain our surroundings to Brian. I hardly thought she would respond to the silent challenge, but almost ostentatiously she did.

She cried, "There's a castle!" when we came to the fine and rather staid château which Duke Stanislas loved, and where he died. She even tried to describe it for Brian, with faltering self-consciousness, and the old streets which once had been "brilliant as Versailles, full of Queen Marie's beautiful ladies." Now, they are gray and sad, even those streets which show no scars from the three weeks' martyrdom of German rule. Soldiers pass, on foot and in motors, yet it's hard to realize that before the war Lunéville was one of the gayest, grandest garrison towns of France, rich and industrious, under Diana's special protection. Just because she was away in her moon-chariot, one dark and dreadful night, all has changed since then. But she'll come back, and bless her ancient place of Lunæ Villa, in good time!

It was here, Brian reminded me, that they drew up the treaty which gave the Rhine frontier to France, after Napoleon won the Battle of Marengo. I wonder if the Germans remembered this in 1914 when they came?

We lunched at an hotel, in a restaurant crowded with French officers; and not a civilian there except ourselves. I was hoping that Paul Herter might come in, for the [Pg 141] tragic Rue Princesse Marie is not far away—and even a Wandering Jew must eat! He did not come; but I almost forgot my new disappointment in hearing the French officers talk about Lorraine.

They were in the midst of a discussion when we came in, and when they had all bowed politely to us, they took up its thread where it had broken off. A colonel—a Lorrainer—was saying that out of the wealth of Lorraine (stolen wealth, he called it!) Germany had built up her fortune as a united nation, in a few years far exceeding the indemnity received in 1871. Germany had known that there were vast stores of iron; but the amazing riches in phosphorus ores had come to her as a surprise. If she had guessed, never would she have agreed to leave more than half the deposit on the French side of the frontier! Well enough for Prussian boasters to say that Germany's success was due to her own industry and supervirtue, or that her tariff schemes had worked wonders. But take away the provinces she tore from France, and she will be a Samson shorn! Take away Lorraine and the world will be rid once and for all of the German menace!

When we left Lunéville there was still hope from Gerbéviller. Herter is often there, it seems. Besides, Gerbéviller was the principal end and aim of our day's excursion. Once no more than a pleasant town of quiet beauty on a pretty river, now it is a *monument historique*, the Pompeii of Lorraine.

As we arrived the sun clouded over suddenly, and the effect was almost theatrical. From gold the light had dimmed to silver. In the midst of the afternoon, we saw Gerbéviller as if by moonlight in the still silence of night. [Pg 142] On the outskirts we forsook our three cars, and walked slowly through the dead town, awestruck and deeply thoughtful as if in a church where the body of some great man lay in state.

There was not a sound except, as at Léomont, the unseen choir of bird-voices; but their song emphasized the silence. In the pale light the shells of wrecked houses glimmered white, like things seen deep down under clear water. They were mysterious as daytime ghosts; and already a heartbreaking picturesqueness had taken possession of the streets, as an artist-decorator comes into an ugly room and mellows all its crudeness with his loving touch.

Gerbéviller's tragic little river Mortagne gleamed silver-bright beneath a torn lace of delicate white flowers that was like a veil flung off by a fugitive bride. It ran sparkling under the motionless wheel of a burned mill, and twinkled on—the one living thing the Germans left—to flow through the park of a ruined château.

When it was alive, that small château must have been gay and delightful as a castle in a fairy tale, pink and friendly among its pleasant trees; but even in its prime, rich with tapestries and splendid old paintings, which were its treasures, never could the place have been so beautiful as in death!

At a first glance—seen straight in front—the face of the house seems to live still, rosy with colour, gazing with immense blue eyes through a light green veil. But a second glance brings a shock to the heart. The face is a mask held up to hide a skull; the blue of the eyes is the open sky framed by glassless windows; the rosy colour [Pg 143] is stained with dark streaks of smoke and flame; the château among its trees, and the chapel with its stopped clock and broken saints are skeletons.

Not even O'Farrell could talk. We were a silent procession in the midst of silence until we came at last to the one quarter of the town whose few houses had been spared to the courage of Gerbéviller's heroine, Sœur Julie.

Her street (but for her it would not exist) has perhaps a dozen houses intact, looking strangely *bourgeois*, almost out of place, so smugly whole where all else has perished. Yet it was a comfort to see them, and wonderful to see Sœur Julie.

We knocked at the door of the hospice, the cottage hospital which is famous because of her, its head and heart; and she herself let us in, for at that instant she had been in the act of starting out. I recognized her at once from the photographs which were in every illustrated paper at the time when, for her magnificent bravery and presence of mind, she was named Chevalière of the Legion of Honour.

But with her first smile I saw that the pictures had done her crude injustice. They made of Sœur Julie an elderly woman in the dress of a nun; somewhat stout, rather large of feature. But the figure which met us in the narrow corridor had dignity and a noble strength. The smile of greeting lit deep eyes whose colour was that of brown topaz, and showed the kindly, humorous curves of a generous mouth. The flaring white headdress of the Order of Saint-Charles of Nancy framed a face so strong that I ceased to wonder how this woman had cowed a German horde; and it thrilled me to think that [Pg 144] in this very doorway she had stood at bay, offering her black-robed body as a shield for the wounded soldiers and poor people she meant to save.

Even if we had not come from the Préfet, and with some of his family who were her admiring friends, I'm sure Sœur Julie would have welcomed the strangers. As it was she beamed with pleasure at the visit, and called a young nun to help place chairs for us all in the clean, bare reception room. By this time she must know that she is the heroine of Lorraine—her own Lorraine!—and that those who came to Gerbéviller come to see her; but she talked to us with the unself-consciousness of a child. It was only when she was begged to tell the tale of August 23, 1914, that she showed a faint sign of embarrassment. The blood flushed her brown face, and she hesitated how to begin, as if she would rather not begin at all, but once launched on the tide, she forgot everything except her story: she lived that time over again, and we lived it with her.

"What a day it was!" she sighed. "We knew what must happen, unless God willed to spare Gerbéviller by some miracle. Our town was in the German's way. Yet we prayed—we hoped. We hoped even after our army's defeat at Morhange. Then Lunéville was taken. Our turn was near. We heard how terrible were the Bavarians under their general, Claus. Our soldiers—poor, brave boys!—fought every step of the way to hold them back. They fought like lions. But they were so few! The Germans came in a gray wave of men. Our wounded were brought here to the hospice, as many as we could take—and more! Often there were three hundred. But [Pg 145] when there was no hope to save the town, quick, with haste at night, they got the wounded away—ambulance after ambulance, cart after cart: all but a few; nineteen *grands*

blessés, who could not be moved. They were here in this room where we sit. But ah, if you had seen us—we sisters—helping the commandant as best we could! We made ourselves carpenters. We took wooden shutters and doors from their hinges for stretchers. We split the wood with axes. We did not remember to be tired. We tore up our linen, and linen which others brought us. We tied the wounded boys on to the shutters. They never groaned. Sometimes they smiled. Ah, it was we who wept, to see them jolting off in rough country wagons, going we knew not where, or to what fate! All night we worked, and at dawn there were none left—except those nineteen I told you of. And that was the morning of the 23rd of August, hot and heavy—a weight upon our hearts and heads.

"Not only the wounded, but our defenders had gone. The army was in retreat. We had fifty-seven chasseurs left, ordered to keep the enemy back for five hours. They did it for *eleven*! From dawn till twilight they held the bridge outside the town, and fought behind barriers they had flung up in haste. Boys they were, but of a courage! They knew they were to die to save their comrades. They asked no better than to die hard. And they fought so well, the Germans believed there were thousands. Not till our boys had nearly all fallen did the enemy break through and swarm into the town. That was down at the other end from us, below the hill, but soon we heard fearful sounds—screams and shoutings, shots and loud[Pg 146] explosions. They were burning the place street by street with that method of theirs! They fired the houses with pastilles their chemists have invented, and with petrol. The air was thick with smoke. We shut our windows to save the wounded from coughing. Soon we might all die together, but we would keep our boys from new sufferings while we could!

"Then at last the hour struck for us. One of our sisters, who had run to look at the red sky to see how near the fire came, cried out that Germans were pouring up the hill—four officers on horseback heading a troop of soldiers. I knew what that meant. I went quickly to the door to meet them. My knees felt as if they had broken under my weight. My heart was a great, cold, dead thing within me. My mouth was dry as if I had lost myself for days in the desert. I am not a small woman, yet it seemed that I was no bigger than a mouse under the stare of those big men who leaped off their horses, and made as if to pass me at the door. But I did not let them pass. I knew I could stop them long enough at least to kill me and then the sisters, one by one, before they reached our wounded! We backed slowly before them into the hall, the sisters and I, to stand guard before this room.

"You are hiding Frenchmen here—French soldiers!" a giant of a captain bawled at me. Beside him was a lieutenant even more tall. They had swords in their hands, and they both pointed their weapons at me.

"We have nineteen soldiers desperately wounded," I said. "There are no other men here."

"You are lying!" shouted the captain. He thought[Pg 147] he could frighten me with his roar like a lion: but he did not seem to me so noble a beast.

"You may come in and see for yourselves that I speak the truth," I said. And think what it was for me, a woman of Lorraine, to bid a *German* enter her house! I did not let those two pass by me into this room. I came in first. While the lieutenant stood threatening our boys in their beds that he would shoot if they moved, the captain went round, tearing off the sheets, looking for firearms. In his hand was a strange knife, like a dagger which he had worn in his belt. One of our soldiers, too weak to open his lips, looked at the German, with a pair of great dark eyes that spoke scorn; and that look maddened the man with a sudden fury.

"Coward, of a country of cowards! You and cattle like you have cut off the ears and torn out the eyes of our glorious Bavarians. I'll slit your throat to pay for that!"

"Ah, but this was too much—more than I could bear! I said 'No!' and I put my two hands—so—between the throat of that boy and the German knife."

When Sœur Julie came to this part of the tale, she made a beautiful, unconscious gesture, re-enacting the part she had played. I knew then how she had looked when she faced the Bavarian officer, and why he had not hacked those two work-worn but nobly shaped hands of hers, to get at the French chasseur's throat. She seemed the incarnate spirit of the mother-woman, whose selfless courage no brute who had known a mother could resist. And her "No!" rang out deep and clear as a warning tocsin. I felt that the wounded boy must have been as safe behind those hands and that "No!" as if a thick[Pg 148] though transparent wall of glass had magically risen to protect him.

"All this time," Sœur Julie went on, gathering herself together after a moment. "All this time Germans led by non-commissioned officers were searching the hospice. But they found no hiding soldiers, because there were none such to find. And somehow that captain and his lieutenant did not touch our wounded ones. They had a look of shame and sullenness on their faces, as if they were angry with themselves for yielding their wicked will to an old woman. Yet they *did* yield, thank God! And then I got the captain's promise to spare the hospice—got it by saying we would care for his wounded as faithfully as we tended our own. I said, 'If you leave this house standing to take in your men, you must leave the whole street. If the buildings round us burn, we shall burn, too—and with us your German wounded. Will you give me your word that this whole quarter shall be safe?'

"The man did not answer. But he looked down at his boots. And I have always noticed that, when men of any nation look at their boots, it is that they are undecided. It was so with him. A few more arguments from me, and he said: 'It shall be as you ask.'

"Soon he must have been glad of his promise, for there were many German wounded, and we took them all in. Ah, this room, which you see so clean and white now, ran blood. We had to sweep blood into the hall, and so out at the front door, where at least it washed away the German footprints from our floor! For days we worked and did our best, even when we knew of the murders[Pg 149] committed: innocent women with their little children. And the fifteen old men they shot for hostages. Oh, we did our best, though it was like acid eating our hearts. But our reward came the day the Germans had to gather up their wounded in wild haste, as the French commandant had gathered ours before the retreat. They fled, and our Frenchmen marched back—too late to save the town, but not too late to redeem its honour.

And that is all my story."

As she finished with a smile half sad, half sweet, Sœur Julie looked over our heads at some one who had just come in—some one who had stood listening in silence, unheard and unseen by us. I turned mechanically, and my eyes met the eyes of Paul Herter, the "Wandering Jew." [Pg 150]

CHAPTER XV

Dierdre O'Farrell and I were sitting side by side, our backs to the door, so it was only as we turned that Herter could have recognized us. He had no scruple in showing that I was the last person he wished to meet. One look was enough for him! His pale face—changed and aged since London—flushed a dark and violent red. Backing out into the hall he banged the door.

My ears tingled as if they had been boxed. I suppose I've been rather spoiled by men. Anyhow, not one ever before ran away at sight of me, as if I were Medusa. I'd been hoping that Doctor Paul and I might meet and make friends, so this was a blow: and it hurt a little that Dierdre O'Farrell should see me thus snubbed. I glanced at her; and her faint smile told that she understood.

Sœur Julie was bewildered for a second, but recovered herself to explain that Doctor Herter was eccentric and shy of strangers. He came often from Lunéville to Gerbéviller to tend the poor, refusing payment, and was so good at heart that we must forgive his odd ways.

"*Spurlos versnubt!*" I heard Puck chuckling to himself; so he, too, was in the secret of the situation. I half expected him to pretend ingenuousness, and spring the tale of Dierdre's adventure with Herter on the company. But he preserved a discreet reticence, more for his own [Pg 151] sake than mine or his sister's, of course. He's as lazy as he is impish, except when there's some special object to gain, and probably he wished to avoid the bother of explanations. As for Brian, his extreme sensitiveness is better than studied tact. I'm sure he felt magnetically that Dierdre O'Farrell shrank from a reference to her part in the night air raid. But his silence puzzled her, and I saw her studying him—more curiously than gratefully, I thought.

We had heard the end of Sœur Julie's story, and had no further excuse to keep her tied to the duties of hostess. When the Becketts had left something for the poor of the hospice, we bade the heroine of Gerbéviller farewell, and started out to regain our automobiles, Julian O'Farrell suddenly appearing at my side.

"Don't make an excuse that you must walk with your brother," he said. "He's all right with Dierdre; perhaps just as happy as with you! One *does* want a change from the best of sisters now and then."

"Mrs. Beckett——" I began.

"Mrs. Beckett is discussing with Mr. Beckett what they can do for Gerbéviller, and they'll ask your advice when they want it. No use worrying. They've boodle enough for all their charities, and for the shorn lambs, too."

"Do you call yourself a shorn lamb?" I sniffed.

"Certainly. Don't I look it? Good heavens, girl, you needn't basilisk me so, to see if I do! You glare as if I were some kind of abnormal beast eating with its eyes, or winking with its mouth."

"You do wink with your mouth," I said. [Pg 152]

You mean I lie? All romantic natures embroider truth. I have a romantic nature. It's growing more romantic every minute since I met you. I started this adventure for what I could get out of it. I'm going on to the end, bitter or sweet, for *les beaux yeux* of Mary O'Malley. I don't grudge you the Becketts' blessing, but I don't know why it shouldn't be bestowed on us both, with Dierdre and Brian in the background throwing flowers. You didn't love Jim Beckett, for the very good reason that you never met him: so, if you owe no more debts than those you owe his memory, you're luckier than——"

It was not I who cut his words short, though I was on the point of breaking in. Perhaps I should have flung at him the truth about Jim Beckett if something had not happened to snatch my thoughts from O'Farrell and his impudence. We had just passed the quarter of the town saved by Sœur Julie, when out from the gaping doorway of a ruined house stepped Paul Herter.

He came straight to me, ignoring my companion.

"I was waiting for you," he said. "Will you walk on a little way with me? There are things I should like to speak about."

All the hurt anger I had felt was gone like the shadow of a flitting cloud. "Oh, yes!" I exclaimed. "I shall be very, very glad."

Whether O'Farrell had the grace to drop behind, or whether I pushed ahead I don't know, but next moment Doctor Herter and I were pacing along, side by side, keeping well ahead of the others, in spite of his limp.

"I thought I never wanted to see you again, Mary O'Malley," he said; "but that glimpse I had, in the [Pg 153] hospice, showed me my mistake. I couldn't stand it to be so near and let you go out of my life without a word—not after seeing your face."

"It makes me happy to hear that," I answered. "I was disappointed when you avoided me the other night, and—hurt to—"

day when you slammed the door."

"How did you know I avoided you? The girl promised to hold her tongue."

"She kept her promise. She was pleased to keep it, because she dislikes me. But I heard your name next day and understood. I—I heard other things, too. If you wouldn't be angry, I should like to tell you how I——"

"Don't tell me."

"I won't then. But I feel very strongly. And you will let me tell you how grieved I should have been, if—if that slammed door had been the end between us."

"The end between us was long ago."

"Not in my thoughts, for I never meant to hurt you. I never stopped being your friend, in spite of all the unkind, unjust things you said to me. I'm proud now that I had your friendship once, even if I haven't it now."

"You had everything there was in me—*except* friendship. Now, of that everything, only ashes are left. The fires have burnt out. You've heard what I suppose they call my story, so you know why. If those fires weren't dead, I shouldn't have dared trust myself to risk this talk with you. As it is—I let your eyes call me back. Not that they called consciously. It was the past that called——"

"They *would* have called consciously if you'd given[Pg 154] them time!" I ventured to smile at him, with a look that asked for kindness. He did not smile back, but he did not frown. His deep-set eyes, in their hollow sockets, gazed at me as if they were memorizing each feature.

"You're lovelier than ever, Mary," he said. "There's something different about your face. You've suffered."

"My brother is blind."

"Ah! There's more than that."

"Yes."

"You loved the son of these rich people the girl told me about? She says you didn't love him, but she's wrong—isn't she?"

"She's wrong. She knows about things I've done, but nothing about what I think or feel. I did love Jim Beckett, Doctor Paul. You don't mind being called by the old name? I've learned how it hurts to love."

"That will do you no harm, Mary. I can speak with you about such things now, for the spirit of a dead woman stands between us. I didn't love her when she was alive. But if I hadn't married her and brought her to France she'd be living now. She died through me—and for me. I think of her with immense tenderness and—a kind of loyalty; a fierce loyalty. I don't know if you understand."

"Indeed I do! I almost envy her that brave death."

"We won't talk of her any more now," Herter said with a sigh. "I've a feeling she wouldn't like us to discuss her, together. She used to be—jealous of you, poor girl! There are other things I wanted to say. The first—but you've guessed it already!—is this: the minute I looked into your face, there in the hospice, I forgave you the pain you made me suffer. In the first shock of meeting[Pg 155] your eyes, I didn't realize that I'd forgiven. It wasn't till I'd slammed the door that I knew."

I didn't repeat that I had not purposely done anything which needed forgiveness. I only looked at him with all the kindness and pity in my heart, and waited until he should go on.

"The second thing I wanted to say is, that just the one look told me you weren't happy and gay as you used to be. When I'd shut the door, I could still see you clearly, as if I had the power to look through the wood. I said to myself, that girl's eyes have got the sadness of the whole world in them. They seem as if they were begging for help, and didn't know where on earth it was coming from. Was that a true impression? I waited to ask you this, even more than to see you again."

"It is true," I confessed. "There's only this difference between my feelings and your impression of them. I *know* there's no help on earth for me. Such help as there is, I get from another place. Do you remember how I used to talk about the dear Padre who was our guardian—my brother's and mine—and how I told him nearly everything good and bad that I thought or did? Well, he went to the front as a chaplain and he has been killed. But I go on writing him letters, exactly as if he could give me advice and comfort, or scold me in the old way."

"What about your brother? The girl—Miss O'Farrell she called herself, I think—said he was with you on this journey. And to-day I recognized him at Sœur Julie's, from his likeness to you. I shouldn't have guessed he was blind. He has a beautiful face. Do you get no comfort from him?"[Pg 156]

"Much comfort from his presence and love," I said. "But I try to keep him happy. I don't bother him with my troubles. I won't even let him talk of them. They're taboo."

"I wish *I* could help you!" Herter exclaimed.

"Your wish is a help."

"Ah, but I'd like to give more than that! I'm going away—that's the third thing I wanted to tell you. A little while ago I was glad to be going (so far as it's in me, nowadays, to be glad of anything) because I—I've been given a sort of—mission. Since we've had this talk, I'd put off going if I could. But I can't. Is your brother's case past cure?"

"It's not absolutely hopeless. Doctor Paul, this is a confidence! It's to try and cure him that I'm with the Becketts. He doesn't know—and I can't explain more to you. But a specialist in Paris ordered Brian a life in the open air, and as much pleasure and interest as possible. You see, it's the optic nerve that was paralyzed in a strange way by shell shock. Some day Brian's sight may—just *possibly* may—come back all of a sudden."

"Ah, that's interesting. I'm not an oculist, but I know one or two of the best men, who have made great reputations since this war. Who was your specialist in Paris?"

I told him.

"A good man," he pronounced, "but I have a friend who is better. I'll write you a letter to him. You can send it if you choose. That's one service I can do for you, Mary. It may prove a big one. But I wish there were something else—something for *you*, yourself. Maybe there will be one day. Who can tell? If that day comes, I shan't be found wanting or forgetful." [Pg 157]

"It's worth a lot to have met you and had this talk," I said. "It's been like a warm fire to cold hands. I do hope, dear Doctor Paul, that you're not going on a dangerous mission?"

He laughed—the quaint laugh I remembered, like a crackling of dry brushwood. "No more danger for me in it than there is for a bit of toasted cheese in a rat-trap."

"What a queer comparison!" I said. "It sounds as if you were going to be a bait to deceive a rat."

"Multiply the singular into the plural, and your quick wit has deciphered my parable."

"I'm afraid my wit doesn't deserve the compliment. I can't imagine what your mission really is. Unless——"

"Unless—what? No! Don't let us go any further. Because I mustn't tell you more, even if you should happen to guess. I've told you almost too much already. But confidence for confidence. You gave me one. Consider that I've confided something to you in return. There's just a millionth chance that my mission—whatever it is—may make me of use to you. Give me an address that will find you always, and then—I must be going. I have to return to the hospice and see some patients. No need to write the directions. Better not, in fact. I shall have no difficulty in remembering anything that concerns you, even the most complicated address."

"It's not complicated," I laughed; and gave him the name of the Paris bankers in whose care the Becketts allow Brian and me to have letters sent—Morgan Harjes.

He repeated the address after me, and then stopped, holding out his hand. "That's all," he said abruptly. "I [Pg 158] shall be glad, whatever happens, that I waited, and had this talk with you. Good-bye."

"Good-bye—and good luck in the mission," I echoed.

He pressed my hand so hard that it hurt, and with one last look turned away. He did not go far, however, but stopped on his way back to ask Dierdre O'Farrell about her arm. She and Brian (Puck had joined the Becketts) were only a few paces behind me, and pausing involuntarily I heard what was said. It was easy to see that Dierdre wished me to hear her part.

"My arm is going on very well," she informed her benefactor. "I thank you again for your kindness in attending to it. But I don't think it was kind to order me to keep a secret, and then give it away yourself. You made me seem an—ungracious pig and a fool. I shouldn't mind that, if it did you good, in return for the good you've done me. But since it was for nothing——"

"I apologize," Herter broke in. "I meant what I said then. But a power outside myself was too strong for me. Maybe it will be the same for you some day. Meanwhile, don't make the mistake I made: don't do other people an injustice."

Leaving Dierdre at bay between anger and amazement, he stared with professional eagerness into Brian's sightless eyes, and stalked off toward the hospice. [Pg 159]

CHAPTER XVI

Since I wrote you last, Padre, I have been in the trenches—real, live trenches, not the faded, half-filled-up ghosts of trenches where men fought long ago. I had to give my word not to tell or write any one just where these trenches are, so I won't put details in black and white, even in pages which are only for you and me. I keep this book that you gave me in my hand-bag, and no eyes but mine see it—unless, dear Padre, you come and look over my shoulder while I scribble, as I often feel you do! Still—something might happen: an automobile accident; or the bag might be lost or stolen, though it's not a gorgeously attractive one, like that in which Mother Beckett carries Jim's letters.

It was the day after Lunéville and Gerbéviller. We started out once again from Nancy, no matter in which direction, but along a wonderful road. Not that the scenery was beautiful. We didn't so much as think of scenery. The thrill was in the passing show, and later in the "camouflage." We were going to be given a glimpse of the Front which the communiqués (when they mention it at all nowadays) speak of as calm. Its alleged "calmness" gave us non-combatants our chance to pay it a visit; but many wires had been pulled to get us there, and we had dwindled to a trio, consisting of Father

Beckett, Brian, and me. Mother Beckett is not made for trenches,[Pg 160] even the calmest, and there was no permission for the occupants of the Red Cross taxi, who are not officially of our party. They have their own police pass for the war-zone, but all special plums are for the Becketts, shared by the O'Malleys; and this visit to the trenches was an extra-special superplum.

All along the way, coming and going, tearing to meet us, or leaving us behind, splashed with gray mud after a night of rain, motor-lorries sped. They carried munitions or food to the front, or brought back tired soldiers bound for a place of rest, and their roofs were marvellously "camouflaged" in a blend of blue and green paint splotched with red. For aeroplanes they must have looked, in their processions, like drifting mist over meadowland. Shooting in and out among them, like slim gray swordfish in a school of porpoise, were military cars crowded with smart officers who saluted the lieutenant escorting us, and stared in surprise at sight of a woman. A sprinkling of these officers were Americans, and they would have astonished us more than we astonished them had we not known that we should see Americans. They were to be, indeed, the "feature" of the great show; and though Mr. Beckett was calm in manner to match the Front, I knew from his face that he was deeply moved by the thought of seeing "boys from home" fighting for France as his dead son had fought.

At each small village we saw soldiers who had been sent to the "back of the Front" for a few days' change from the trenches. They lounged on long wooden benches before humble houses where they had *logement*; they sat at tables borrowed from kitchens, earnestly engaged at dominoes or *manille*, or they played *boules* in[Pg 161] narrow grass alleys beside the muddy road. For them we had packed all vacant space in the auto with a cargo of cigarettes; and white teeth flashed and blue arms waved in gratitude as we went by. I think Father Beckett was happier than he had been since we left Paris.

At last we came to a part of the road that was "camouflaged" with a screen of branches fixed into wire. There was no great need of it in these days, our lieutenant explained, but Heaven knew when it might be urgently wanted again: perhaps to-morrow! And this was where we said "*au revoir*" to our car. She was wheeled out of the way on to a strip of damp grass, under a convenient group of trees where no prowling enemy plane might "spot" her; and we set out to walk for a short distance to what had once been a farmhouse. Now, what was left of it had another use. A board walk (well above the mud), which led to the new, unpainted door, was guarded by sentinels, and explanations were given and papers shown before a rather elderly French captain appeared to greet us. Arrangements had been made for our reception, but we had to be identified; and when all was done we were given a good welcome. Also we were given helmets, and I was vain enough to fancy I had never worn a more becoming hat.

Besides our own escort—the lieutenant who had brought us from Nancy—we had a captain and a lieutenant to guide us into the "calmness" of the trenches (the captain and a lieutenant for Mr. Beckett and Brian, the other lieutenant for me) and one would have thought that they had never before seen a woman in or out of a helmet! Down in a deep cellar-like hole, which they called "*l'anti-[Pg 162]chambre*," all three officers coached Father Beckett and me in trench manners. As for Brian, it was clear to them that he was no stranger to trench life, and their treatment of him was perfect. They made no fuss, as tactless folk do over blind men; but, while feigning to regard him as one of themselves, they slyly watched and protected his movements as a proud mother might the first steps of a child.

On we went from the *antichambre* into a long mouldy passage dug deep into the earth. It was the link between trenches; and now and then a sentinel popped out from behind a queer barrier built up as a protection against "*les éclats d'obus*." "This is the way the wounded come back," said one of the lieutenants, "when there *are* any wounded. Just now (or you would not be here, Mademoiselle) there is"—he finished in English—"nothing doing."

I laughed. "Who taught you that?"

"You will see," he replied, making a nice little mystery. "You will see who taught it to me—and *then* some!"

That was a beautiful ending for the sentence, and his American accent was perfect, even if the meaning of the poor man's quotation was a little uncertain!

We turned several times, and I had begun to think of the Minotaur's labyrinth, when the passage knotted itself into a low-roofed room, open at both ends, save for bomb screens, with a trench leading dismally off from an opposite doorway. "When is a door not a door?" was a conundrum of my childhood, and I think the answer was: "When it's ajar." But nowadays there is a better *réplique*: A door is not a door when it's a dug-out. It is then a hole,[Pg 163] kept from falling in upon itself by a log of wood or anything handy. This time, the "anything handy" seemed to be part of an old wheelbarrow, and on top were some sandbags. In the room, which was four times as long as it was broad, and twelve times longer than high, a few vague soldier-forms crouched over a meal on the floor, their tablecloth being a Paris newspaper. They scrambled to their feet, but could not stand upright, and to see their stooping salute to stooping officers in the smoky twilight, was like a vision in a dark, convex mirror.

As we wound our way past the screen at the far end of the cellar dining-room, my lieutenant explained the method in placing each *pare-éclat*, as he called the screen. "You see, Mademoiselle, if a bomb happened to break through and kill us, the screen would save the men beyond," he said; then, remembering with a start that he was talking to a woman, he hurried to add: "Oh, but we shall not be killed. Have no fear. There's nothing of that sort on our programme to-day—at least, not where we shall take *you*."

"Do I look as if I were afraid?" I asked.

"No, you look very brave, Mademoiselle," he flattered me. "I'm sure it is more than the helmet which gives you that look. I believe, if you were allowed you would go on past the safety zone."

"Where does the safety zone end?" I curiously questioned.

"It is different on different days. If you had come yesterday, you could have had a good long promenade. Indeed that

was what we hoped, when we arranged to entertain your party. But unfortunately the gentlemen[Pg 164] in the opposing trenches discovered that *Les Sammies* had arrived on our *secteur*. They wanted to give them a reception, and so—your walk has to be shortened, Mademoiselle."

Suddenly I felt sick. I had the sensation Sœur Julie described herself as feeling when she met the giant German officers. But it was not fear. "Do you mean—while we're here, safe—like tourists on a pleasure jaunt," I stammered, "that American soldiers are being *killed*—in the trenches close by? It's horrible! I can't—"

"*Il ne faut pas se faire de la bile*, as our *poilus* say, when they mean 'Don't worry,' Mademoiselle," the lieutenant soothed me. "If there were any killing along this *secteur* you would hear the guns boom, *n'est-ce-pas?* You had not stopped to think of that. There was a little affair at dawn, I don't conceal it from you. A surprise—a *coup de main* against the Americans the Boches intended. They thought, as all has been quiet on our Front for so long, we should expect nothing. But the surprise didn't work. They got as good as they sent, and no one on our side was killed. That I swear to you, Mademoiselle! There were a few wounded, yes, but no fatalities. The trouble is that now things have begun to move, they may not sit still for long, and we cannot take risks with our visitors. The mountain must come to Mahomet. That is, *les Sammies* must call upon you, instead of you upon them. The reception room is *chez nous Français*. It is ready, and you will see it in a moment."

Almost as he spoke we came to a dug-out of far more imposing architecture than the hole between trenches which we had seen. We had to stoop to go in, but once in[Pg 165] we could stand upright, even Brian, who towered several inches above the other men. The place was lighted with many guttering candles, and tears sprang to my eyes at the pathos of the decorations. Needless to explain that the French and American flags which draped the dark walls were there in our honour! Also there were a Colonel, a table, benches, chairs, some glasses, and one precious bottle of champagne, enough for a large company to sip, if not to drink, each other's health. Hardly had we been introduced to the decorations, including the Colonel, when the Americans began to arrive, three young officers and two who had hardened into warlike middle age. It was heart-warming to see them meet Mr. Beckett, and their chivalric niceness to Brian and me was somehow different from any other niceness I remember—except Jim's.

Not that one of the men looked like Jim, or had a voice like his: yet, when they spoke, and smiled, and shook hands, I seemed to see Jim standing behind them, smiling as he had smiled at me on our one day together. I seemed to hear his voice in an undertone, as if it mingled with theirs, and I wondered if Jim's father had the same almost supernatural impression that his son had come into the dug-out room with that little band of his countrymen.

It is strange how a woman can be homesick for a man she has known only one day; but she can—she *can*—for a Jim Beckett! He was so vital, so central in life, known even for a day, that after his going the world is a background from which his figure has been cut out, leaving a blank place. These jolly, brave American soldier-men made me want so desperately to see Jim that I wished a[Pg 166] bomb would drop in—just a *small* bomb, touching only me, and whisking me away to the place where he is. In body he could not forgive me, of course, for what I've done; but in spirit he might forgive my spirit if it travelled a long way to see his!

I am almost sure that the Americans did bring Jim back to Father Beckett, as to me, for though he was cheerful, and even made jokes to show that he mustn't be treated as a mourner, there was one piteous sign of emotion which no self-control could hide. I saw his throat work—the throat of an old man—his "Adam's apple" going convulsively up and down like a tossed ball in a fountain jet. Then, lest I should sob while his eyes were dry, I looked away.

We all had champagne out of the marvellous bottle which had been hoarded during long months in case of "a great occasion," and we economized sips but not healths. We drank to each one of the Allies in turn, and to a victorious peace. Then the officers—French and American—began telling us trench tales—no grim stories, only those at which we could laugh. One was what an American captain called a "peach"; but it was a Frenchman who told it: the American contingent have had no such adventures yet.

The thing happened some time ago, before the "liveliness" died down along this *secteur*. One spring day, in a rainy fog like a gray curtain, a strange pair of legs appeared, prowling alongside a French trench. They were not French legs; but instantly two pairs of French arms darted out under the stage-drop of fog to jerk them in. Down came a *feldwebel* on top of them, squealing desolately[Pg 167] "Kamerad!" He squealed many more guttural utterances, but not one of the soldiers in blue helmets, who soon swarmed round him, could understand a word he said. "Why the crowd?" wondered the Captain of the company, appearing from a near-by dug-out. The queer quarry was dragged to the officer's feet, and fortunately the Captain, an Alsatian, had enough German for a catechism.

"What were you doing close to our lines?" he demanded.

"Oh, Herr Captain, I did not know they were your lines. I thought they were ours. In our trench we are hungry, very hungry. I thought in the mist I could safely go a little way and seek for some potatoes. Where we are they say there was once a fine potato field. Not long ago, one of our men came back with half a dozen beauties. Ah, they were good! I was empty enough to risk anything, Herr Captain. But I had no luck. And, worse still, the fog led me astray. Spare my life, sir!"

"We will spare you what is worth more than a little thing like your life," said the Captain. "We'll spare you some of our good food, to show you that we French do not have to gnaw our finger-nails, like you miserable Boches. Men, take this animal away and feed it!"

The men obeyed, enjoying the joke. The dazed Kamerad was stuffed with sardines, meat, bread, and butter (of which he had forgotten the existence), delicious cheese, and chocolates. At last the magic meal was topped off with smoking hot black coffee, a thimbleful of brandy, and—a *cigar!* Tobacco and cognac may have been cheap, but they made the *feldwebel* feel as if he had died and gone to heaven.[Pg 168]

When he had eaten till his belt was tight for the first time in many moons, back he was hustled to the Captain.

"Well—you have had something better than potatoes? *Bon!* Now, out of this, quicker than you came! Your mother may admire your face, but we others, we have seen enough of it."

"But, Herr Captain," pleaded the poor wretch, loth to be banished from Paradise, "I am your prisoner."

"Not at all," coolly replied the officer. "We can't be bothered with a single prisoner. What is one flea on a blanket? Another time, if we come across you again with enough of your comrades to make the game worth while, why then, perhaps we may give ourselves the pain of keeping you. You've seen that we have enough food to feed your whole trench, and never miss it."

Away flew the German over the top, head over heels, not unassisted: and after they had laughed awhile, his hosts and foes forgot him. But not so could he forget them. That night, after dark, he came trotting back with fifteen friends, all crying "Kamerad!" eager to deliver themselves up to captivity for the flesh-pots of Egypt.

"But—we're not to go without a glimpse of the Sammies, are we?" I asked, when stories and champagne were finished.

The "Sammies'" officers laughed. "The boys don't love that name, you know! But it sticks like a burr. It's harder to get rid of than the Boches. As for seeing them—(the boys, not the Boches!) *well*—" And a consultation followed.

The trenches beyond our dug-out drawing room could not be guaranteed "safe as the Bank of England" for non[Pg 169]-combatants that day, and no one wanted to be responsible for our venturing farther. Still, if we couldn't go to the boys, a "bunch" of the boys could come to us. A lieutenant dashed away, and presently returned with six of the tallest, brownest, best-looking young men I ever saw. Their khaki and their beautiful new helmets were so like British khaki and helmets that I shouldn't have been expert enough to recognize them as American. But somehow the merest amateur would never have mistaken those boys for their British brothers. I can't tell where the difference lay. All I can say is that it was there. Were their jaws squarer? No, it couldn't have been that, for British jaws are firm enough, and have need to be, Heaven knows! Were their chins more prominent? But millions of British chins are prominent. My brain collapsed in the strain after comparisons, abandoned the effort and drank in a draught of rich, ripe American slang as a glorious pick-me-up. No wonder the French officers in *liaison* have caught the new "code." The coming of those brown boys with their bright and glittering teeth and witty words made up to us for miles of trenches we hadn't seen. Gee, but they were bully! Oh, *boy!* Get hep to that![Pg 170]

CHAPTER XVII

Father Beckett must have suffered dark hours of reaction after seeing those soldier-sons of American fathers, if there had been time to think. But we flashed back to Nancy in haste, for a late dinner and adieux to our friends. Brian and I snatched the story of our day's adventure from his mouth for Mother Beckett; and luckily he was too tired to give her a new version. I heard in the morning that he had slept through an air raid!

I, too, was tired, and for the same reason: but I could not sleep. Waking dreams marched through my mind—dreams of Jim as he must have looked in khaki, dreams which made an air raid more or less seem unimportant. As the clocks of Nancy told the hours, I was in a mood for the first time since Gerbéviller to puzzle out the meaning of Paul Herter's parable.

What had he meant by saying that his mission would be no more dangerous than a rat-trap for a bit of toasted cheese?

I had exclaimed, "That sounds as if you were to bait the trap!" but he had not encouraged me to guess. And there had been so much else to think of, just then! His offer of introductions to specialists for Brian had appealed to me more than a vague suggestion of service to myself "some day."[Pg 171]

But now, through the darkness of night, a ray like a searchlight struck clear upon his cryptic hint.

Somehow, Herter hoped to get across the frontier into Germany! His question, whether I had loved Jim Beckett, was not an idle one. He had not asked it through mere curiosity, or because he was jealous of the dead. His idea was that, if I had deeply cared for Jim, I should be glad to know how he had died, and where his body lay. Germany was the one place where the mystery could be solved. I realized suddenly that Doctor Paul expected "some day" to be in a position to solve it.

"He's going into Germany as a spy," I said to myself. "He's a man of German Lorraine. German is his native language. Legally he's a German subject. He'll only have to pretend that he was caught by accident in France when the war broke out—and that at last he has escaped. All that may be easy if there are no spies to give him away—to tell what he's been doing in France since 1914. The trouble will be when he wants to come back."

I wished that I could have seen the man again, to have bidden him a better farewell, to have told him I'd pray for his success. But now it was too late. Already he must have set off on his "mission," and we were to start in the morning for Verdun.

The thought of Verdun alone was enough to keep me awake for the rest of the night, to say nothing of air raids and speculations about Doctor Paul. It seemed almost too strange to be true that we were to see Verdun—Verdun, where month after month beat the heart of the world.

The O'Farrells had not got permission for Verdun, nor for Rheims, where we of the great gray car were going[Pg 172] next. Still more than our glimpse of the trenches were these two places "extra special." The brother and sister were to start with us from Nancy, but we (the Becketts, Brian, and I) were to part from them at Bar-le-Duc, where we would be met by an officer from Verdun. Two days later, we were to meet again at Paris, and continue—as Puck impudently put it

—"our rôle of ministering angels," along the Noyon front and beyond.

This programme was settled when—through influence at Nancy—Father Beckett's passes for four had been extended to Verdun and Rheims. I breathed a sigh of relief at the prospect of two more days without the O'Farrells; and all that's Irish in me trusted to luck that "something might happen" to part us forever. Why not? The Red Cross taxi might break down (it looked ready to shake to pieces any minute!). Dierdre might be taken ill (no marble statue could be paler!). Or the pair might be arrested by the military police as dangerous spies. (Really, I wouldn't "put it past" them!). But my secret hopes were rudely jangled with my first sight of Brian on the Verdun morning.

"Molly, I hope you won't mind," he said, "but I've promised O'Farrell to go with them and meet you in Paris to-morrow night. I've already spoken to Mr. Beckett and he approves."

"This comes of my being ten minutes late!" I almost—not quite—cried aloud. I'd hardly closed my eyes all night, but had fallen into a doze at dawn and overslept myself. Meanwhile the O'Farrell faction had got in its deadly work!

I was angry and disgusted, yet—as usual where that [Pg 173] devil of a Puck was concerned—I had the impulse to laugh. It was as if he'd put his finger to his nose and chuckled in impish glee: "You hope to get rid of us, do you, you minx? Well, I'll *show* you!" But I should be playing his game if I lost my temper.

"Why do the O'Farrells want you to go with them?" I "camouflaged" my rage.

"It's Julian who wants me," explained the dear boy. (Oh, it had come to Christian names!) "It seems Miss O'Farrell has taken it into her head that none of us likes her, and that we've arranged this way to get rid of them both—letting them down easily and making some excuse not to start again together from Paris. O'Farrell thought if I'd offer to go with them and sit in the back of the car while he drove I could persuade her——"

"Well, I don't envy any one the task of persuading that girl to believe a thing she doesn't wish to believe," I exploded. "My private opinion is, though, that her brother's sister needs no persuading. The two of them want to show me that they have power——"

Brian broke in with a laugh. "My child, you see things through a magnifying glass! Is your blind brother a prize worth squabbling over? I can be of use to the Becketts, it's true, when we travel without a military escort, or with one young officer who knows more about seventy-fives than about the romance of history. I can tell them what I've read and what I've seen. But at Verdun you'll be in the society of generals; and at Rheims of as many dignitaries as haven't been bombarded out of town. The Becketts don't need me. Perhaps Miss O'Farrell does." [Pg 174]

"Perhaps!" I repeated.

Brian can see twice as much as those who have eyes, but he would not see my sarcasm. Just then, however, Mrs. Beckett joined us in the hall of the hotel, where we stood ready to start—all having breakfasted in our own rooms. She guessed from my face that I was not pleased with Brian's plan.

"My dear, I'd go myself with poor little Dierdre O'Farrell instead of Brian!" she said. "Verdun isn't one of Jim's towns. Rheims is—but I'd have sacrificed it. There can't be much left there to see. Only—*two whole days*! Father and I haven't been parted so long in our lives since we were married. I thought yesterday, when you were away in those trenches, what a coward I'd been not to insist on going, and what if I never saw Father again! I hope you don't think I'm too selfish!"

Poor darling, *selfish* to travel in her own car with her own husband! I just gave her a look to show what I felt; but after that I could no longer object to parting with Brian. Puck had got his way, and I could see by the light in his annoyingly beautiful eyes how exquisitely he enjoyed the situation. Brian and Brian's kitbag were transferred to the Red Cross taxi, there and then, to save delay for us and the officer who would meet us, in case the wretched car should get a *panne*, en route to Bar-le-Duc. As a matter of fact, that is what happened; or at all events when our big, reliable motor purred with us into Bar-le-Duc, the O'Farrells were nowhere to be seen.

Our officer—another lieutenant—had arrived in a little Ford; and as we were invited to lunch in the citadel of Verdun we could not wait. I felt sure the demon Puck [Pg 175] had managed to be late on purpose, so that my Verdun day might be spoiled by anxiety for Brian. Thus he would kill two birds with one stone: show how little I gained by the enemy's absence, and punish me for not letting him make love!

The road to Verdun was a wonderful prelude. After three years' Titanic battling, how could there be a road at all? I had had vague visions of an earthly turmoil, a wilderness of shell-holes where once had gleamed rich meadows and vineyards, with little villages set jewel-like among them, and the visions were true. But through the war-worn desert always the road unrolled—the brave white road. Heaven alone could tell the deeds of valour which had achieved the impossible, making and remaking that road! It should have some great poem all to itself, I thought; a poem called "The Road to Verdun." And the poem should be set to music. I could almost hear the lilt of the verses as our car slipped through the tangle of motor *camions* and gun-carriages on the way thither. As for the music, I could really hear that without flight of fancy: a deep, rolling undertone of heavy wheels, of jolting guns, of pulsing engines, like a million beating hearts; and out of its muffled bass rising the lighter music of men's voices: soldiers singing; soldiers going to the front, who shouted gaily to soldiers going to repose; soldiers laughing; soldier-music that no hardship or suffering could subdue.

We had seen such processions before, but none so endless as this, going both ways, as far as the eye could reach. We had seen no such tremendous parks of artillery and aviation by the roadside, no such store of shells for big guns [Pg 176] and little guns, no such pyramids of grenades for trenches and aeroplanes. We were engulfed in war, swallowed up in war. It was thrilling beyond words.

But all the road flashed bright with thrills. There was a thrill at "le Bois de Regrets," forest of dark regret for the Prussians of 1792, where the French turned them back—the forest which Goethe saw: a thrill more keen for the pointing sign, "Metz, 47 kilomètres," which reminded us that less than thirty miles separated us from the great German stronghold, yet—"on ne passera pas!" And the deepest thrill of all at the words of our guide: "*Voilà la porte de Verdun! Nous y sommes.*"

Turning off the road, we stopped our car and the little Ford to look up and worship. There it rose before us, ancient pile of gray stones, altar of history and triumph, Verodunum of Rome, city of warlike, almost royal bishops and rich burghers: town of treaties, sacked by Barbarians; owned and given up by Germans; seized by Prussians when the French had spiked their guns in 1870; and now forever a monument to the immortal manhood of France!

Perhaps it was the mist in my eyes, but at first sight Verdun did not look ruined, as I saw it towering up to its citadel in massive strength and stern dignity. The old houses on the slope stood shoulder to shoulder and back to back, like massed men fighting their last stand. It was only when we had started on again, and passing through the gate had slipped into the sorrowful intimacy of the streets, that Verdun let us see her glorious rags and scars.

You would think that one devastated town would be much like another to look at save for size. But no! I am [Pg 177] learning that each has some arresting claim of its own to sacred remembrance. Nancy has had big buildings knocked down like card houses by occasional bombardment of great guns. Sermaize, Gerbéviller, Vitrimont and twenty other places we have seen were thoroughly looted by the Germans and then burned, street by street. But Verdun has been bombarded every day for weeks and months and years. The town is a royal skeleton, erect and on its feet, its jewelled sceptre damaged, but still grasped in a fleshless hand. The Germans have never got near enough to steal!

"You see," said the smart young captain who had come out to meet us at the gate and take us to the citadel, "you see, nothing has been touched in these houses since the owners had to go. When they return from their places of refuge far away, they will find everything as they left it—that is, as the Boche guns have left it."

Only too easy was it to see! In some of the streets whole rows of houses had had their fronts torn off. The rooms within were like stage-settings for some tragic play. Sheets and blankets trailed from beds where sleepers had waked in fright. Doors of wardrobes gaped to show dresses dangling forlornly, like Bluebeard's murdered brides. Dinner-tables were set out for meals never to be finished, save by rats. Family portraits of comfortable old faces smiling under broken glass hung awry on pink or blue papered walls. Half-made shirts and petticoats were still caught by the needle in broken sewing-machines. Dropped books and baskets of knitting lay on bright carpets snowed under by fallen plaster. Vases of dead flowers stood on mantelpieces, ghostly stems and shrivelled [Pg 178] brown leaves reflected in gilt-framed mirrors. I could hardly bear to look! It was like being shown by a hard-hearted surgeon the beating of a brain through the sawed hole in a man's skull. If one could have crawled through the crust of lava at Pompeii, a year after the eruption, one might have felt somewhat as at Verdun now!

On a broken terrace, once a beloved evening promenade, our two cars paused. We got out and gazed down, down over the River Meuse, from a high vantage-point where a few months ago, we should have been blown to bits, in five minutes. Our two officers pointed out in the misty autumn landscape spots where some of the fiercest and most famous fights had been. How the names they rattled off brought back anxious nights and mornings when our first and only thoughts had been the *communiqués*! "Desperate battle on the Meuse." "Splendid stand at Douaumont." "New attack on Morthomme." But nothing we saw helped out our imaginings. There was just a vast stretch of desolation where vinelands once had poured their perfume to the sun. The forts protecting Verdun were as invisible as fairyland, I said. "As invisible as hell!" one of our guides amended. And then to me, in a low voice unheard by pale and trembling Mother Beckett, he added, "If Nature did not work to make ugly things invisible, we could not let you come here, Mademoiselle. See how high the grass has grown in the plain down there! In summer it is full of poppies, red as the blood that feeds their roots. And it is only the grasses and the poppies that hide the bones of men we've never yet put underground. Nature has been one of our chief sextons, here at Verdun. I wish you could have [Pg 179] seen the poppies a few months ago, mixed with blue marguerites and cornflowers—that we call 'bluets.' We used to say that our dead were lying in state under the tricolour flag of France. But I have made you sad, Mademoiselle. *Je regrette!* We must take you quickly to the citadel. Our general will not let you be sad there."

We turned from the view over the Meuse and walked away in silence. I thought I had never heard so loud, so thunderously echoing, a silence in my life.

Oh, no, it was not sad in the citadel! It was, on the contrary, very gay, of a gaiety so gallant and so pathetic that it brought a lump to the throat when there should have been a laugh on the lips. But the lump had to be swallowed, or our hosts' feelings would be hurt. They didn't want watery-eyed, full-throated guests at a luncheon worthy of bright smiles and keen appetites!

The first thing that happened to Mother Beckett and me in the famous fortress was to be shown into a room decorated as a ladies' boudoir. All had been done, we were told almost timidly, in our honour, even the frescoes on the walls, painted in record time by a young lieutenant, who was an artist; and the officers hoped that they had forgotten nothing we might need. We could both have cried, if we hadn't feared to spoil our eyes and redden our noses! But even if we'd not been strong enough to stifle our tears, there was everything at hand to repair their ravages. And all this in a place where the Revolution had sent fourteen lovely ladies to the guillotine for servilely begging the King of Prussia to spare Verdun.

The lieutenant who met us at Bar-le-Duc had rushed [Pg 180] there in advance of us, in order to shop with frantic haste. A long list must have been compiled after "mature deliberation"—as they say in courts-martial—otherwise any normal young man would have missed out something. In the tiny, subterranean room (not much larger than a cell) a stick of incense burned. The cot-bed of some hospitable captain or major disguised itself as a couch, under a brand-new silk table-cover with the price-mark still attached, and several small sofa cushions, also ticketed. A deal table had been

painted green and spread with a lace-edged tea-cloth, on which were proudly displayed a galaxy of fittings from a dressing-bag, the best, no doubt, that poor bombarded Bar-le-Duc could produce in war time. There were ivory-backed hair and clothes brushes; a comb; bottles filled with white face-wash and perfume; a manicure-set, with pink salve and nail-powder; a tray decked out with every size of hairpin; a cushion bristling with pins of many-coloured heads; boxes of rouge, a hare's-foot to put it on with; face-powder in several tints; swan's-down puffs; black pencils for the eyebrows and blue for the eyelids; sweet-smelling soap—a dazzling and heavily fragrant collection.

"Oh, my dear, what *did* they think of us?" gasped Mother Beckett. "What a shame the poor lambs should have wasted all their money and trouble!"

"It *mustn't* be wasted!" said I. "Think how disappointed they'd be if they came in here afterward and found we hadn't touched a thing!"

"But——" she protested.

"You wouldn't hurt the feelings of the saviours of France? I'm going to make us both up! And there's[Pg 181] no time to waste. They've given us fifteen minutes' grace before lunch. For the honour of womanhood we *mustn't* be late!"

I sat her down in the only chair. I dusted her pure little face with pearl-powder and the faintest *souçon* of rouge. I rubbed on her sweet lips just the suspicion of pink, liked by an elderly *grande dame française*, who has not yet "abdicated." I then made myself up more seriously: a blue shadow on the lids, a raven touch on the lashes; a flick of the hare's-foot under my eyes and on my ear-tips: an extra coat of pink and a brilliant (most injurious!) varnish on the nails. Then, with a dash of *Rose Ambrée* for my companion's blouse and *Nuits d'Orient* for mine, we sallied forth scented like a harem, to do honour to our hosts.

Luncheon was in a vast cavern of a vaulted banqueting-hall, in the deepest heart of that citadel, where for eleven years Napoleon kept his weary English prisoners. Electric lights showed us a table adorned with fresh flowers (where they'd come from was a miracle, but soon we were to see other miracles still more miraculous), French, British, and American flags, and pyramids of fruit. The *Rose Ambrée* and *Nuits d'Orient* filled the whole vast *salle*, and pleased the officers, I was sure. They bowed and smiled and paid us compliments, their many medals glittered in the light, and their uniforms were resplendent against the cold background of the walls. I wished that, instead of one girl, I had been a dozen! But I did my best and so did Mother Beckett, who brightened into a charming second youth, the youth of a happy mother surrounded by a band of sons.[Pg 182]

The lumps that had been in our throats had to be choked sternly down, for not to do justice to that meal would be worse than leaving the rouge and powder boxes unopened! The menu need not have put a palace to shame. In the citadel of Verdun it seemed as if it must have been evolved by rubbing Aladdin's lamp, and I said so as I read it over:

Huitres d'Ostende
Bisque d'Écrevisses
Sanglier rôti
Purée de Pommes de Terre
Soufflée de Chocolat
Fruits
Bonbons

"Oh, we've never been hungry at Verdun, even when things were at their liveliest," said the officer sitting next to me. "Providence provided for us in a strange way. I will tell you how. Before the civil population went away, or expected to go, there was talk of a long siege. The shopkeepers thought they would be intelligent and sent to Paris for all sorts of food. Oh, not only the grocers and butchers! Everyone. You would have laughed to see the jewellers showing hams in their windows instead of diamonds and pearls and gold purses, and the piles of preserved meat and fruit tins at the perfumers! The confectioners ordered stores of sugar and the wine merchants restocked their cellars. Then things began to happen. Houses were bombed, and people hustled out in a hurry. You have seen some of those houses! The place was getting too hot; and the order came for evacuation. Not much could be taken away. Transport was[Pg 183] difficult in those days! All the good food had to be left behind, and we thought it would be a pity to waste it. Our chief bought the lot at a reasonable price—merchants were thankful to sell. So you see we did not need Aladdin's lamp."

"I don't *quite* see!" I confessed. "Because, that's a long time ago, and these oysters of Ostende——"

"Never saw Ostende!" he laughed. "They are a big bluff! We always have them when"—he bowed—"we entertain distinguished guests. The Germans used to print in their papers that we at Verdun could not hold out long, because we were eating rats. So we took to cutting a dash with our menus. We do not go into particulars and say that our oysters have kept themselves fresh in tins!"

"But the wild boar?" I persisted. "Does one tin wild boar?"

"One does not! One goes out and shoots it. *Ma foi*, it's a good adventure when the German guns are not asleep! The fruit? Ah, that is easy! It comes as the air we breathe. And for our bonbons, the famous sugared almonds of Verdun were not all destroyed when the factory blew up."

With this he handed me a dish of the delicious things. "The story is," he said, "that a certain Abbess brought the secret of making these almonds to Verdun. We have to thank Henry of Navarre for her. He had a pleasant way, when he wished to be rid of an old love with a compliment, of turning her into an Abbess. That time he made a lucky stroke for us."

At the end of luncheon we all drank healths, and nearly[Pg 184] everyone made a speech except Mrs. Beckett. She only nodded and smiled, looking so ideal a little mother that she must have made even the highest officers homesick for their

mamans.

Then we were led through a mysterious network of narrow passages and vaulted rooms, all lit with electric lamps, and striking cold and cellary. We saw the big hospital, not very busy just then, and the clean, empty operating theatre, and gnome-caverns where munitions were stored in vast, black pyramids. When there was nothing left to see in the citadel, our hosts asked if we would like to pay a visit to the trenches—old trenches which had once defended Thiaumont.

"I don't think my wife had better—" Mr. Beckett began; but the little old lady cut him short. "Yes, Father, I just *had* better! To-day, being among all these splendid brave soldiers has shown me that I'm weak—a spoiled child. I felt yesterday I'd been a coward. Now I *know* it! And I'm *going* to see those trenches."

I believe it was partly the powder and lip salve that made her so desperate!

Her husband yielded, meek as a lamb. Big men like Mr. Beckett always do to little women like Mrs. Beckett. But she bore it well. And when at last we bade good-bye to our glorious hosts, she said to me, "Molly, you tell them in French, that now I've met *them* I understand why the Germans could never pass!"[Pg 185]

CHAPTER XVIII

Almost any place on earth would be an anti-climax the day after Verdun—but not Rheims!

Just at this moment (it mayn't be much more) Rheims is resting, like a brave victim on the rack who has tired his torturers by an obstinate silence. Only a few people are allowed to enter the town, save those who have lived there all along, and learned to think no more of German bombs than German sausages; and those favoured few must slip in and out almost between breaths. Any instant the torturing may begin again, when the Boches have bombs to spare for what they call "target practice"; for think, how near is Laon!—and we'd been warned that, even at the portals of the town, we might be turned back.

We had still another new French officer to take us to Rheims. (I am getting their faces a little mixed, like a composite picture, but I keep sacredly all their dear visiting-cards!) He was a captain, with a scarred but handsome face, and he complimented Mother Beckett and me on our "courage." This made Father Beckett visibly regret that he had brought us, though he had been assured that it was a "safe time." However, his was not the kind of regret which tempts a man to turn back: it only makes his upper lip look long.

I never saw Rheims in palmy days of peace. Now I[Pg 186] wish I had seen it! But there was that lithograph of the cathedral by Gustave Simonau, the great Belgian artist, hanging above your desk, in the den, Padre. I used to study it when I should have been studying my lessons, fascinated by the splendid façade, the twin towers, the three "portals of the Trinity," the rose-window, the gallery of kings, the angels, the saints, the gargoyles and all the carved stone lace-work which the picture so wonderfully shows.

On the opposite side of the room was Simonau's Cathedral of Chartres, in a dark frame to match, and I remember your saying that Chartres was considered by some critics even finer than Rheims. The Cathedral of Chartres seemed a romantic monument of history to me, because it was built as a shrine for the "tunic of the Virgin"; but the Gothic Notre-Dame of Rheims appealed to my—perhaps prophetic—soul. Maybe I had a latent presentiment of how I should see the real cathedral, as *la grande blessée* of the greatest war of the world.

Anyhow, I always took a deep interest in Rheims from the day I first gaped, an open-mouthed child, at that beautiful drawing, and I was glad I'd forgotten none of its details, as we motored toward the martyr town. Usually there's Brian, who can tell the dear Becketts all they don't know and want to know, but this time they'd only me to depend upon. And when I think what a cruel fraud I am at heart, there's some consolation in serving them, even in small ways.

There's a wide plain that knows desolately what German bombardment means: there are gentle hills rising out of it, south and west (will grapes ever be sweet on those[Pg 187] sad hillsides again?) and there's the little river Vesle that runs into the Aisne. There's the Canal of the Aisne and the Marne, too—oh, many wide waters and little streams, to breathe out mist, for Rheims is on the pleasant Île-de-France. There was so much mist this autumn day that it hid from our eyes for a long time the tall form of the Cathedral which should dominate the plain for many miles; a thick, white mist like the sheet with which a sculptor veils his masterpiece until it's ready to face the world. As we drove on, and still saw no looming bulk, frozen fear pinched my heart, like horrid, ice-cold fingers. What if there'd been some new bombardment we hadn't had time to hear of, and the Cathedral were *gone*?

But I didn't speak my fear. I tried to cover it up by chattering about Rheims. Goodness knows there's a lot to chatter about! All that wonderful history, since Clovis was baptized by Saint Remi; and Charlemagne crowned, and Charles the VII, with Jeanne d'Arc looking on in bright armour, and various Capets, and enough other kings to name Notre-Dame of Rheims the "Cathedral of Coronations." I remembered something about the Gate of Mars, too—the oldest thing of all—which the Remi people put up in praise of Augustus Cæsar when Agrippa brought his great new roads close to their capital. I think it had been called Durocoroturum up to that time—or some equally awful name, which you remember only because you expect to forget! I hardly dared tell the Becketts about the celebrated archiepiscopal palace where the kings used to be entertained by the archbishops (successors of Saint Remi) while the coronation ceremonies were going on: and the *Salle du Tau* with its wonder[Pg 188]ful hangings, its velvet-cushioned stone seats and carved, upright furniture, where the royal guests—in robes stiff with jewelled embroidery—had their banquets from plates of solid silver and gold. It seemed cruel to speak of splendours vanished forever, vanished like the holy oil of the sacred phial brought from heaven by a dove for the baptism of Clovis, and kept for the anointing of all those dead kings!

But it was just the time and place to talk about Attila—Attila the First, I mean, of whom, as I told you, I firmly believe the present "incumbent" to be the reincarnation. As Attila I. thought fit to put Rheims to the sword, Atilla II. is naturally

impelled by the "spiral" to do his best from a distance, by destroying the Cathedral which wasn't begun in his predecessor's day. But what does he think, I wonder, about the prophecy? That in Rheims—scene of the first German defeat on the soil of Gaul—Germany's last defeat will be celebrated, with great rejoicing in the Cathedral she has tried to ruin?

Those words, "tried to ruin," I uttered rather feebly, holding forth to the Becketts, because we had passed a long dark line of trees before which—we'd been told—we ought to see the Cathedral rise triumphant against an empty background of sky. And still there was nothing!

Of course, I told myself, it must be the mist. But could mist be thick enough entirely to hide a great mountain of a cathedral from eyes drawing nearer every minute? Then, suddenly, my question was answered by the mist itself. I must have hypnotized it! A light wind, which we had thought was made by the motor, cut like the shears of Lachesis through the woolly white web. A [Pg 189] gash of blue appeared and in the midst, floating as if it had died and gone to heaven, the Cathedral.

Yes, "died and gone to heaven!" That is just what has happened to Notre-Dame of Rheims. The body has been martyred, but the soul is left alive—beautiful, brave soul of the old stones of France!

"Oh!" went up from three voices in the motor-car. I think even our one-legged soldier-chauffeur emitted a grunt of joy; and Mother Beckett clasped her hands on her little thin breast, as if she were praying, such a wonderful sight it was, with the golden coronation of the noon-day sun on the towers. Our officer-guide, in his car ahead, looked back as if to say, "I told you so! They can't kill France, and Rheims is the very spirit and youth of France."

Not one of us spoke another word until we drove into the town, and began exclaiming with horror and rage at what Attila II has done to the streets.

The mist had fallen again, not white in the town, but a pale, sad gray, like a mantle of half-mourning. It hung over the spacious avenues and the once fine, now desolate, streets, which had been the pride of Rheims; it slipped serpent-like through what remained of old arcades: it draped the ancient Gate of Mars in the Place de la République as if to hide the cruel scars of the bombardment; it lay like soiled snow on the mountain of tumbled stone which had been the Rue St. Jacques; it curtained the "show street" of Rheims, the Rue de la Grue, almost as old as the Cathedral itself, which a Sieur de Coucy began in 1212; trickling gray as glacier waters over the fallen walls which artists had loved. It marbled with pale streaks the [Pg 190] burned, black corpse of the once famous Maison des Laines; it clouded the marvellous old church of St. Remi, and when we came to the Cathedral—kept for the climax—it floated past the wounded statues on the great western façade like an army of spirits—spirits of all those watching saints whom the statues honoured.

The crowns of the broken towers we could not see, but at that height the mist was gilded by the sun which sifted through so that each tower seemed to have its own faint golden halo.

"This effect comes often on these foggy autumn days, when the sun is high, about noontime," said our guide. "It's rather wonderful, isn't it? We have a priest-soldier invalided here now, who used to be of the service in the Cathedral, before he volunteered to fight. He has written some verses, which it seems came to him in a dream one night. Whether the world would think them fine I do not know, but at Rheims we like them. The idea is that Jeanne d'Arc has mobilized the souls of the saints who protect Rheims, to bless and console the Cathedral, which they were not permitted to save from outward ruin. It is she who gilds the mist on the towers with a prophecy of hope. As for the mist itself, according to the poet, it is no common fog. It is but the cloak worn by this army of saints to visit their cathedral, and bathe its wounds with their cool white hands, so that at last, when peace dawns, there shall be a spiritual beauty found in the old marred stones—a beauty they never had in their prime."

"I should like to see that soldier-priest!" said Father Beckett, when I had translated for him the officer's de [Pg 191] scription of the poem. "Couldn't we meet him? What's his name?"

I passed on the questions to our captain of the scarred face. "The man's name is St. Pol," he told us. "You can see from that he comes of an old family. If it had been this day last week you could have met him. He would have been pleased. But—since then—alas! Mademoiselle, it is impossible that he should be seen. It would be too sad for you and your friends."

"He has been wounded in some bombardment?" I exclaimed.

"Not wounded—no. We don't think much of wounds. What has happened is sadder than wounds. Some day the man may recover. We hope so. But at present he—is out of everything, dead in life."

"What happened?" I gasped.

"Oh, it is quite a history!" said the Captain. "But it begins a long time ago, when the Germans came to Rheims in 1914. Perhaps it would fatigue you? Besides, you have to translate, which takes double the time. I might write out the story and send it, Mademoiselle, if you like. You and your friends are not as safe here as in your own houses, I do not disguise that from you! The Germans have let us rest these last few days. Yet who can tell when they may choose to wake us up with a bomb or two?"

"I don't think we're afraid," I said, and consulted the Becketts. The little old lady answered for both. She was stoutly sure they were not afraid! "We shouldn't deserve to be Jim's parents if we were—of a thing like *that!* You tell the Captain, Molly, we're getting used to bombs, and we want the story right here, on the spot!" [Pg 192]

"*C'est très chic, ça!*" remarked the Captain, eyeing the mite of a woman. He stood for a minute, his scarred face pale in the mist, his eyes fixed thoughtfully on a headless stone king. Then he began his story of the soldier-priest.

Monsieur le Curé de St. Pol was very young when the war began—almost as young as a *curé* can be. He did not think, at first, to become a soldier, for he hated war. But, indeed, in those early days he had no time to think at all. He only worked—worked, to help care for the wounded who were pouring into Rheims, toward the last of August, 1914. Many were brought into the Cathedral, where they lay on the floor, on beds of straw. The Curé's duty was among these. He had relations in Rheims—a family of cousins of the same name as his. They lived in a beautiful old house, one of the best in Rheims, with an ancient chapel in the garden. There was an invalid father, whose wife devoted her life to him, and a daughter—a very beautiful young girl just home from a convent-school the spring before the war broke out. There was a son, too—but naturally, he was away fighting.

This young girl, Liane de St. Pol, was one of many in Rheims who volunteered to help nurse the wounded. All girls brought up in convents have some skill in nursing, you know!

While she and the Curé were at work in the Cathedral, among the wounded men who came in were her own brother, a lieutenant, and his best friend, a captain of his regiment. Both were badly hurt—the St. Pol boy worse than his friend. Yet even for him there was hope—if he could have had the best of care—if he could have been taken home and lovingly nursed there. That was not possible. The surgeons had no time for house-to-house visits. He was operated on in the Cathedral, and as he lay between life and death, news came that the Germans were close to Rheims.

In haste the wounded were sent to Épernay—to save them from being made prisoners. But some could not go: Louis de St. Pol and his friend Captain Jean de Visgnes. De Visgnes might have been hidden in the St. Pol house but he would not leave the boy, who could not be moved so far. The Curé vowed to hide both, and he did hide them in a chapel of the Cathedral itself. On September 3, at evening, the first Germans rode into the town and took up their quarters in the Municipal Palace, where they forced the Mayor, a very old man, to live with them. It was a changed Rheims since the day before. The troops of the garrison had gone in the direction of Épernay, since there was no hope of defence. Many rich people had fled, taking what they could carry in automobiles or cabs. The poor feared a siege—or worse: they knew not what. The St. Pol family received into their house a number of women whose husbands were at the Front, and their babies. No one ventured out who could stay indoors. The city filled up with German soldiers, with the Kaiser's son, Prince August Wilhelm, at their head. They, too, had wounded. The Cathedral was put to use for them, and the Curé cared for the Boches as he had cared for the French. This gave him a chance, at night, to nurse his two friends. So dragged on seven days, which seemed seven years; and then rumours drifted in of a great German retreat, a mysterious failure in the midst of seeming victory. The Battle of the Marne was making itself felt. In rage and bewilderment the Germans poured out of Rheims, leaving only their wounded behind. The townspeople praised God, and thought their trial was over. But it was only just begun! On the 16th the bombardment opened. The Germans knew that their wounded still lay in the Cathedral, but they did not seem to care for men out of the fighting line. A rain of bombs fell in the town—one of the first wrecked the Red Cross ambulance—and many struck the Cathedral. Then came the night when the straw bedding blazed, and fire poured through the long naves, rising to the roof.

The Curé told afterward how wonderful the sight was with the jewelled windows lighting up for the last time, before the old glass burst with the shrill tinkle of a million crystal bells. He and Jean de Visgnes carried Louis de St. Pol out into the street, but the boy died before they reached his father's house, and De Visgnes had a dangerous relapse. It was on this night that the Curé made up his mind to volunteer, and soon he was at the Front. Nearly three years passed before he and De Visgnes met again, both *en permission*, travelling back to Rheims to pass their "perm." Jean was now engaged to Liane de St. Pol who, with her parents, had remained in the bombarded town, refusing to desert their poor protegées. The two planned to marry, after the war; but Liane had been struck by a flying fragment of shell, and wounded in the head. De Visgnes could bear the separation no longer. He made the girl promise to marry him at once—in the chapel of the old house, as she was still suffering, and forbidden to go out. His leave had been granted for the wedding, and the moment Liane was strong enough she and the old people would leave Rheims. Jean was to take them himself to his own home in Provence. The Curé was to marry his cousin to the man whose life he had saved.

Many children of the poor whom Liane had helped decorated the chapel with flowers, and though the wedding-day was one of fierce bombardment, no one dreamed of putting off the ceremony. No fine shops for women's dress were open in Rheims, but the bride wore her mother's wedding-gown and veil of old lace. None save the family were asked to the marriage, because it was dangerous to go from house to house; yet all Rheims loved Liane, and meant to wish happiness for bride and bridegroom as the chapel-bells chimed for their union. But the bells began and never finished. At the instant when Liane de St. Pol and Jean de Visgnes became man and wife a bomb fell on the chapel roof. The tiles collapsed like cards, and all the bridal party was killed as by a lightning stroke. Only the soldier-priest was spared. Strangely, he was not even touched. But horror had driven him mad. Since then he spoke only to rave of Liane and Jean; how beautiful they had looked, lying dead before the wrecked altar.

"The doctors say it is like a case of shell-shock," the Captain finished. "They think he'll recover. But at present, as I said—it is a sad affair. Sad for *him*—not for those who died together, suffering no pain. One of the Curé's favourite sayings used to be, they tell me, 'Death is not an end, but a beginning.'"

"You know him well?" I asked.

"Yes. I was stationed in Rheims before the war. I used to dance with Liane when she came home from school." [Pg 196]

"Ah, if only her family hadn't stayed here till too late!" I cried.

The captain with the scarred face shrugged his shoulders. "Destiny!" he said. "Besides, the best people do not run away easily from the homes they love. Perhaps they have the feeling that, in a home which has always meant peace, nothing terrible can happen. Yet there's more in it than that—something more subtle which keeps them in the place where they have always lived: something, I think, that binds the spirits of us Frenchmen and women to the spirit of their own hearths—their own soil. Haven't you found that already, in other places you have visited in this journey of yours?"

"Yes," I answered, thinking of the old people I had seen at Vitrimont living in the granaries of their ruined houses, and

strangely, unbelievably happy because they were "at home." "Yes, we have seen that in little villages of Lorraine."

"Then how much more at Rheims, under the shadow of Notre-Dame!" The scarred captain still gazed at the headless king, and faintly smiled.[Pg 197]

CHAPTER XIX

Of course nothing did happen in Paris to break up the party. I might have known that nothing would. Nothing happened at all, except that I received a letter from Doctor Herter with the promised introduction to an oculist just now at the Front, and that I realized, after three days' absence, how Brian is improving. He has less the air of a beautiful soul, whose incarnation in a body is a mere accident, and more the look of a happy, handsome young man, with a certain spiritual radiance which makes him remarkable and somehow "disturbing," as the French say. If anything could stop the rats gnawing my conscience, it would be this blessed change. Brian is getting back health and strength. When I think what a short time ago it is that his life hung in the balance, this seems a miracle. I'm afraid I am glad—glad that I did the thing which has given him his chance. Besides, I love the Becketts. So does Brian. And they love us. It's difficult to remember that I've stolen their love. Surely, they're happier with us than they could have been without us? Brian's scheme for their visits to the liberated towns is doing good to them and to hundreds—even thousands—of people whom they intend to help.

All this is sophistry, no doubt, but oh, it's beguiling sophistry! It's so perfectly disguised that I seldom recog[Pg 198]nize it except at night when I lie awake, and it sits on my bed, without its becoming mask.

Being the Becketts' adviser-in-chief, and having his lungs full of ozone every day should be enough to account for Brian's improvement. Yet—well, I can't help thinking that he takes a lot more trouble than he need for Dierdre O'Farrell. Oh, not that he's *in love*! Such an idea is ridiculous, but he's interested and sorry for the girl, because she goes about with a chip on her shoulder, defying the world to knock it off. He won't admit that it's the fault of her outlook on the world, and that the poor old world isn't to blame at all.

What if he knew the truth about that brother and sister? Naturally I can't tell him, of all people on earth, and they take advantage of my handicap. They've used their time well, in my absence, when they had Brian to themselves. He had his doubts of Julian, but the creature has sung himself into my blind brother's heart. From what I hear, the three have spent most of their time at the piano in the private *salon* which the Becketts invited the O'Farrells to engage.

Now, as I write, we are making our headquarters in Compiègne, sleeping there, and sightseeing by day on what they call the "Noyon Front."

After Rheims and before Noyon we stopped three days in Paris instead of one, as we'd planned, for Mother Beckett was tired. She wouldn't confess it, but "Father" thought she looked pale. Strange if she had not, after such experiences and emotions! Sometimes, when I study the delicate old face, with blue hollows under kind, sweet eyes, I ask myself: "Will she be able to get through the[Pg 199] task she's set herself?" But she is so quietly brave, not only in fatigue, but in danger, that I answer my own question: "Yes, she will do it somehow, on the reserve force that kept her up when Jim died."

The road from Paris, past Senlis, to Compiègne, was even more thrilling than the road to Nancy and beyond, for this was the way the Germans took in September, 1914, when they thought the capital was theirs to have and hold: "*la route de l'Allemagne*" it used to be called, but never will French lips give it that name again.

Just at first, running out of the city in early morning, things looked much the same as when starting for Nancy: the unnatural quiet of streets once crammed with busy traffic for feeding gay Paris; military motors of all sorts and sizes, instead of milk wagons and cartloads of colourful fruits; women working instead of men; children on their way to school, sedately talking of "*papa au Front*," instead of playing games. But outside the suburbs the real thrills began.

There were the toy-like fortifications of which Paris was proud in the 'fifties; there was the black tangle of barbed wire, and the trace of trenches (a mere depression on the earth's surface, as if a serpent had laid its heavy length on a great, green velvet cushion) with which Paris had hoped to delay the German wave. Only a little way on, we shot through the sleepy-looking village of Bourget where Napoleon stopped a few hours after Waterloo, rather than enter Paris by daylight; and Brian had a story of the place. A French soldier, a friend of his (nearly everyone he meets is Brian's friend!) who was born there, told him that on each anniversary the ghost of the "Little Corporal" ap[Pg 200]pears, travel-stained and worn, on the road leading to Bourget. For many years his custom was to show himself for a second to some seeing eye, then vanish like a mirage of the desert. But since 1914 his way is different. He does not confine his visit to the hamlet of sad memories. He walks the country side, his hands behind him, his head bent as of old; or he rides a horse that is slightly lame, inspecting with thoughtful gaze the frenzied industries of war, war such as he—the war-genius—never saw in his visions of the future: the immense aerodromes, the bomb sheds, the wireless stations and observation towers, the giant "*saucisses*" resting under green canvas, ready to rise at dawn; and all the other astounding features of the landscape so peaceful in his day.

Even now parts of it are peaceful, often the very spots marked by history, where it seems as if each tree should be decorated by a Croix de Guerre. For instance, there was the place—a junction of roads—where the Uhlans with a glitter of helmets came proudly galloping toward Paris, and to their blank amazement and rage had to turn back. As we halted to take in the scene, it was mysterious as dreamland in the morning mist. Nothing moved save two teams of cream-coloured oxen, their moon-white sides dazzling behind a silver veil. The pale road stretched before us so straight and far that it seemed to descend from the sky like a waterfall. Only the trees had a martial look, like tall, dark soldiers drawn up in line for parade.

It was not till we plunged into forest depths that I said to myself: "We must be coming near Senlis!" For the very name

"Senlis" fills the mind with forest pictures. No [Pg 201] wonder, since it lies walled away from the outer world—like the Sleeping Beauty—by woods, and woods, and woods: the forests of Hallette, Chantilly, and Ermenonville, each as full of history as it is now of aromatic scents, and used to be of wild boars for kings to kill!

I think the best of the forest pictures has Henri de Navarre for its principal figure. Brian and I turned over the pages of our memory for the Becketts, who listened like children to fairy tales—or as we listened when you used to embroider history for us in those evening *causeries* in the dear old "den," Padre.

I dug up the story about Henri at twenty-one, married more than a year to beautiful, lively Marguerite de Valois, and enduring lazily the despotism of his mother-in-law. There in the old palace of the Louvre, he loitered the time away, practically a prisoner until the only friend he had with courage to speak out (Agrippa d'Aubigny) gave him a lecture. Agrippa lashed his master with the words "coward" and "sluggard," letting his faithful servants work for his interests while he remained the slave of a "wicked old witch." The Béarnais had been biding his time—"crouching to spring": but that slap in the face set him on fire. He could no longer wait for the right moment. He decided to make the *first* moment the right one. His quick brain mapped out a plan of escape in which the sole flaw was that he must leave behind his brilliant bride. With eight or ten of his greatest, most loyal gentlemen, he arranged to hunt in the forest of Senlis; and he had shown himself so biddable, so boyish, that at first even Catherine de Medicis did not suspect him. It was only when the party had set forth that the plot burst like a bomb, in [Pg 202] Catherine's own boudoir, where she sat with her favourite son, vile Henri III of France.

Fervacques, one of the plotters, had stopped in Paris, feigning illness. The plan had been concocted in his rooms, and he but waited for Navarre's back to be turned to betray him. Marguerite laughed when she heard (perhaps she was in the secret), but Catherine said evil words, of which she knew a great many—especially in Italian. Orders were given for the gates of Paris to be shut (gates that in those days barred the road along which we now motored), but they were too late. Navarre and his hunters had passed through. Agrippa d'Aubigny was not among them. His part had been to watch the happenings of the Court, and join Navarre later in his own kingdom, but that hope was broken. Disguised as a *mignon* of Henri III, he slipped out of Paris on a fast horse, tore after the Béarnais and his equerries, and caught the cavalcade in the forest. "Thou art betrayed!" he cried.

"But not captured!" laughed Navarre.

In haste they substituted a new plot for the old. The young king was to pretend ignorance of the betrayal. He installed himself accordingly in the best lodgings of Senlis, talking loudly about hunting prospects, arranged to see a performance by travelling actors, and sent such a message back to Catherine and Henri that they believed Fervacques had fooled them.

By the time they'd waked to the truth, Navarre had ridden safely out of Senlis with his friends, bound for the kingdom on the Spanish border. Even then he was a man of big ambitions; so maybe he said to himself, looking back at Senlis: "I shall travel this road again, as king [Pg 203] of France, to enter Paris in triumph." Anyhow, he was grateful to Senlis for saving him, and stayed there often, as Henri Quatre, flirting with pretty ladies, and inviting them to become abbesses when he tired of them.

Lots of things have happened in Senlis, because it's on the road to Paris, and for centuries has been getting into someone's way. Why, if it hadn't been for Senlis, William the Conqueror might never have conquered! You see, before William's day, Count Bernard of Senlis (who boasted himself a forty-second grandson or something of Charlemagne) quarrelled with King Louis IV of France. To spite him, Bernard adopted the baby son of William Longsword, Duke of Normandy, killed in battle; for Normandy was a "thorn in the eye" of France. Thanks to Bernard's help Normandy gained in riches and importance. By the time William, son of Robert the Devil and Arlette of Falaise, appeared on the scene, the dukedom was a power in the world, and William was able to dare his great enterprise.

But that was only one incident. Senlis was already an old, old town, and as much entitled to call itself a capital of France as was Paris. Not for nothing had the Gallo-Romans given it walls twenty feet high and thirteen feet thick! They could not have builded better had they meant to attract posterity's attention, and win for their strong city the admiration of kings. Clovis was the first king who fancied it, and settled there. But not a king who followed, till after the day of Henri Quatre, failed to live in the castle which Clovis began. Henry V of England married Bonny Kate in the château; Charles VIII of France and Maximilian of Austria signed a treaty with [Pg 204] in its walls; Francis I finished Notre-Dame of Senlis. The Duke of Bedford fought Joan of Arc there, and she was helped by the Maréchal Rais, no other than Bluebeard; so "Sister Anne" must have gazed out from some neighbouring tower for the "cloud of dust in the distance." Somewhere in the vast encircling forests the Babes in the Wood were buried by the birds, while the wicked uncle reigned in their father's place at Senlis. In 1814 Prussian, Russian, and British soldiers marched through the town on their tramp to Paris. Cossacks and Highlanders were the "strangest sight" Senlis had ever seen, though it had seen many; but a hundred years later it was to see a stranger one yet.

If ever a place looked made for peace, that place is Senlis, on its bright little river Nonette—child of the Oise—and in its lovely valley. That was what I said as we slowed down on the outskirts: but ah, how the thought of peace broke as we drove along the "kings' highway"—the broad Rue de la République! In an instant the drama of September 2nd—eve of the Marne battle—sprang to our eyes and knocked at our hearts. We could smell the smoke, and see the flames, and hear the shots, the cries of grief and rage, the far-off thunder of bridges blown up by the retreating French army. Suddenly we knew how the people of Senlis had suffered that day, and—strangely, horribly—how the Germans had felt.

Senlis hadn't realized—wouldn't let itself realize—even during bombardment, what its fate might be. It had been spared, as an open town, in 1870; and since then, through long, prosperous years of peace a comfortable conviction had grown that only pleasant things could [Pg 205] happen. Why, it was the place of pleasure, reaping a harvest of fame and money from its adventurous past! Tourists came from all the world over to put up at the Hôtel du Grand Cerf, once the hunting lodge of kings. They came to loiter in narrow old streets whose very names were echoes of history; to study the ruins of the Roman arena and the ancient walls; to hunt in the forest, as royal men and ladies had hunted when stags

and wild boar had been plentiful as foxes and rabbits; or to motor from one neighbouring château to another. Surely even Germans could not doom such a town to destruction. To be sure, some people did fly when a rabble of refugees from Compiègne poured past, hurrying south; and others fled from the bombardment when big guns, fired from Lucien Bonaparte's old village of Chamant, struck the cathedral. But many stayed for duty's sake, or because they believed obstinately that to *their* bit of the Île-de-France no tragedy could come.

They didn't know yet that Von Kluck and his men were drunk with victory, and that flaming towns were for the German army bonfires of triumph. They didn't know that the Kaiser's dinner was ordered in Paris for a certain date, and that at all costs Paris must be cowed to a speedy peace, lest the dinner be delayed. "Frightfulness" was the word of command, and famous old Senlis was to serve as a lesson to Paris.

But somehow the German master of Senlis's heart weakened when the crucial moment came. He was at the Hôtel du Grand Cerf, where a dinner was being prepared by scared servants for thirty German officers. The order was about to be signed when suddenly a *curé*, small[Pg 206] and pale, but lion-brave, entered the room. How he got in no one knew! Surprise held the general tongue-tied for three seconds; and a French *curé* is capable of much eloquence in three seconds.

He gambled—if a *curé* may gamble!—on the chance of his man being Catholic—and he won. That is why (so they told us in the same room three years later) Senlis was struck with many sore wounds, but not exterminated; that is why only the Maire and a few citizens were murdered instead of all; that is why in some quarters of Senlis the people who have come back can still dream that nothing happened to their dear haunt of peace on September 2, 1914.

Even if Senlis had fallen utterly, before the Germans turned in their tracks, Paris would not have been "cowed." As it was, Paris and all France were roused to a redoubled fury of resistance by the fate of the Senlis "hostages." So these men did not die in vain.

The scars of Senlis are still unhealed. Whole streets are blackened heaps of ruin, and there are things that "make you see red," as Father Beckett growled. But the thing which left the clearest picture in my brain was a sight sweet as well as sad: a charming little château, ruined by fire, yet pathetically lovely in martyrdom; the green trellis still ornamenting its stained façade, a few autumn roses peeping with childlike curiosity into gaping window-eyes; a silent old gardener raking the one patch of lawn buried under blackened tiles and tumbled bricks. The man's figure was bent, yet I felt that there was hope as well as loyalty in his work. "They will come back home some day," was the expression of that faithful back.[Pg 207]

In the exquisite beauty of the forest beyond Senlis there was still—for me—this note of hope. "Where beauty is, sadness cannot dwell for ever!" As we rushed along in the big car, the delicate gray trunks of clustering trees seemed to whirl round and round before our eyes, as in a votive dance of young priestesses. We saw bands of German prisoners toiling gnome-like in dim glades, but they didn't make us sad again. *Au contraire!* We found poetical justice in the thought that they, the cruel destroyers of trees, must chop wood and pile faggots from dawn to dusk.

So we came to Compiègne, where the French army has its headquarters in one of the most famous châteaux in the world.[Pg 208]

CHAPTER XX

It took a mere glance (even if we hadn't known beforehand) to see that noble Compiègne craved no Beckett charity, no American adoption.

True, German officers lived for twelve riotous days in the palace, in 1914, selecting for home use many of its treasures, and German "non-coms." filled vans with rare antiques from the richest mansions; still, they had no time, or else no inclination, to disfigure the town. The most sensational souvenir of those days before the Marne battle is a couple of broken bridges across the Oise and Aisne, blown up by the French in the hour of their retreat. But that strange sight didn't break on our eyes as we entered Compiègne. We seemed to have been transported by white magic from mystic forest depths to be plumped down suddenly in a city square, in front of a large, classical palace. It's only the genie of motoring who can arrange these startling contrasts!

If we took Brian's advice, and "played" that our autos were old-fashioned coaches; if we looked through, instead of at, the dozen military cars lined up at the palace gates; if we changed a few details of the soldiers' uniforms, the gray château need not have been Army Headquarters in our fancy. For us, the Germans might cease from troubling and the war-weary be at rest, while we skipped back to any century we fancied.[Pg 209]

Of course, Louis XV, son-in-law of our old friend Stanislas of Lorraine, built the château; and Napoleon the Great added a wing in honour of his second bride, Marie Louise. But why be hampered by details like that? Charles V built a castle at this old Roman Compendium, on the very spot where all those centuries later Louis XV erected his Grecian façades; and Henri of Navarre often came there, in his day. One of Henri's best romances he owed to Compiègne; and while we were having what was meant to be a hurried luncheon, Mother Beckett made Brian tell the story. You know Brian came to Compiègne before the war and painted in the palace park, where Napoleon I and Napoleon III used to give their *fêtes-champêtres*; and he says that the picture is clear as ever "behind his eyes."

Once upon a time, Henri was staying in the château, very bored because weather had spoiled the hunting. Suddenly appeared the "handsomest young man of France," the Duc de Bellegarde, Henri's equerry, who had been away on an adventure of love. Somehow, he'd contrived to meet Gabrielle d'Estrées, almost a child, but of dazzling beauty. She hid him for three days, and then, alas, a treacherous maid threatened to tell Gabrielle's father. Bellegarde had to be smuggled out of the family castle—a rope and a high window. The tale amused Henri; and the girl's portrait fired him. He couldn't forget; and later, having finished some business at Senlis (part of which concerned a lady) he laid a plan to

cut Bellegarde out. When the Equerry begged leave from Compiègne to visit Gabrielle again, Henri consented, on condition that he might be the duke's companion.[Pg 210]

Bellegarde had to agree; and Henri fell in love at sight with the golden hair, blue eyes, and rose-and-white skin of "Gaby." She preferred Bellegarde to the long-nosed king; but the Béarnais was never one to take "no" for an answer. He went from Compiègne again and again to the forbidden castle, in peril of his life from Guise and the League. After a wild adventure, in disguise as a peasant with a bundle of straw on his head, his daring captured the girl's fancy. She was his; and he was hers, writing sonnets to "Charmante Gabrielle," making Marguerite furious by giving to the new love his wife's own Abbey of St. Corneille, at Compiègne. (One can still see its ruins!)

I said we meant to eat quickly and go for an afternoon of sightseeing—for early to-morrow (I'm writing late at night) we're due at Noyon. But Brian remembered so many bits about Compiègne, that by tacit consent we lingered and listened. When he was here last, he did a sketch of Henri and Gabrielle hunting in the forest; "Gaby" pearl-fair in green satin, embroidered with silver; on her head the famous hat of velvet-like red taffetas, which cost Henri two hundred crowns. Perhaps she carried in her hand one of the handkerchiefs for which she paid what other women pay for dresses; but Brian's sketches are too "impressionist" to show handkerchiefs! Anyhow, her hand was in the king's, for that was her way of riding with her gray-clad lover; though when she went alone she rode boldly astride. Poor Henri couldn't say nay to the becoming green satin and red hat, though he was hard up in those days. After paying a bill of Gaby's, he asked his valet how many shirts and handkerchiefs[Pg 211] he had. "A dozen shirts, torn," was the answer. "Handkerchiefs, five."

On the walls of the room where we ate hung beautiful old engravings of Napoleon I in his daily life at the Château of Compiègne. Napoleon receiving honoured guests in the vast Galerie des Fêtes, with its polished floor and long line of immense windows; Napoleon and his bride in the Salon des Dames d'Honneur, among the ladies of Marie Louise; Napoleon listening wistfully—thinking maybe of lost Joséphine—to a damsel at the harp, in the Salon de Musique; Marie Louise smirking against a background of *teinture chinoise*; Napoleon observing a tapestry battle of stags in the Salle des Cerfs; Napoleon on the magnificent *terrasse* giving a garden party; Napoleon walking with his generals along the Avenue des Beaux Monts, in the park. But these pictures rather teased than pleased us, because in war days only the army enters palace or park.

Brian was luckier than the rest of us! He had been through the château and forgotten nothing. Best of all he had liked the bedchamber of Marie Antoinette, said to be haunted by her ghost, in hunting dress with a large hat and drooping plume. The Empress Eugénie, it seemed, had loved this room, and often entered it alone to dream of the past. Little could she have guessed then how near she would come to some such end as that fatal queen, second in beauty only to herself.

Even if Julian O'Farrell's significant glance hadn't called my attention to his sister, I should have noticed how Dierdre lost her sulky look in listening to Brian.

"He has something to say to me about those two when[Pg 212] he gets a chance, and he wants me to know it now," I thought. But I pretended to be absorbed in stories of the Second Empire. For we sat on and on at the table, putting off our visit to the ancient timbered houses and the monument of Jeanne d'Arc, and all the other things which called us away from those hotel windows. It seemed as if the heart of Compiègne, past and present, were hidden just behind that gray façade of the palace across the square!

Of course, Jeanne was the "star" heroine of Compiègne, where she fought so bravely and was taken prisoner, and sold to the English by John of Luxembourg at a very cheap price. But, you know, she is the heroine of such lots of other places we have seen or will see, that we let her image fade for us behind the brilliant visions of Compiègne's pleasures.

As a rule, old history has the lure of romance in it, and makes modern history seem dull in contrast. But such a gorgeous novel could be written about Second Empire days of Compiègne (if only there were a Dumas to write it) that I do think this town is an exception.

Even "The Queen's Necklace" couldn't be more exciting than a story of Eugénie, with that "divinest beauty of all ages," the Castiglione, as her rival! I don't know how Dumas would begin it, but I would have the first scene at a house party of Louis Napoleon's, in the palace at Compiègne, after he had revived the old custom of the Royal Hunt: Napoleon, already falling in love, but hesitating, anxious to see how the Spanish girl would bear herself among the aristocratic charmers of the Court, whether she could hold her own as a huntress,[Pg 213] as in a ballroom. I'd show her making a sensation by her horsemanship and beauty. Then I'd take her through the years, till the dazzling Florentine came to trouble her peace, the adored, yet disappointed divinity who cried, "If my mother had brought me to France instead of marrying me to Castiglione, an Italian, not a Spaniard, would have shared the throne with Napoleon, and there would have been no Franco-Prussian War!"

What a brilliant background Compiègne of those days would make for that pair, the beautiful young Empress and the more beautiful Countess!—Compiègne when the palace was crowded with the flower of Europe, when great princes and brave soldiers romped through children's games with lovely ladies, if rain spoiled the hunting; when Highland nobles brought their pipers, and everyone danced the wildest reels, if there were time to spare from private theatricals and *tableaux vivants*! I think I would make my story end, though, not there, but far away; the Castiglione lying dead, with youth and beauty gone, dressed by her last request in a certain gown she had worn on a certain night at Compiègne, never to be forgotten.

When at last we did go out to walk and see the wonderful timbered houses and the blown-up bridges, what I had expected to happen did happen: Julian O'Farrell contrived to separate me from the others.

"Haven't I been clever?" he asked, with his smile of a naughty child.

"So far as I know of you," I answered, "you are always clever."

"That's the first compliment you've ever paid me! Thanks all the same, though I'd be the opposite of clever[Pg 214] if I thought you wanted me to be flattered. You're clever, too, so of course you know what I mean as well as I know myself. Perhaps you thought I was being clever on the sly. But I'm above that. Haven't I always showed you my cards, trumps and joker and all?"

"You've shown me how the knave can take a trick!"

He laughed. "History repeating itself! The Queen of Hearts, you remember—and the Knave of—Spades, wasn't it? I wish it were diamonds instead: but maybe his spade will dig up a few sparklers in the end. I've got a splendid plan brewing. But that isn't what I want to talk about just now. In fact, I *don't* want to talk about it—yet! You're not going to admit that you see the results of my cleverness, or that you'd understand them if you did see. So I'll just wave them under your darling nose."

It would have been absurd to say: "How dare you call my nose a darling?" so I said nothing at all.

"You saw it was a plot, getting Brian to go to Paris with us," he went on. "I saw that you saw it. But I wasn't sure and I'm not sure now, if you realized its design, as the villain of the piece would remark."

"You ought to know what he'd remark."

"I do, dear villainess! I was going to say, '*Sister Villainess*,' but I wouldn't have you for a sister at any price. I've cast you for a different part. You may have imagined that Dare and I were just grabbing your brother to spite you, and show what we could do with him."

"I did imagine that!"

"Wrong! Guess again. Or no—you needn't. We may be interrupted any minute. To save time I'll[Pg 215] explain my bag of tricks. Dare wasn't in on that hand of mine."

"Indeed?"

"You don't believe me? That shows you're no judge of character. Dare adores her Jule, and what he wants her to do she does; but I told you she was no actress. She can't act much better off the stage than on. I wouldn't trust her to create the part of the White Cat, let alone that of Wily Vivien. She gets along all right if she can just keep still and sulk and act the Stormy Petrel. I should have pulled her through on those lines if she'd been obliged to play Jim Beckett's broken-hearted fiancée. But to do the siren with your brother—no, she wouldn't be equal to that, even to please me: couldn't get it across the footlights. I had to win her to Brian as well as win Brian to me. I hope you don't mind my calling him by his Christian name? He says I may."

"Why did you want to win Miss O'Farrell to my brother?"

"You don't know? You'll have to go down a place lower in this class! She couldn't make Brian really like her, unless she liked him. At first—though I knew better—she stuck it out that Brian was only a kind of decoy duck for you with the Becketts—"

"Oh!"

"Please don't look at me as if you were biting a lemon. *I* didn't think so. And Dare doesn't now."

"How sweet of her!"

"She's turning sweet. That's partly what I was after. I wormed myself into your brother's affections, to entice him to Paris. I wanted Dare to learn that her *instinct*[Pg 216] about him was right; her instinct was always defending him against what she thought was her reason and common sense. Now, she sees that he's genuine, and she's secretly letting herself go—admiring him and wondering at him to make up for her injustice."

"Are you telling all this to disarm me?"

"Not exactly. I'm telling you because I was sure you'd find out soon what's going on, and because I thought an open policy best. As it is, you can't say I haven't played fair from the word go."

"I wish," I cried out, "that the word *was* 'go!'"

"You're not very kind, my dear."

"Why should I be kind?"

"Because I'm the stick of your rocket. You can't soar without me. And because I love you such a lot."

"You!"

"Yes, I, me, Julian O'Farrell: Giulio di Napoli. Haven't I sacrificed my prospects and my sister's prospects rather than throw you to the lions? Didn't I waste those perfectly good snapshots? Didn't I sit tight, protecting you silently, letting you have all I'd expected to have for myself and Dare?"

I gasped. To speak was beyond my powers just then.

"I know what you'd like to say," Julian explained me to myself. "You'd love to say: 'The d—d cheek of the man! It's *rich!*' Well, it is rich. And *I* mean to be rich to match. That's in my plan. And so are you in it. Practically you *are* the plan. To

carry it out calmly, without ructions and feathers flying, I put your brother and my sister in the way of falling in love. Dare didn't want to join the Beckett party and didn't want to stay[Pg 217] with it. Now, she does want to stay. Brian distrusted me and was intrigued by Dare. Now, he gives me the benefit of the doubt. And he has *no* doubts of her— That's a beautiful timbered house, isn't it, Mr. Beckett? Yes, I was just telling Miss O'Malley that this place seems to me the best one we've visited yet. I shall never forget it, or the circumstances of seeing it, shall you, Miss O'Malley? Don't you think, sir, she might let me call her 'Mary,' now we all know each other so well? I'm 'Julian' to her brother and he's 'Brian' to me."

"I certainly do think she might," said Father Beckett, with that slow, pleasant smile which Jim inherited from him.[Pg 218]

CHAPTER XXI

It's late at night again—no, early to-morrow morning, just about the hour when to-morrow's war-bread is being baked by to-night's war-bakers. But it's good to burn the midnight electricity, because my body and brain are feeling electric.

We have had the most astonishing day!

Of course, I expected that, because we were going to Noyon, and I evacuated all unneeded thoughts and impressions (for instance, those concerning the O'Farrells) to make room for a crowd of new ones, as we did at the Hôpital des Épidémies with convalescents, for an incoming batch of patients. But I didn't count on private, personal emotions— unless we blundered into an air raid somewhere!

You remember those authors we met once, who write together—the Sandersons—and how they said if they ever dared put a real incident in a book, people picked out that one as impossible? Well, this evening just past reminded me of the Sandersons. We spent it at the War Correspondents' Château, not far out of Compiègne: that is, we spent it there if it was *real*, and not a dream.

I am the only one in Mother Beckett's confidence—I mean, about her health. Even her husband doesn't know how this trip strains her endurance, physical and mental. Indeed, he's the very one who *mustn't* know. It's agreed[Pg 219] between us that, if she feels hopelessly unfit for any excursion, I shall put on invalid airs and she will stop at home to keep me company. Thus will be avoided all danger of Father Beckett suspecting the weakness she hides. But you can imagine, Padre, knowing me as you do, how frightened I was to-day—our morning for Noyon—lest she should give the signal. I felt I simply couldn't *bear* to miss Noyon. No use telling myself I shall feel exactly the same about Soissons to-morrow, and Roye and Ham and Chauny and various others the day after. My reason couldn't detach itself at that instant from Noyon.

Our daily programme as now arranged is: Me to knock at Mother Beckett's door half an hour before starting-time. If she's fearing a collapse, she is to exclaim: "My child, how pale you are!" or some other criticism of my complexion. Then I'm to play up, replying: "I do feel under the weather." Whereupon it's easy for her to say: "You must stop in the hotel and rest. I'll stay with you."

To my joy, the greeting this morning was: "My dear, you look fresh as a rose!"

I didn't feel it; for you know I wrote late to you. And at last in bed, I disobeyed your advice about never worrying: I worried quite a lot over Brian and Dierdre O'Farrell; my having led him into a trap, when above all things I wanted his happiness and health. I could well have passed as pale: but I was so pleased with the secret signal that I braced up and bloomed again.

We had to start early, because there was a good deal to do in the day; and we were supposed to return early, too, for a rest, as there's the great adventure of Soissons before[Pg 220] us to-morrow. The Correspondents' Château wasn't on our list: that was an accident, though now it seems as if the whole trip would have been worth while if only to lead up to that "accident!"

There were several ways we could have taken to Noyon, but we took the way by Dives and Lassigny. We shall have chances for other roads, because, to see various places we mean to visit, we shall go through Noyon again.

Once upon a time, before the Germans came, Dives had a lovely château, part of it very old, with a round turret under a tall pointed hat; the other part comparatively young—as young as the Renaissance—and all built of that pale, rose-pink colour which most châteaux of this forestland, and this Île-de-France used to wear in happy days before they put on smoke-stained mourning.

Now, instead of its proud château, Dives has a ruin even more lovely, though infinitely sad.

As for Lassigny, it was battered to death: yet I think it was glad to die, because the Germans had turned it into a fortress, and they had to be shelled out by the French. Poor little Lassigny! It must have had what the French call "*une beauté coquette*," and the Germans, it seemed, were loth to leave. When they found that they must go, and in haste, they boiled with rage. Not only did they blow up all that was left in the village, but they blew up the trees of the surrounding orchards. They had not the excuse for this that they needed the trees to bar the way of the pursuing French army. Such trees as they felled across the road were the big trees of the forest. Their destruction of the young fruit trees was just a slaughter of[Pg 221] innocents; and I've never hated war, Padre, as I hated it to-day—above all, German methods of making war. Even the countless graves on the battlefields do not look so sad as those acres of murdered trees: blown-up trees, chopped-down trees, trees gashed to death with axes, trees that strove with all the strength of Nature to live, putting forth leaves and blossoms as their life blood emptied from their veins.

The graves of dead soldiers do not, somehow, look utterly sad. Their little flags stir triumphantly in the breeze, as if waved by unseen hands. The caps that mark the mounds seem to be on the heads of men invisible, under the earth, standing at the salute, saying to those who pass: "There is no death! Keep up your hearts, and follow the example we have set." The souls of those who left their bodies on these battlefields march on, bearing torches that have lit the courage of the world, with a light that can never fail. But the poor trees, so dear to France, giving life as a mother gives milk to her child!—they died to serve no end save cruelty.

The sight of them made me furious, and I glared like a basilisk at any German prisoners we saw working along the good, newly made white road. On their green trousers were large letters, "P. G." for "Prisonnier de Guerre"; and I snapped out as we passed a group, "It needs only an I between the P and the G to make it *perfect!*"

One man must have heard, and understood English, for he glanced up with a start. I was sorry then, for it was like hitting a fallen enemy. As he had what would have seemed a good face if he'd been British or French, perhaps he was one of those who wrote home that the [Pg 222] killing of trees in France "will be a shame to Germany till the end of time."

Only a few days ago Brian learned by heart a poem I read aloud, a poem called "Les Arbres Coupés," by Edmond Rostand. Teaching Brian, I found I had learned it myself.

Chacun de nos soldats eut son cri de souffrance
Devant ces arbres morts qui jonchaient les terrains:
"Les pêcheurs!" criaient ceux de l'Île-de-France;
"Et les mirabelliers!" crièrent les Lorrains.
Soldats bleus demeures paysans sous vos casques,
Quels poings nouveaux et noirs vers le nord vous tendiez!
"Les cerisiers!" criaient avec fureur les Basques;
Et ceux du Rousillon criaient: "Les amandiers!"
Devant les arbres morts de l'Aisne ou de la Somme,
Chacun se retrouva Breton ou Limousin.
"Les pommiers!" criaient ceux du pays de la pomme;
"Les vignes!" criaient ceux du pays raisin.
Ainsi vous disiez tous le climat dont vous êtes,
Devant ces arbres morts que vous considérez,
—Et moi, voyant tomber tant de jeunes poètes,
Hélas, combien de fois j'ai crié: "Les lauriers!"

I love it. Yet I don't quite agree with the beautiful turning at the end, because the laurels of the soldier-poets aren't really dead, nor can they ever die. Even some of the trees which the Boches meant to kill would not be conquered by Germans or death. Many of them, cut almost level with the ground, continued to live, spouting [Pg 223] leaves close to earth as a fountain spouts water when its jet has been turned low. All the victims that could be saved have been saved by the French, carefully, scientifically bandaged like wounded soldiers: and the Becketts talked eagerly of giving money—much money—to American societies that, with the British, are aiding France to make her fair land bloom again. Mother Beckett became quite inventive and excited, planning to start "instruction farms," with a fund in honour of Jim. Seeds and slipp and tools and teachers should all be imported from California. Oh, it would be wonderful! And how thankful she and Father were that they had Brian and Molly to help make the plan come true! I shouldn't have liked to catch Julian O'Farrell's eye just then.

All the way was haunted by the tragedy of trees, not only the tragedy of orchards, and of the roadside giants that once had shaded the straight avenues, but the martyrdom of trees in the great dark forests—oaks and elms and beeches. At first glance these woods, France's shield against her enemies—rose still and beautiful, like mystic abodes of peace, against the pale horizon. But a searching gaze showed how they had suffered. For every trio of living trees there seemed to be one corpse, shattered by bombs, or blasted by evil gas. The sight of them struck at the heart: yet they were heroes, as well as martyrs, I said to myself. They had truly died for France, to save France. And as I thought this, I knew that if I were a poet, beautiful words would come at my call, to clothe my fancy about the forests.

I wanted the right words so much that it was pain when they wouldn't answer my wish, for I seemed to hear only a [Pg 224] faint, far-off echo of some fine strain of music, whose real notes I failed to catch.

Always forests have fascinated me; sweet, fairy-peopled groves of my native island, and emerald-lit beech woods of England. But I never felt the grand meaning of forests as I felt them to-day, in this ravaged and tortured land. I could have cried out to them: "Oh, you forests of France, what a part you've played in the history of wars! How wise and brave of you to stand in unbroken line, a rampart protecting your country's frontiers, through the ages. Forests, you are bands of soldiers, in armour of wood, and you, too, like your human brothers, have hearts that beat and veins that bleed for France! You are soldiers, and you are fortresses—Nature's fortresses stronger than all modern inventions. You are fortresses to fight in; you are shelters from air-pirates, you hide cannon; you give shelter to your fighting countrymen from rain and heat. You delay the enemy; you mislead him, you drive him back. When you die, deserted by the birds and all your hidden furred and feathered children, you give yourselves—give, give to the last! Your wood strengthens the trenches, or burns to warm the freezing *poilus*. Brave forests, pathetic forests! I hear you defy the enemy in your hour of death: "Strike us, kill us. Still you shall never pass!"

We had felt that we knew something of the war-zone after Lorraine; but there the great battles had all been fought in 1914, when the world was young. Here, it seemed as if the earth must still be hot from the feet of retreating Germans.

The whole landscape was pitted with shell-holes, and [Pg 225] spider-webbed with barbed wire. The three lines of French trenches we passed might, from their look, have been manned yesterday. Piled along the neat new road were bombs for aviators to drop; queer, fish-shaped things, and still queerer cages they had been in. There were long, low

sheds for fodder. At each turn was the warning word, "*Convois*." The poor houses of such villages as continued to exist were numbered, for the first time in their humble lives, because they were needed for military lodgings. Notices in the German language were hardly effaced from walls of half-ruined buildings. They had been partly rubbed out, one could see, but the ugly German words survived, strong and black as a stain on one's past. Huge rounds of barbed wire which had been brought, and never used, were stacked by the roadside, and there were long lines of trench-furniture the enemy had had to abandon in flight, or leave in dug-outs: rough tables, chairs, rusty cooking-stoves, pots, pans, petrol tins, and broken dishes: even lamps, torn books, and a few particularly ugly blue vases for flowers. *They* must have been made in Germany, I knew!

Wattled screens against enemy fire still protected the road, and here and there was a "camouflage" canopy for a big gun. The roofs of beautiful old farmhouses were crushed in, as if tons of rock had fallen on them: and the moss which once had decked their ancient tiles with velvet had withered, turning a curious rust colour, like dried blood. Young trees with their throats cut were bandaged up with torn linen and bagging on which German printed words were dimly legible. It would have been a scene of unmitigated grimness, save for last summer's enterprising[Pg 226] grass and flowers, which autumn, kinder than war, had not killed.

Late roses and early chrysanthemums grew in the gardens of broken, deserted cottages, as if the flowers yearned to comfort the wounded walls with soft caresses, innocent as the touch of children. On the burned façades of houses, trellised fruit-trees clung, some dead—mere black pencillings sketched on brick or plaster—but now and then one was living still, like a beautiful young Mazeppa, bound to a dead steed.

So we arrived at Noyon, less than two hours by car from Compiègne. The nearness of it to the heart of France struck me suddenly. I could hear the echo of sad voices curbing the optimists: "The Germans are still at Noyon!"

Well—they are not at Noyon now. They've been gone for many moons. Yet there's a look on the faces of the people in the town—a look when they come to the windows or doors of their houses, or when they hear a sudden noise in the street—which makes those moons seem never to have waned.

Washington has adopted Noyon, so the Becketts could not offer any great public charity, but they could sprinkle about a few private good deeds, in remembrance of Jim, who loved the place, as he loved all the Île-de-France. One of Mother Beckett's most valued letters from "Jim-on-his-travels" (as she always says) is from Noyon, and she was so bent on reading it aloud to us, as we drove slowly—almost reverently—into the town, that she wouldn't look (I believe she even grudged our looking!) at the façade of the far-famed Hôtel de Ville, until she'd[Pg 227] come to the end of the last page. She seemed to think that to look up prematurely would be like wanting to see the stage before the curtain rose on the play!

I loved her for it—we all loved her—and obeyed as far as possible. But one couldn't shut one's eyes to the Stars and Stripes that flapped on the marvellously ornate front of the old building—flapped like the wings of the American Eagle that has flown across the Atlantic to help save France.

Jim—a son of the Eagle—who gave his life for this land and for liberty, would have felt proud of that flag, I think, if he could have seen it to-day: for because she is the adopted child of Washington, Noyon "stars" the emblem of her American mother. She hangs out no other flag—not even that of France—on the Hôtel de Ville. Maybe she'll give her own colours a place there later, but at this moment the Star Spangled Banner floats alone in its glory.

No nice, normal-minded person could remember, or morbidly want to remember, the name unkindly given by Julius Cæsar to Noyon, when he had besieged it. I can imagine even Charlemagne waving that cumbrous label impatiently aside, though Noyon mixed with Laon was his first capital. "Noviodunum Belgarum it may have been" (I dare say he said). "But *I'm* going to call it Noyon!"

He was crowned king of Austria in Noyon cathedral—an even older one than the cathedral of to-day, which the Germans have generously omitted to destroy, merely stealing all its treasures! But I feel sure he doesn't feel Austrian in these days, if he is looking down over the[Pg 228] "Blessed Damosel's" shoulder, to see what's going on here below. He belonged really to the whole world. Why, didn't that fairy-story king, Haroun al Raschid, send him from Bagdad the "keys of the tomb of Christ," as Chief of the Christian World? They say his ghost haunts Noyon, and was always there whenever a king was crowned, or elected—as Hugh Capet was. Perhaps it may have been Charlemagne in the spirit who persuaded the Germans to their great retreat from the Noyon front this last spring of 1917!"

Coming into the *Place*, and stopping in front of the Hôtel de Ville, gave me the oddest sense of unreality, because, when we were in Paris the other day, I saw the scene in a moving picture: the first joyful entry of the French soldiers into the town, when the Germans had cleared out. I could hardly believe that I wasn't just a figure flickering across a screen, and that the film wouldn't hurry me along somewhere else, whether I wanted to go or not.

There were the venerable houses with the steep slate roofs, and singularly intelligent-looking windows, whose bright panes seemed to twinkle with knowledge of what they had seen during these dreadful eighteen months of German occupation. There were the odd, unfinished towers of the cruciform cathedral—quaint towers, topped with wood and pointed spirelets—soaring into the sky above the gray colony of clustered roofs. There was the cobbled pavement, glittering like masses of broken glass, after a shower of rain just past; and even more interesting than any of these was the fantastically carved façade of the Hôtel de Ville, which has lured thousands of tourists[Pg 229] to Noyon in days of peace. Who knows but they have been coming ever since 1532, when it was finished?

At first sight, we should never have guessed what Noyon had suffered from the Germans. It was only after wandering through the splendid old cathedral of Notre-Dame, stripped of everything worth stealing, and going from street to street (we paused a long time in the one where Calvin was born, a disagreeable, but I suppose useful, man!) that we began to realize the slow torture inflicted by the Germans. Of course, "lessons" had to be taught. Rebellious persons had to be "punished." Nothing but justice had been done upon the unjust by their just conquerors. And oh, how thorough and

painstaking they were in its execution!

As they'd destroyed all surrounding cities and villages, they had to put the "evacuated" inhabitants somewhere (those they couldn't use as slaves to work in Germany), so they herded the people by the thousand into Noyon. That place had to be spared for the Germans themselves to live in, being bigger and more comfortable than others in the neighbourhood; so it was well to have as many of the conquered as possible interned under their own sharp eyes. Noyon was "home" to six thousand souls before the war. After the Germans marched in, it had to hold ten thousand. But a little more room in the houses was thriftily obtained by annexing all the furniture, even beds. Tables and chairs they took, too, and stoves, and cooking utensils, which left the houses conveniently empty, to be shared by families from Roye, and Nesle, and Ham, and Chauny—oh, so many other towns and hamlets, that one loses count in trying to remember![Pg 230]

How the people lived, they hardly know now, in looking back, some of them told us, as we walked about with a French officer who was our guide. Eighteen months of it! Summer wasn't quite so bad. One can always bear hardships when weather, at least, is kind. But the winters! It is those winters that scarcely bear thinking of, even now.

No lights were allowed after dark. All doors must be left open, for the German military police to walk in at any hour of the night, to see what mischief was brewing in the happy families caged together. There was no heating, and often no fire for cooking, consequently such food as there was had to be eaten cold. No nose must be shown out of doors unless with a special permit, so to speak, displayed on the end of it. Not that there was much incentive to go out, as all business was stopped, and all shops closed. Without "*le Comité Américain*," thousands would have starved, so it was lucky for Noyon that the United States was neutral then!

We spent hours seeing things, and talking to people—old people, and children, and soldiers—each one with a new side of the great story to tell, as if each had been weaving a few inches of some wonderful, historic piece of tapestry, small in itself, but essential to the pattern. Then we started for home—I mean Compiègne—by a different way; the way of Carlepont, named after Charlemagne, because it is supposed that he was born there.

The forest was even more lovable than before, a younger forest: fairy-like in beauty as a rainbow, in its splashed gold and red, and green and violet and orange of autumn. The violet was "atmosphere," but it was as much a part[Pg 231] of the forest as the leaves, or the delicate trunks dim as ghosts in shadow, bright as organ-pipes where sun touched them. Out from the depths came sweet, mysterious breaths, and whispers like prophecies of peace. But to this region of romance there were sharp contrasts. Not even dreams have sharper ones! German trenches, chopped into blackened wastes that once were farmlands, and barbed wire wriggling like snake-skeletons across dreary fields.

We got out of our cars, and went into the trenches, thinking thoughts unspeakable. Long ago as the Germans had vanished, and every corner had been searched, our officer warned us not to pick up "souvenirs." Some infernal machine might have been missed in the search and nothing was to be trusted—no, not even a bit of innocent-looking lead pencil.

They were trenches made to live in, these! They had been walled with stones from ruined farmhouses. The "dug-outs" were super-dug-outs. We saw concealed cupolas for machine-guns, and "*les officiers boches*" had had a neat system of douches.

There was no need to worry that Brian might stumble or fall in the slippery labyrinths we travelled, for he had Dierdre O'Farrell as guide. I'm afraid I knew what it was to be jealous: and this new gnawing pain is perhaps meant to be one of my punishments. Of course it's no more than I deserve. But that Brian should be chosen as the instrument, all unknowingly, and happily—that *hurts!*

It was just as we were close to Compiègne, not twenty minutes (in motor talk) outside the town, that the "accident" happened.[Pg 232]

CHAPTER XXII

At first it seemed an ordinary, commonplace accident. A loud report like a pistol shot: a flat tire down on our car: that was all.

We stopped, and the little taxi-cab, tagging on behind like a small dog after a big one, halted in sympathy. Julian O'Farrell jumped out to help Morel, our one-legged chauffeur, as he always does if anything happens, just to remind the Becketts how kind and indispensable he is. We knew that we should be hung up for a good twenty minutes, so the whole party, with the exception of Mother Beckett and me, deserted the cars. Brian was with Dierdre. He had no need of his sister; so I was free to stop with the little old lady, who whispered in my ear that she was tired.

Father Beckett and Julian watched Morel, giving him a word or a hand now and then. Dierdre and Brian sauntered away, deep in argument over Irish politics (it's come to that between them: and Dierdre actually *listens* to Brian!). Mother Beckett drifted into talk of Jim, as she loves to do with me, and I wandered, hand in hand with her, back into his childhood. Blue dusk was falling like a rain of dead violets—just that peculiar, faded blue; and as I was absorbed in the tale of a nursery fire (Jim, at six, playing the hero) I had no eyes for scenery. I was but vaguely aware that not far off loomed a gateway,[Pg 233] adorned with a figure of the Virgin. A curving avenue led to shadowy, neglected lawns, dimly suggesting some faded romance of history.

Presently, from between the open gates came a man in khaki, accompanied by a tall, slim, and graceful dog. It was he, not the man, that caught my eye and for an instant snatched my thought from Little Boy Jim rescuing a rocking-horse at the risk of his life. He was a police dog with the dignity of a prince and the lightness of a plume.

"Lovely creature!" I said to myself, as he and the khaki man swung toward us down the road. And I wished that Brian

could see him, for the dog Brian loved and lost at the Front was a Belgian police dog.

Perhaps, Padre, Brian wrote you about his wonderful pet, that he thought worthy to name after the dog-star Sirius. I've forgotten to ask if he did write; but I seldom had a letter from him from the trenches that didn't mention Sirius. Everyone seemed to adore the dog, which developed into a regimental mascot. What his early history was can never be known: but Brian rescued him from a burning chateau in Belgium, just as Jim rescued the rocking-horse of Mother Beckett's nursery story, though with rather more risk! It was a chateau where some hidden tragedy must have been enacted, because the Germans took possession of it with the family still there—such of the family as wasn't fighting: two young married women, sisters, wives of brothers. But when the Germans ran before the British, and fired the chateau as they went, not a creature living or dead was left in the house—except the dog—and nothing has ever been heard of the sisters.

The fire was raging so fiercely when Brian's regiment[[Pg 234](#)] arrived that no one would have ventured into the house if a dog hadn't been heard to howl. You know how Brian loves dogs. When he found that the sound came from a certain room on the ground floor, he determined to get in somehow. Masses of ivy cloaked that side of the chateau. It was beginning to crackle with fire that flamed out from other windows, but Brian climbed the thick, rope-like stems, hundreds of years old, and smashed his way through the window. The room was filling with smoke. The dog's voice was choked. Brian's eyes streamed, but he wouldn't give up. Only by crawling along the floor under the smoke curtain could he get at the dog. Somebody had meant to murder the animal, for he had been chained to the leg of a table.

Brian wrote that the dog realized his danger, and was grateful as a human being to his rescuer. His worship of Brian was pathetic. He seemed to care for no one else, though he was too fine a gentleman not to be polite to all—all, that is, except Germans. They never dared let him loose when prisoners were about. The sight of a gray-green uniform was to that dog what a red rag is to a bull. For him some horror was associated with it—a horror which must remain a mystery for us.

The day Brian lost his eyesight he lost Sirius. When he came back to consciousness, only to learn that he was blind, his first thought was of his friend. No one knew what had happened to the dog. The chances seemed to be that the shell which had buried Brian had buried Sirius, too; but Brian wouldn't believe this. Somehow the dog would have contrived to escape. I had to promise that, whenever I happened to see a dark gray, almost black[[Pg 235](#)] Belgian police dog of beautiful shape, I would call "Sirius" to see if he answered.

More than once since this trip began I've called "Sirius!" to police dogs, not knowing whether they were Belgian, German, or Dutch, and they have answered only with glances of superb scorn. This time I hesitated. The mental picture I saw of myself—a vague young woman, seated in an automobile stranded by the roadside, trying to lure away the dog of a strange man—was disconcerting. While I debated whether to break my promise or behave like a wild school girl, the animal paused in his listless trot. He stopped, as if he'd been struck by an unseen bullet, quivered all over, and shot past us like a torpedo. A minute later I heard a tumultuous barking—a barking as if the gates of a dog's heaven had suddenly opened.

I sprang up in the car, and turning round, knelt on the seat to see what was going on behind us. Far away were Brian and Dierdre. And oh, Padre, I can never dislike that girl again! I apologize for everything I ever said against her. She saw that great police dog making for blind Brian. And you know, a police dog can look formidable as a panther. She took no time to think, though the idea might have sprung to her mind that the creature was mad. She simply threw herself in front of Brian. It was an offer of her life for his.

I could do nothing, of course. I was too far off. I'm not a screaming girl, but I'm afraid I did give a shriek, for Mother Beckett started up, and cried out: "What's the matter?"

I didn't answer her. I hardly heard. I forgot everyone[[Pg 236](#)] except Brian and that girl. It was only when the thing was over, and we were all talking at once, that I realized how the others had shared my fright.

Perhaps Brian recognized the dog's bark at a distance, for he says a dog's voice is individual as a man's. Or his instinct—made magically keen by his blindness—told him in a flash of inspiration what his eyes couldn't see. Anyhow, he knew that Dierdre was in danger, and almost flung her behind him. He was just in time to save her from being thrown down by the dog, who hurled himself like a young avalanche at Brian. To those who had no clue to the truth, it must have seemed that the animal was mad. Julian, and Father Beckett, and the khaki man rushed to the rescue, only to see the dog and Brian in each other's arms, the creature licking Brian's face, laughing and crying at the same time—which you know, Padre, a dog frantic with joy at sight of a long-lost master can do perfectly well! It seems too melodramatic to be true, but it *is* true: the dog was Sirius.

You'll think now that this is the "astonishing thing" which would—I said—have made this whole trip worth while. But no: the thing I meant has little or nothing to do with the finding of Sirius.

Even Mother Beckett could sit still no longer. She had to be helped out of the car by me to join the group round Brian and the dog. She took my arm, and I matched my steps to her tiny trot, though I pined to sprint! We met Father Beckett coming back with apologies for his one minute of forgetfulness. The first time in years, I should think, that he had forgotten his wife for sixty whole seconds![[Pg 237](#)]

"It's like something in a story or a play," he panted, out of breath. "This is Brian's lost dog. You've heard him talk of Sirius, my dear. There can be no doubt it's the same animal! The man who thought he was its master admits that. And *guess* who he is—the man, not the dog."

Mother Beckett reminded her husband that never had she succeeded in a guess. But she was saved trying by the arrival of the man in khaki who, having abandoned his dog—or being abandoned by it—had followed Mr. Beckett.

"Why, Jack *Curtis*!" gasped the little old lady. "It can't be you!"

"I guess it's nobody else," laughed a soldierly fellow, with the blackest eyes and whitest teeth imaginable. "I'm doing the war for the New York *Record*—staying here at the chateau of Royalieu with the British correspondents for the French front."

I longed to get to Brian and be introduced to Sirius, but Mother Beckett caught my arm. "Mary, dear," she cooed, "I'd like you and Mr. Curtis to meet. Jack, this is Miss O'Malley, who would have been our Jim's wife if he'd lived. And Mary, this is one of Jim's classmates at college; a very good friend."

The khaki young man (American khaki) held out his hand and I put mine into it. He stared at me—a pleasant, sympathetic, and not unadmiring stare—peering nearsightedly through the twilight.

"So Jim found you again, after all?" he asked, in a quiet, low voice, not utterly unlike Jim's own. Men of the same university do speak alike all over the world.[Pg 238]

"I—don't quite understand," I stammered. When any sudden question about Jim is flung at me before his parents, I'm always a little scared!

"Jim and I had a bet," Mr. Curtis explained, "that he couldn't travel *incog.*, through Europe for a given length of time, in a big auto, doing himself well everywhere, without his real name coming out. He won the bet, but he told me—after he got over a bad dose of typhoid—that he'd lost the only girl he'd ever loved or could love—lost her through that da—that stupid bet. He described the girl. I guess there aren't two of her on earth!"

"That's a mighty fine compliment, Molly!" said Father Beckett.

Just then Brian called, and I wasn't sorry, for I couldn't find the right answer for the man who had separated Jim Beckett from me. It was all I could do to get my breath.

"Why, of course, that's your brother! I might have known by the likeness. Gee, but it's great about the dog! No wonder it despised the name of 'Sherlock.' Rather a come-down from a star! There's a big story in this. Your party will have to dine with us correspondents, and talk things over. The crowd will be delighted. Say yes, Mrs. Beckett!"

I heard no more, for I was on my way to Brian. But by the time I'd thanked Dierdre, been slightly snubbed by her, and successfully presented to Sirius, it was settled that we should spend our evening at Royalieu with the correspondents. The Beckett auto was ready, but the dog's joy was too big for the biggest car, so Brian and I walked to the chateau, and Jack Curtis with us, to exchange stories of *le grand chien policier*, late "Sherlock." [Pg 239]

Matching the new history on to the early mystery was like fitting in the lost bits of a jigsaw puzzle—bits which, when missing, left the picture void. Between Brian and the war correspondent the pattern came to life: but there's one piece in the middle which can never be restored. Only one person could supply that: a German officer, and he is no longer in this world.

Jack Curtis found the police dog, badly wounded, at a place near Paschendale, where the Germans had temporary headquarters and had been driven out after a fierce struggle. One of the dog's legs was broken, and blood had dried on his glossy coat, but he "registered delight" (as moving picture people say) when he limped out of a half-ruined house to welcome the rush of British khaki. The few inhabitants who had lived in the village through the German occupation, knew the dog as "Siegfried," to which name he had obstinately refused to answer. His German master, a captain, whom he obeyed sullenly, always dragged him about in leash, as he never willingly kept at heel. Everyone wondered why the officer, who was far from lenient with his men, showed patience with the dog. But his orderly explained that Captain von Busche had picked up the starving animal weeks before, wandering about No Man's Land. The creature was valuable, and his dislike of the gray-green uniform had puzzled Von Busche. His failure to win the dog's affection piqued him, and in his blundering way he persevered. The people of the village were more successful. They made friends with "Siegfried," to Von Busche's annoyance; and a day or two before the hurried German retreat under bombardment, the dog [Pg 240] was beaten for deserting his master to follow a little boy. The boy, too, was punished for his "impudence" in calling the dog. People were indignant, and there were secret murmurings about revenge.

That night, however, Fate took the matter in hand. Precisely what happened is the bit that must remain missing in the puzzle. The dog slept in the room with his master, in a house where several young officers lived close to headquarters. All of them had been out playing cards at a tavern. Von Busche returned earlier than the rest. He was seen in the street the worse for drink. He went into the house, and must have gone to his room, where the police dog had been shut up for hours in disgrace. A moment later there was a yell, then a gurgling shriek. The neighbours listened—and shrugged their shoulders. The parents of the child who had been beaten by Von Busche lived next door. They heard sounds of a scuffle; furniture falling; faint groans and deep growls. Lips dared not speak, but eyes met and said: "The dog's done what we couldn't do."

Silence had fallen long before Von Busche's fellow officers came home; such silence as that town knew, where bombardment ceased not by day or night. Before dawn, a bomb fell on the roof of the house, which till then had never been touched, and the officers all scuttled out to save themselves; all but Von Busche. Whether in the confusion he was forgotten, or whether it was thought he had not come home, no one could tell. He was not seen again till after the Germans had packed up in haste and decamped, which they did a few hours later, leaving the townsfolk to shelter in cellars. It was only when the [Pg 241] British arrived, and Siegfried limped out from the battered house, that the dog's existence was recalled—and the sounds in the night. Then the house was searched, and Von Busche's body found, half buried under fallen tiles and plaster. There were wounds in his throat, however, not to be accounted for by the accident. The dog's broken leg was also a mystery. "I had the poor boy mended up by a jolly good surgeon," Jack Curtis finished his story. "He's as sound as ever now. He attached himself to me from the first, as if he knew he had to thank me for his cure, but he wasn't enthusiastic. I couldn't flatter myself that I was loved! I had the idea I wasn't what he wanted—that he'd like to tell me what he *did* want, and politely bid me good-bye forever."

"You don't know where Von Busche got hold of the dog, do you?" Brian asked.

"Only what his orderly told people, that it was in Flanders, close to some ruined, burnt-up château that he could hardly be forced to leave, though he was starving."

"I thought he'd get back there!" Brian said. "As for Von Busche—I wonder—but no! If it had been he the first time, would the dog have waited all those weeks for his revenge?"

"I don't understand," said the war correspondent.

"I don't myself," answered Brian. "But maybe the dog will manage to make me, some day. I was thinking—how I found him, tied to a table in a burning room. If Von Busche— But anyhow, Sirius, you're no assassin! At worst, you're an avenger."

The dog leaped upon Brian at sound of the remembered [Pg 242] name. Odd that three of his names, chosen by different men, should begin with "S"!

He's going to be an exciting passenger for the Becketts' car I foresee. But Brian can make him do anything, even to keeping quiet. And the trip can't go on a step without him now!

I felt that Jack Curtis had been hoping for a chance to speak with me alone—about Jim. But there was no such chance then. We were met by two of the British correspondents, and a French officer with a very high and ancient title, who was playing host (for France) to the newspaper men in this old château, once a convent. You see, the two cars had shot past as we walked; and by the time we reached the door preparations were being made for an impromptu party.

Never was a dinner so good, it seemed, and never was talk so absorbing. Some of it concerned an arch of honour or a statue to be placed over the spot where the first men of the American army fell in France: at Bethelmont; some concerned a road whose construction is being planned—a sacred road through Belgium and France, from the North Sea to Alsace; a road to lead pilgrims past villages and towns destroyed by Germany. This, according to the correspondents who were full of the idea, doesn't mean that the devastation isn't ultimately to be repaired. The proposal is, to leave in each martyred place a memorial for the eyes of coming generations: a ruined church; a burned château; the skeleton of an *hôtel de ville*, or a wrecked factory; a mute appeal to all the world: "This was war, as the Germans made it. In the midst of peace, Remember!" [Pg 243]

Beneath my interest in the talk ran an undercurrent of my own private thought, which was not of the future, but of the past. I'd begun to wonder why I had been afraid of Jack Curtis. Instead of dreading words with him alone, I wished for them now.

After dinner I had but a few minutes to wait. When I'd refused coffee, he, too, refused, and made an excuse to show me a room of which the correspondents were fond—a room full of old trophies of the forest hunt.

"Did you notice at dinner how I kept trying to get a good look at your left hand?" Curtis asked.

"No," I answered, "I didn't notice that."

"I'm glad. I was scared you'd think me cheeky. Yet I couldn't resist. I wanted to see whether Jim had given you *the* ring."

"The ring?" I echoed.

"The ring of our bet, the year before the war: the bet you knew about, that kept you two apart till Jim came over to France this second time."

"Yes—I knew about the bet," I said, "but not the ring. I—I haven't an engagement ring."

"Queer!" Jack Curtis puzzled out aloud. "It was a race between Jim and me which should get that ring at an antique shop, when we both heard of its history. He could afford to bid higher, so he secured it. Not that he was selfish! But he said he wanted the ring in case he met his ideal and got engaged to her. If he'd lost the bet the ring would have been mine. If he didn't give it to you, I wonder what's become of the thing? Perhaps his mother knows. Did she ever speak to you about Jim bringing home a quaint old ring from France, that [Pg 244] time after his fever—a ring supposed to have belonged to the most beautiful woman of her day, the Italian Countess Castiglione, whom Louis Napoleon loved?"

"No," I said. "He can't have given the ring to his mother, or she would have told me about it, I'm sure. She's always talking of him."

"Perhaps it was stolen or lost," Curtis reflected. "Yet I don't feel as if that had happened, somehow! I trust my feelings a good deal—especially since this war, that's made us all a bit psychic—don't you?"

"I have too many feelings to trust half of them!" I tried to laugh.

"Have you ever had one, I wonder, like mine, about Jim? Dare I speak to you of this?"

"Why not?"

"Well—I wouldn't dare to his mother. Or even to the old man."

"You *must* speak now, please, Mr. Curtis, to me!"

"It's this; have you ever had the feeling that Jim may be alive?"

We were standing. I caught at the back of a chair. Things whirled for an instant. Then I gathered my wits together. "I haven't let myself feel it," I said. "And yet, in a way, I *always* feel it. I mean, I seem to feel—his thoughts round us. But that's because we speak and think of him almost every moment of the day, his father and mother and I. There can be no doubt—can there?"

"Others have come back from the dead since this war. Why not Jim Beckett?"

"They said they had—found his body." [Pg 245]

"Oh, they *said!* Germans say a lot of things. But for the Lord's sake, Miss O'Malley, don't let's upset those poor old people with any such hope. I've only my feeling—and other people's stories of escape—to go upon. I spoke to you, because I guess you've got a strong soul, and can stand shocks. Besides, you told me I must speak. I had to obey."

"Thank you for obeying," I said. And just then someone came into the room.

Now, Padre, I have told you the *great thing*. What does it matter what happens to me, if only Jack Curtis's "feeling" comes true? [Pg 246]

CHAPTER XXIII

It is two days since I wrote, Padre; and I have come back to Compiègne from a world of unnatural silence and desolation. Day before yesterday it was Roye and Nesle; the Château of Ham; Jussy, Chauny and Prince Eitel Friedrich's pavilion. To-morrow we hope to start for Soissons.

Yesterday we rested, because Mother Beckett had a shocking headache. (Oh, it was pathetic and funny, too, what she said when we slipped back into Compiègne at night! "Isn't it a comfort, Molly, to see a place again where there are *whole* houses?") After Soissons we shall return to Compiègne and then go to Amiens with several of the war correspondents, who have their own car. Women aren't allowed, as a rule, to see anything of the British front, but it's just possible that Father Beckett can get permission for his wife to venture within gazing distance. Of course, she can't—or thinks she can't—stir without me!

We took still another road to Noyon (one must pass through Noyon going toward the front, if one keeps Compiègne for one's headquarters) and the slaughter of trees was the wickedest we'd seen: a long avenue of kind giants murdered, and orchards on both sides of it. The Germans, it seems, had circular saws, worked by motors, on purpose to destroy the large trees in a hurry. They [Pg 247] didn't protect their retreat by barring the road with the felled trunks. They left most of the martyrs standing, their trunks so nearly sawed through that a wind would have blown them down. The pursuing armies had to finish the destruction to protect themselves. Farms were exterminated all along the way; and little hamlets—nameless for us—were heaps of blackened brick and stone, mercifully strewn with flowers like old altars to an unforgotten god.

Roye was the first big place on our road. It used to be rich, and its 4,000 inhabitants traded in grain and sugar. How the very name brought back our last spring joy in reading news of the recapture! "Important Victory. Roye Retaken." It was grandly impressive in ruin, especially the old church of St. Pierre, whose immense, graceful windows used to be jewelled with ancient glass that people came from far away to see.

Jim had written his mother about that glass, consequently she *would* get out of the car to climb (with my help and her husband's) over a pile of fallen stones like a petrified cataract, which leads painfully up to the desecrated and pillaged high altar. I nearly sprained my ankle in getting to one of the windows, under which my eyes had caught the glint of a small, sparkling thing: but I had my reward, for the sparkling thing was a lovely bit of sapphire-blue glass from the robe of some saint, and the little lady was grateful for the gift as if it had been a real jewel—indeed, more grateful. "I'll keep it with my souvenirs of Jim," she said, "for his eyes have looked on it: and it's just the colour of yours which he loved. He'd be pleased that you found it for me." (Ah, if she knew! I can't [Pg 248] help praying that she never may know, though such prayers from me are almost sacrilege.)

A little farther on—as the motor, not the crow, flies—we came to Nesle, or what once was Nesle. The ghost of the twelfth-century church looms in skeleton form above one more Pompeii among the many forced by the Germans upon France: but save for that towering relic of the past there's little left of this brave town of the Somme, which was historic before the thirteenth century. It gave its name to a famous fighting family of feudal days: and through the last heiress of the line—a beauty and a "catch"—a certain Seigneur de Nesle became Regent of France, in the second Crusade of Louis XII—"Saint Louis." Later ladies of the line became dear friends of another Louis, fifteenth of the name, who was never called saint. Not far from Nesle, Henry V of England crossed the Somme and won the Battle of Agincourt. But now, the greatest dramatic interest is concentrated in the cemetery!

We had heard of it at Compiègne and the wild things that had happened there: so after a look at the ruined church, and the once charming *Place*, we went straight to the town burial-place, and our unofficial guide was the oldest man I ever saw. He had lurked rather than lived, through months of German barbarity at Nesle, guarding a bag of money he'd hidden underground. An officer from Noyon was with us; but he had knowledge of the ancient man—a great character—and bade him tell us the tale of the graveyard. He obeyed with unctious and with gestures like lightning as it flashes across a night sky. The looks his old eyes darted [Pg 249] forth as he talked might have struck a live German dead.

"The animals! What do you think they did when they were masters here?" he snarled. "Ah, you do not know the Boches as we learned to know them, so you would never guess. They opened our tombs, the vaults of distinguished families of France. They broke the coffins and stole the rings from skeleton fingers. They left the bones of our ancestors, and of our friends whose living faces we could remember, scattered over the ground, as if to feed the dogs. In our empty coffins

they placed their own dead. On the stone or marble of monuments they cut away the names of those whose sacred sleep they had disturbed. Instead, they inscribed the disgusting names of their Boche generals and colonels. Where they could not change the inscriptions they destroyed the tombstones and set up others. You will see them now. But wait—you have not heard all yet. Far from that! When the Tommies came to Nesle—your English Tommies—they did not like what the Boches had done to our cemetery. They said things—strong things! And while they were hot with anger they knocked the hideous new monuments about. They could not bear to see them mark the stolen graves. The little crosses that showed where simple soldiers lay, those they did not touch. It was only the officers' tombs they spoiled. I will show you what they did."

We let him hobble ahead of us into the graveyard. He led us past the long rows of low wooden crosses with German names on them, the crosses with British names—(good, sturdy British names: "Hardy,"[Pg 250] "Kemp," "Logan," "Wilding," planted among flowers of France)—and paused in the aristocratic corner of the city of the dead. Once, this had been the last earthly resting-place of old French families, or of the rich whose relatives could afford expensive monuments. But the war had changed all that. German names had replaced the ancient French ones on the vaults, as German corpses had replaced French bodies in the coffins. Stone and marble monuments had been recarved, or new ones raised. There were roughly cut figures of German colonels and majors and captains. This rearrangement was what the "Tommies" had "not liked." They liked it so little that they chopped off stone noses and faces; they threw red ink, brighter than blood, over carved German uniforms, and neatly chipped away the counterfeit presentment of iron crosses. In some cases, also, they purified the vaults of German bones and gave back in exchange such French ones as they found scattered. They wrote in large letters on tombstones, "*Boch no bon*," and other illiterate comments unflattering to the dead usurpers; all of which, our old man explained, mightily endeared the Atkinses to the returning inhabitants of Nesle.

"Those brave Tommies are gone now," he sighed, "but they left their dead in our care. You see those flowers on their graves? It is we who put them there, and the children tend them every day. If you come back next year, it will be the same. We shall not forget."

"A great statesman paid us a visit not long after Nesle was liberated," our officer guide took up the story. "He had heard what the Tommies did, and he was not quite sure if they were justified. 'After all, German or[Pg 251] not German, a tomb is a tomb, and the dead are dead,' he argued. But when he saw the cemetery of another place not far away, where the bodies of Frenchmen—yes, and women and little babies!—still lay where Germans had thrown them in stealing their graves, the grand old man's blood rushed to his head. He was no longer uncertain if the Tommies were right. He was certain they had done well; and in his red rage he, with his own hands, tore down thirty of the lying tombstones."

Oh, the silence of these dead towns that the Germans have killed with bombs and burning! *You* know what it is like, Padre, because you have passed behind the veil and have knowledge beyond our dreaming: but to me it is a *triste révélation*. I never realized before what the words "dead silence" could mean. It is a silence you *hear*. It cries out as the loudest voice could not cry. It makes you listen—listen for the pleasant, homely sounds you've always associated with human habitations: the laughter of girls, the shouts of schoolboys, the friendly barking of dogs. But you listen in vain. You wonder if you are deaf—if other people are hearing what you cannot hear: and then you see on each face the same blank, listening look that must be on your own. I think a night at Chauny, or Jussy, might drive a weak woman mad. But—I haven't come to Chauny or Jussy yet! After Nesle we arrived at Ham, with its canal and its green, surrounding marshes.

Ham has ceased to be silent. There are some houses left, and to those houses people have come back. Shops have reopened, as at Noyon, where the French Government has advanced money to the business men. We[Pg 252] drove into the town of Ham (what is left of it!) just as we were hating ourselves for being hungry. It is sordid and dreadful to be hungry in the midst of one's rage and grief and pity—to want to eat in a place like Ham, where one should wish to absorb nothing but history; yet our officer guide, who has helped make a good deal of history since 1914, seemed to think lunching quite as important as sightseeing. In a somewhat battered square, busy with reopening shops (some of them most *quaint* shops, with false hair as a favourite display!) was a hotel. The Germans had lived in it for months. They had bullied the very old, very vital landlady who welcomed us. Their boots had worn holes in the stair carpet, going up and down in a goose-step. Their elbows had polished the long table in the dining room, and—oh, horror!—their mouths had drunk beer from glasses in which the good wine of France was offered to us!

"Ah, but I have scrubbed the goblets since with a fortune's worth of soda," the woman volubly explained. "They are purified. If I could wash away as easily the memories behind my eyes and in my ears! Of them I cannot get rid. Whenever I see an automobile, yes, even the most innocent automobile, I live again through a certain scene! We had here at Ham an invalid woman, whose husband the Boches took out and shot. When she heard the news, she threw herself under one of their military cars and was killed. If a young girl passes my windows (alas, it is seldom! the Germans know why) I see once more a procession of girls lined up to send into slavery. God knows where they are now, those children! All we know is, that in this country there is not a girl[Pg 253] left of an age between twelve and twenty, unless she was hidden or disguised when the Boches took their toll. If I hear a sound of bells, I see our people being herded into church—our old, old church, with its proud monuments!—so their houses might be burned before the Germans had to run. They stayed in the church for days and nights, waiting for the château to be blown up. What a suspense! No one knew if the great shock, when it came, might not kill everyone!"

As she exploded reminiscences, the old lady fed us with ham and omelette salted with tears. We had to eat, or hurt her feelings, but it was as if we swallowed the poor creature's emotion with our food, and the effect within was dynamic. I never had such a volcanic meal! Our French officer was the only calm one among us, but—he had been stationed in this liberated region for months. It's an old story for him.

After luncheon we staggered away to see the great sight of Ham, the fortress-château which has given it history and fame for centuries. The Germans blew up the citadel out of sheer spite, as the vast pink pile long ago ceased to be of military value. They wished to show their power by ruining the future of the town, which lived on its *monument historique*: but (as often happens with their "frightfulness") that object was just the one they failed in. I can't believe

that the castle of Ham was as striking in its untouched magnificence as now in the rose-red splendour of its ruin!

To be sure, the guardians can never again show precisely where Joan of Arc was imprisoned, or the rooms where Louis Napoleon lived through his six years of [Pg 254] captivity, or the little garden he used to cultivate, or the way he passed to escape over the drawbridge, dressed as a mason, with a plank on his shoulder. But the glorious old tower or donjon still stands, one hundred feet high and one hundred feet wide. German gunpowder was too weak to bring it down, and so perhaps the prophecy of the Comte de St. Pol, builder of the fortress, may be fulfilled—that while France stands, the tower of Ham's citadel will stand. Thousands more pilgrims will come in a year, after the war, to see what the Germans did and what they failed to do, than ever came in the mild, prosperous days before 1914, when Ham's best history was old. They will come and gaze at the massive bulk—red always as if reflecting sunset light—looming against the blue; they will peer down into dusky dungeons underground: and the new guardian (a mutilated soldier he'll be, perhaps, decorated with the *croix de guerre*) will tell them about the girl of Ham who lured a German officer to a death-trap in a secret *oubliette*, "where 'tis said his body lies to-day." Then they will stand under the celebrated old tree in the courtyard, unhurt by the explosion, and take photographs of the château the Germans have unwittingly made more beautiful than before.

"*Mon mieux*" was the motto St. Pol carved over the gateway; "Our worst" is the taunt the Germans have flung. But the combination of that best and worst is glorious to the eye.

From Ham we spun on to Jussy, along the new white road which is so amazing when one thinks that every yard of it had to be created out of chaos a few months [Pg 255] ago. (They say that some sort of surface was given for the army to pass over in three days' work!) At Jussy we came close to the *real* front—closer than we've been yet, except when we went to the American trenches. The first line was only three miles away, and the place is under bombardment, but this was what our guide called a "quiet day," so there was only an occasional mumble and boom. The town was destroyed, wiped almost out of existence, save for heaps of rubble which might have been houses or hills. But there were things to be seen which would have made Jussy worth a long journey. It had been a prosperous place, with one of the biggest sugar refineries in France, and the wrecked *usine* was as terrible and thrilling as the moon seen through the biggest telescope in the world.

Not that it looked like the moon. It looked more like a futurist sketch, in red and brown, of the heart of a cyclone; or of the inside of a submarine that has rammed a skeleton ship on the stocks. But the sight gave me the same kind of icy shock I had when I first saw the moon's ravaged face through a huge telescope. *You* took me, Padre, so you'll remember.

If you came to Jussy, and didn't know about the war, you'd think you had stumbled into hell—or else that you were having a nightmare and couldn't wake up. I shall never forget a brooding nagian boiler as big as a battle tank, that had reared itself on its hind-legs to peer through a *cheval de frise* of writhing girders—tortured girders like a vast wilderness of immense thorn bushes in a hopeless tangle, or a pit of bloodstained snakes. The walls of the *usine* have simply melted, and it's hard to realize that it [Pg 256] as a building, put up by human hands for human uses, ever existed. There is a new Jussy, though, created since the German retreat; and seeing it, you couldn't *help* knowing that there was a war! The whole landscape is full of cannon, big and little and middle-sized. Queer mushroom buildings have sprung up, for officers' and soldiers' barracks and canteens. Narrow plank walks built high above mud-level—"duck boards," I think they're called—lead to the corrugated iron, tin, and wooden huts. There are aerodromes and aerodromes like a vast circus encampment, where there are not cannon; and the greenish canvas roofs give the only bit of colour, as far as the eye can see—unless one counts the soldiers' uniforms. All the rest is gray as the desert before a dust-storm. Even the sky, which had been blue and bright, was gray over Jussy, and the grayest of gray things were the immense "*saucisses*"—three or four of them—hanging low under the clouds like advertisements of titanic potatoes, haughtiest of war-time vegetables.

Dierdre O'Farrell inadvertently called the big bulks "*saucissons*," which amused our officer guide so much that he laughed to tears. The rest of us were able to raise only a faint smile, and we felt his disappointment at our lack of humour.

"Ah, but it is most *funny!*" he said. "I will tell everyone. In future they shall for us be '*saucissons*' forever. I suppose it is not so funny for you, because the sight of these dead towns has made you sad. I am almost afraid to take you on to Chauny. You will be much sadder there. Chauny is the sight most pitiful of all. Would you perhaps wish to avoid it?" [Pg 257]

"What about you, Mother?" Father Beckett wanted to know.

But Mother had no wish to avoid Chauny. She was not able to believe that anything could be sadder than Roye, or Nesle, or Ham, or more grim than Jussy.

"He doesn't want to take us to Chauny," Brian whispered to me. We were all grouped together near the cars, with Sirius, a quiet, happy dog. "He's trying to think up a new excuse to get out of it."

I glanced at our guide. It was *like* Brian to have guessed what we hadn't seen! Now I was on the alert, the clear-cut French face *did* look nonplussed; and a nervous brown hand was tugging at a smart black moustache.

"Is there any reason why you think it would be better for us not to go there?" I decided to ask frankly.

"It's getting rather late," he suggested, in his precise English. "You have also the Pavilion of Prince Eitel Fritz before you. If it grows too dark, you cannot see St. Quentin well, in the distance, and the glasses will be of no use for Soissons."

"But we're *going* to Soissons day after to-morrow!" said Father Beckett.

"And there'll be a moon presently," added Dierdre. She had heard of the ruined convent at Chauny and was determined not to miss it.

"Yes, there'll be a moon," reluctantly admitted Monsieur le Lieutenant.

"Is there still another reason?" I tried to help him.

"Well, yes, there is one, Mademoiselle," he blurted out. "I had meant not to mention it. But perhaps it [Pg 258] is best to tell, and then you may all choose whether you go to Chauny or not. There is a certain risk at this time of day, or a little later. You know we are close to the front here, and enemy aeroplanes fly nearly every afternoon over Chauny toward dusk. They hope to catch some important personage, and they come expressly to 'spot' automobiles. The road through the ruined town is white and new, and the gray military cars in which we bring visitors to the front stand out clearly, especially as twilight falls. I'm afraid we have lingered too long in some of these places. If we were a party of men, I should say nothing, but with three ladies——"

"I can answer for all three, Monsieur," said Mother Beckett, with a pathetically defiant tilt of her small chin.

"My son, you know, was a soldier. We have come to this part of the world to see what we can do for the people in honour of his memory. So we mustn't leave Chauny out."

"Madame, there are no people there, for there are no houses. There are but a few soldiers with an anti-aircraft gun."

"We must see what can be done about building up some of the houses so the people can come back," persisted the old lady, with that gentle obstinacy of hers.

The French officer made no more objections; and knowing his wife, I suppose Father Beckett felt it useless to offer any. We started at once for Chauny: in fact, we flew along the road almost as fast—it seemed—as enemy aeroplanes could fly along the sky if they pursued. But we had a long respite still before twilight. [Pg 259]

CHAPTER XXIV

Our guide was right. Chauny was sadder than the rest, because there had been more of beauty to ruin. And it was ruined cruelly, completely! Even Gerbéviller, in Lorraine, had been less sad than this—less sad because of Sœur Julie, and the quarter on the hill which her devotion saved; less sad, because of the American Red Cross reconstruction centre, for the fruit trees. Here there had been no Sœur Julie, no reconstruction centre yet. The Germans, when they knew they had to go, gave three weeks to their wrecking work. They sent off, neatly packed, all that was worth sending to Germany. They measured the cellars to see what quantity of explosives would be needed to blow up the houses. Then they blew them up, making their quarters meanwhile at a safe distance, in the convent. As for that convent—you will see what happened there when the Boches had no further use for it!

In happy days before the war, whose joys we took comfortably for granted, Chauny had several châteaux of beauty and charm. It had pretty houses and lots of fine shops and a park. It was proud of its *mairie* and church and great *usine* (now a sight of horror), and the newer parts of the town did honour to their architects. But—Chauny was on the direct road between Cologne and Paris. Nobody thought much about this fact then, except that it helped [Pg 260] travel and so was good for the country. It is only now that one knows what a price Chauny paid for the advantage. Instead of a beautiful town there remains a heap of cinders, with here and there a wrecked façade of pitiful grace or broken dignity to tell where stood the proudest buildings.

The sky was empty of enemy 'planes; but our guide hurried us through the town, where the new road shone white in contrast with our cars; and having hidden the autos under a group of trees outside, led us on foot toward the convent. The approach was exquisite: a long, long avenue of architectural elms, arbour-like in shade, once the favourite evening promenade of Chauny. That tunnel of emerald and gold would have been an interlude of peace between two tragedies—tragedy of the town, tragedy of the convent—if the ground hadn't been strewn with torn papers, like leaves scattered by the wind: official records flung out of strong boxes by ruthless German hands, poor remnants no longer of value, and saved from destruction only by the kindly trees, friends of happy memories. "The Boches didn't take time to spoil this avenue," said our officer. "They liked it while they lived in the convent; and they left in a hurry."

Just beyond the avenue lies the convent garden; and though it is autumn, when we stepped into that garden we stepped into an oasis of old-fashioned, fragrant flowers, guarded by delicate trees, gentle as the vanished Sisters and their flock of young girl pupils; sweet, small trees, bending low as if to shield the garden's breast from harm.

I wish when Chauny is rebuilt this convent might be left as a *monument historique*, for, ringed by its perfumed pleasance, it is a glimpse of "fairylands forlorn." [Pg 261]

One half believes there must have been some fairy charm at work which kept the fire-breathing German dragon from laying this garden waste when he was forced out of his stolen lair in the convent! Little remains of the house, and in the rubbish heap of fallen walls and beams and plaster, narrow iron bedsteads, where nuns slept or young girls dreamed, perch timidly among stones and blackened bricks. But in the garden all is flowery peace: and the chapel, though ruined, is a strange vision of beauty framed in horror.

Not that the Germans were merciful there. They burned and blew up all that would burn or blow up. The roof fell, and heaped the floor with wreckage; but out of that wreckage, as out of a troubled sea, rise two figures: St. Joseph, and an almost life-size, painted statue of the Virgin. There the two stand firmly on their pedestals, their faces raised to God's roof of blue, which never fails. Because their eyes are lifted, they do not see the flotsam and jetsam of shattered stained glass, burnt woodwork, smashed benches, broken picture-frames and torn, rain-blurred portraits of lesser saints. They

seem to think only of heaven.

Though I'm not a Catholic, the chapel gave me such a sense of sacredness and benediction that I felt I must be there alone, if only for a moment. So when our officer led the others out I stayed behind. A clear ray of late sunshine slanted through a broken window set high in a side wall, to stream full upon the face of the Virgin. Someone had crowned her with a wreath of fresh flowers, and had thrust a few white roses under the folded hands which seemed to clasp them lovingly, with a prayer for the peace[Pg 262] of the world. The dazzling radiance brought face and figure to life; and it was as if a living woman had taken the statue's place on the pedestal. The effect was so startling that, if I were a Catholic, I might have believed in a miracle. Protestant as I am, I had the impulse to pray: but—(I don't know, Padre, if I have ever told you this)—I've not dared to pray properly since I first stole the Becketts' love for Brian and me. I've not dared, though never in my life have I so needed and longed for prayer.

This time I couldn't resist, unworthy as I am. The smile of peace and pardon on the statue's illumined face seemed to make all sin forgivable in this haunt of holy dreams. "God forgive me, and show me how to atone," I sent my plea skyward. Suddenly the conviction came that I *should* be shown a way of atonement, though it might be hard. I felt lighter of heart, and went on to pray that Jack Curtis's hope might be justified: that, no matter what happened to me, or even to Brian, Jim Beckett might be alive, in this world, and come back safely to his parents.

While I prayed, a sound disturbed the deep silence. It was a far-away sound, but quickly it grew louder and drew nearer: at first a buzzing as of all the bees in France mobilized in a bee-barrage. Then the buzzing became a roar. I knew directly what it was: enemy aeroplanes.

I could not see them yet, but they must be close. If they were flying very low, to search Chauny for visitors, I might be seen if I moved. Those in the garden were better off than I, for they were screened by the trees, but trying to join them I might attract attention to myself.

As I thought this, I wondered why I didn't decide upon[Pg 263] the thing most likely to solve all my problems at once. If I were killed, Brian would grieve: but he had the Becketts to love and care for him, and—he had Dierdre: no use disguising that fact from my intelligence, after the episode of the dog! What a chance for me to disappear, having done for Brian all I could do! Oh, why didn't I add another prayer to my last, and beg God to let me die that minute?

I'll tell you why I did not pray this, Padre, and why, instead of trying to expose my life, I wished—almost unconsciously—to save it. I hardly realized why then, but I do realize now. It is different in these days from that night in Paris, when I wished I might be run over by a motor-car. At that time I should have been glad to die. Now I cling to life—not just because I'm young and strong, and people call me beautiful, but because I feel I *must* stay in the world to see what happens next.

I kept as still as a frightened mouse. I didn't move. I scarcely breathed. Presently an aeroplane sailed into sight directly overhead, and flying so low that I could make out its iron cross, exactly like photographs I'd seen. Whether the men in it could see me or not I can't tell; but if they could, perhaps they mistook me for one of the statues they knew existed in the ruined chapel, and thought I wasn't worth bombing.

In that case it was St. Joseph and the Virgin who protected me!

In a second the big bird of prey had swept on. I was sick with fear for a moment lest it should drop an "egg" on to the garden, and kill Brian or the Becketts, or the lieutenant who had wished to spare us this danger. Even[Pg 264] the O'Farrells I didn't want hurt; and I was pleased to find out that about myself, because they are a far more constant danger for me than all the aeroplanes along the German front; and when I came face to face with realities in my own soul, I might have discovered a wicked desire for them to be out of the way at any price. But since Dierdre proved herself ready to die for Brian, I do admire if I don't like her. As for Julian—would it be possible, Padre, to miss a person you almost hate? Anyhow, when I tried to imagine how I should feel if I went back to the garden and saw him dead, I grew quite giddy and ill. How queer we are, we human things!

But no one was hurt. The whole party hid under the trees; and as the cars were also hidden at a distance, the German fliers turned tail, disappointed; besides, the anti-aircraft gun which we'd been told about, and had seen on our way to the convent, was potting away like mad, so it wasn't healthful for aeroplanes to linger merely "on spec."

Mother Beckett was pale and trembling a little, but she said that she had been too anxious about me, in my absence, to think of herself, which was perhaps a good thing. I noticed, when I joined them in the garden, after the roar had changed again to a buzz, that Dierdre stood close to Brian, and that his hand was on her shoulder, her hand on Sirius's beautiful head. Yet I felt too strangely happy to be jealous. I suppose it must have been through my prayer—or the answer to it.

When all was clear and the danger over (our guide said that the "birds" never made more than one tour of in[Pg 265]spection in an afternoon) we started off again. Father Beckett suggested that his wife had better go home and rest, but she wouldn't hear of it. And when we reached a turning of the road which would lead us to Coucy-le Château, it was she who begged our lieutenant to let us run along that way, "just far enough for a glimpse, a *tiny* glimpse."

"My son wrote me it was the most wonderful old château in France," she pleaded. "I've got in my pocket now a snapshot he sent me."

The Frenchman couldn't resist. You know how charming the French are to old ladies. "It isn't as safe as—as the Bank of England!" he laughed. "Sometimes they keep this road rather hot. But to-day, I have told you, things are quiet all along. We will take what Madame calls a tiny glimpse."

Orders were given to our chauffeur. Brian was with the O'Farrells, coming on behind, and of course the Red Cross taxi

followed at our heels like a faithful dachshund. Our big car flew swiftly, and the little one did its jolting best to keep up the pace, for time wouldn't wait for us—and these autumn days are cutting themselves short.

Presently we saw a thing which proved that the road was indeed "hot" sometimes: a neat, round shell-hole, which looked ominously new! We swung past it with a bump, and flashed into sight of a ruin which dwarfed all others we had seen—yes, dwarfed even cathedrals! A long line of ramparts rising from a high headland of gray-white chalk-ramparts crowned with broken, round towers, which the sun was painting with heraldic gold: the stump of a tremendous keep that reared its bulk like a [Pg 266] giant in his death struggle, for a last look over his shield of shattered walls. This was what German malice had made of Coucy, pride of France, architectural masterpiece of feudal times!

"This is as far as I dare go!" our lieutenant said, with a brusque gesture which bade the chauffeur stop. But before the car turned, he gave us a moment to take in the picture of grandeur and unforgivable cruelty. Yes, unforgivable! for you know, Padre, there was no military motive in the destruction. The only object was to deprive France forever of the noblest of her castles, which has helped in the making of her history since a bishop of Rheims began to build it in 920.

"Roi ne suis Ne prince, ne duc, ne comte aussy. Je suys le Sire de Coucy."

The beautiful old boast in beautiful old French sang in my head as I gazed through tears at the new ruin of ancient grandeur.

Some of those haughty Sires de Coucy may have deserved to have their stronghold destroyed, for they seem—most of them—to have been as bad as they were vain. I remember there was one, in the days of Louis XII, who punished three little boys for killing a few rabbits in his park, by ordering the children to be hanged on the spot; and St. Louis was so angry on hearing of the crime that he wished to hang the Sire de Coucy on the same tree. There were others I've read of, just as wicked and high-handed: but their castle was not to blame for [Pg 267] its master's crimes! Besides, the last of the proud Enguerrands and Thomases and Raouls, Seigneurs of the line, was son-in-law to Edward III of England; so all their sins were expiated long ago.

"The Boches were jealous of our Coucy," said the Frenchman, with a sigh. "They have nothing to compare with it on their side of the Rhine. If they could have packed up the château and carted it across the frontier they would—if it had taken three years. As they couldn't do that, they did what Cardinal Mazarin wasn't able to do with his picked engineers; they blew it up with high explosives. But all they could steal they stole: carvings and historic furniture. You know there was a room the guardian used to show before the war—the room where César de Bourbon was born, the son of Henri Quatre of Navarre and Gabrielle d'Estrées? That room the Boches emptied when they first came in August, 1914. Not a piece of rich tapestry, not a suit of armour, not even a chair, or a table, or lamp did they leave. Everything was sent to Germany. But we believe we shall get it all again some day. And now we must go, for the Boches shell this road whenever they think of it, or have nothing better to do!"

The signal was given. We turned and tore along the road by which we'd come, our backs feeling rather sensitive and exposed to chance German bombs, until we'd got round the corner to a "safe section." Our way led through a pitiful country of crippled trees to a curious round hill. A little castle or miniature fortress must have crowned it once, for the height was entirely circled by an ancient moat. On top of this green mound Prince [Pg 268] Eitel Fritz built for himself the imitation shooting-lodge which was our goal and viewpoint. And, Padre, there can't be another such German-looking spot in martyred France as he has made of the insulted hillock!

I don't know how many fair young birch trees he sacrificed to build a summer-house for himself and his staff to drink beer in, and gaze over the country, at St. Quentin, at Soissons and a hundred conquered towns and villages! Now he's obliged to look from St. Quentin at the summer-house—and how we pray that it may not be for long!

Over one door of the building a pair of crossed swords carved heavily in wood form a stolid German decoration; and still more maddeningly German are the seats outside the house, made of cement and shaped like toadstools. In the sitting room are rough chairs, and a big table so stained with wine and beer that I could almost see the fat figures of the prince and his friends grouped round it, with cheers for "*Wein, Weib, und Gesang*."

Close down below us, in sloping green meadows, a lot of war-worn horses *en permission* were grazing peacefully. Our guide said that some were "Americans," and I fancied them dreaming of Kentucky grasslands, or the desert herbs of the Far West, which they will never taste again. Also I yearned sorrowfully over the weary creatures that had done their "bit" without any incentive, without much praise or glory, and that would presently go back to do it all over again, until they died or were finally disabled. I remembered a cavalry-man I nursed in our *Hôpital des Épidémies* telling me how brave horses are. "The only trouble with them in battle," he said, "is when [Pg 269] their riders are killed, to make them fall out of line. They *will* keep their places!"

Both Father Beckett and the French officer had field-glasses, but we hardly needed them for St. Quentin. Far away across a plain slowly turning from bright blue-green to dim green-blue in the twilight, we saw a dream town built of violet shadows—Marie Stuart's dowry town. Its purple roofs and the dominating towers of its great collegiate church were ethereal as a mirage, yet delicately clear, and so beautiful, rising from the river-bank, that I shuddered to think of the French guns, forced to break the heart of Faidherbe's brave city.

It was a time of day to call back the past, for in the falling dusk modern things and old things blended lovingly together. For all one could see of detail, nothing had changed much since the plain of Picardy was the great Merovingian centre of France, the gateway through which the English marched, and went away never to return until they came as friends. Still less had the scene changed since the brave days when Marguerite de Valois rode through Picardy with her band of lovely ladies and gallant gentlemen. It was summer when she travelled; but on just such an evening of blue twilight and silver moonshine might she have had her pretended carriage accident at Catelet, as an excuse to disappoint the Bishop of Cambrai, and meet the man best loved of all her lovers, Duc Henri de Guise. It was just then he had got the wound which gave him his scar and his nickname of "*Le Balafre*"; and she would have been all the more anxious not to miss her

hero.

I thought of that adventure, because of the picture Brian painted of the Queen on her journey, the only one of his [Pg 270] which has been hung in the Academy, you know, Padre; and I sat for Marguerite. Not that I'm her type at all, judging from portraits! However, I fancied myself intensely in the finished picture, and used to hope I should be recognized when I strolled into the Academy. But I never was.

Looking down over the plain of Picardy, I pretended to myself that I could see the Queen's procession: Marguerite (looking as much as possible like me!) in her gold and crystal coach, lined with rose-coloured Spanish velvet, jewelled: the gentlemen outriders trying to stare through the thick panes obscured with designs and mottoes concerning the sun and its influence upon human fate; the high-born girls chattering to each other from their embroidered Spanish saddles, as they rode on white palfreys, trailing after the glittering coach; and the dust rising like smoke from wheels of jolting chariots which held the elder women of the Court.

Oh, those were great days, the days of Henry of Navarre and his naughty wife! But, after all, there wasn't as much chivalry and real romance in Picardy then, or in the time of St. Quentin himself, as war has brought back to it now. No deeds we can find in history equal the deeds of to-day!

We got lost going home, somehow taking the wrong road, straying into a wood, plunging and bumping down and down over fearful roads, and landing—by what might have been a bad accident—in a deep ravine almost too strange to be true. [Pg 271]

Even our French officer couldn't make out what had happened to us, or whither we'd wandered, until we'd stopped, and our blaze of acetylene had lighted up a series of fantastic caverns in the rock (caverns improved up to date by German cement) and in front of that honeycombed gray wall a flat, grassy lawn that was a graveyard.

"*Mon Dieu, c'est le Ravin de Bitry!*" he cried. "Let us get out of it! I would never have brought you here of my own free will."

"But why—why?" I insisted. "It isn't the only graveyard we have seen, alas! and there are only French names on the little crosses."

"I know," he said. "After we chased the Germans out of this hole, we lived here ourselves, in their caves—and died here, as you see, Mademoiselle. But the place is haunted, and not by spirits of the dead—worse! Put on your hats again, Messieurs! The dead will forgive you. And, ladies, wrap veils over your faces. If it were not so late, you would already know why. But the noise of our autos, and the lights may stir up those ghosts!"

Then, in an instant, before the cars could turn, we *did* know why. Flies!... such flies as I had never seen ...nightmare flies. They rose from everywhere, in a thick black cloud, like the plague of Egypt. They were in thousands. They were big as bees. They dropped on us like a black jelly falling out of a mould. They sat all over us. It was only when our cars had swayed and stumbled up again, over that awful road, out of the haunted hole in the deep woods, and risen into fresh, moving air, that the horde deserted us. Julian O'Farrell had his hands bitten, and dear Mother Beckett [Pg 272] was badly stung on the throat. Horrible!... I don't think I could have slept at night for thinking of the Ravin de Bitry, if we hadn't had such a refreshing run home that the impression of the lost, dark place was purified away.

Forest fragrance sprayed into our faces like perfume from a vaporizer. We seemed to pass through endless halls supported by white marble pillars, which were really spaces between trees, magically transformed by our blazing headlight. Always in front of us hovered an archway of frosted silver, moving as we moved, like a pale, elusive rainbow; and when we put on extra speed for a long, straight stretch, poplars carelessly spared by the Boches spouted up on either side of us like geysers. Then, suddenly, across a stretch of blackness palely shone Compiègne, as Venice shines across the dark lagoon. [Pg 273]

CHAPTER XXV

Little did I think, Padre, to write you from Soissons! When last I spoke to you about it, we were gazing through field-glasses at the single tower of the cathedral, pointing out of purple shadows toward the evening star of hope. Then we lost ourselves in the Ravin de Bitry, and arrived thankfully at Compiègne two hours later than we had planned. We expected to have part of a day at Soissons, but—I told you of the dreadful flies in that ravine of death, and how Mother Beckett was stung on the throat. The next day she had a headache, but took aspirin, and pronounced herself well enough for the trip to Soissons. Father Beckett let her go, because he's in the habit of letting her do whatever she wants to do, fancying (and she fancies it, too) that he is master. You see, we thought it was only a fatigue-headache. Foolishly, we didn't connect it with the sting, for Julian O'Farrell was bitten, too, and didn't complain at all.

Well, we set out for Soissons yesterday morning (I write again at night) leaving all our luggage at the hotel in Compiègne. It was quite a safe and uneventful run, for the Germans stopped shelling Soissons temporarily some time ago, when they were obliged to devote their whole attention to other places. The road was good, and the day a dream of Indian summer, when war seemed more [Pg 274] than ever out of place in such a world. If Mother Beckett looked ill, we didn't notice, because she wore her dust-veil. The same officer was with us who'd been our guide last time, and we felt like friends, as he explained, with those vivid gestures Frenchmen have, just how the Germans in September, 1914, marched from Laon upon Soissons—marched fast, singing, yelling, wild to take a city so important that the world would be impressed. Why, it would be—they thought—as if the whole Île-de-France were in their grasp! The next step would be to Paris, goal of all Germanic invasions since Attila.

It's an engaging habit of Mother Beckett's to punctuate exciting stories like this with little soft sighs of sympathy: but

the graphic war descriptions given by our lieutenant left her cold. Even when we came into the town, and began to go round it in the car, she was heavily silent, not an exclamation! And we ought to have realized that this was strange, because Soissons nowadays is a sight to strike the heart a hammer-blow.

Of course the place isn't older than Rheims. It's of the same time and the same significance. But its face looks older in ruin—such features as haven't been battered out of shape. There's the wonderful St. Jean-des-Vignes, which should have interested the little lady, because the great namesake of her family St. Thomas à Beckett, lived there, when it was one of Soissons' four famous abbeys. There's the church of St. Léger, and the grand old gates of St. Médard, to say nothing of the cathedral itself. And then there's the history, which goes back to the Sussions who owned twelve towns, and had a king whose power carried across the sea, all the way to Britain. If Mother[Pg 275] Beckett doesn't know much about history, she loves being in the midst of it, and hearing talk of it. But when our Frenchman told us a story of her latest favourite, King Clovis, she had the air of being asleep behind her thick blue veil. It was quite a good story, too, about a gold vase and a bishop. The gold vase had been stolen in the sack of the churches, after the battle of Soissons, when Roman rule was ended in France. St. Remi begged Clovis to give the vase back. But the booty was being divided, and the soldier who had the vase refused to surrender it to a mere monarch. "You'll get what your luck brings you, like the rest of us!" said he, striking the vase so hard with his battle-axe that it was dented, and its beauty spoiled. Clovis swallowed the insult, that being the day of soldiers, not of kings: but he didn't forget; and he kept watch upon the man. A year later, to the day, the excuse he'd waited for came. The soldier's armour was dirty, on review; Clovis had the right as a general to reproach and punish him, so snatching the man's battle-axe, the king crushed in the soldier's head. "I do to you with the same weapon what you did to the gold vase at Soissons!" he said.

It wasn't until we had seen everything, and had spent over an hour looking at the martyred cathedral, from every point of view, inside and out, that Mother Beckett confessed her suffering. "Oh, Molly!" she gasped, leaning on my arm, "I'm so glad there's only *one* tower, and not two! That is, I'm glad, as it was always like that."

"Why," I exclaimed, "how odd of you, dearest! I know it's considered one of the best cathedrals in France, though it isn't a museum of sculpture, like Rheims. But[Pg 276] the single tower worries me, it looks so unfinished. *I'm* not glad there's only one!"

"You would be if you felt like I do," she moaned. "If there was another tower, we'd have to spend double time looking at it, and in five minutes more I should have to faint! Oh no, I've stood everything so far, not to disappoint any one, but I *couldn't* see another tower!"

With that, she did faint, or nearly, then came to herself, and apologized for bothering us! Father Beckett hardly spoke, but his face was gray-white with fear, and he held the fragile creature in his arms as if she were his last link with the life of this world.

We got her back into the car; and the man who had shown us the cathedral said that there was an hotel within five minutes' motoring distance. It was not first rate, he explained, but officers messed there and occasionally wives and mothers of officers stayed there. He thought we might be taken in and made fairly comfortable; and to be sure we didn't miss the house, he rode on the step of the car, to show us the way.

It was a sad way, for we had to pass hillocks of plaster and stone which had once been streets, but we had eyes only for Mother Beckett's face, Father Beckett and I: and even Brian seemed to look at her. Sirius, too, for he would not go into the Red Cross taxi with the others! Brian, whom in most things the dog obeys with a pathetic eagerness, couldn't get him to do that: and when I said, "Oh, his eyes are tragic. He thinks you're going to send him away, never to see you again!" Brian didn't insist. So the dog sat squeezed in among us, knowing perfectly well that we were anxious about the little lady who patted[Pg 277] him so often, and unpatriotically saved him lumps of sugar. He licked her small fingers, clasped by her husband, and attracting Mother Beckett's attention perhaps kept her from fainting again.

Well, we got to the hotel, which was really more of a *pension* than an hotel, and Madame Bornier, the elderly woman in deep mourning who was *la patronne*, was kind and helpful. Her best room had been made ready for the wife of an officer just coming out of hospital, but there would be time to prepare another. Our dear invalid was carried upstairs in her husband's arms, and I put her to bed while a doctor was sent for. Of course, we had no permission to spend a night at Soissons, but I began to foresee that we should have to stay unless we were turned out by the military authorities.

When the doctor came—a *médecin major* fetched from a hospital by our officer-guide—he said that Madame was suffering from malarial symptoms; she must have been poisoned. So then of course we remembered the sting on her throat. He examined it, looked rather grave, and warned Father Beckett that *Madame sa femme* would not be able to travel that day. She had a high temperature, and at best must have a day or two of repose, with no food save a little boiled milk.

Soissons seemed the last place in France to hope for milk of any description, but the doctor promised it from the hospital if it couldn't be got elsewhere, and added with pride that Soissons was not without resources. "When the Germans came three years ago," he said, "most of the inhabitants had fled, taking what they could carry. Only seven hundred souls were left, out of fifteen thousand,[Pg 278] but many have come back: we have more than two thousand now, and some of them behaved like heroes and heroines. Oh yes, we may almost say that life goes on normally! You shall have all the milk you need for Madame."

When she had taken some medicine, and smiled at him, Father Beckett left his wife in my care, and rushed off to arrange about permission to stop. The *médecin major* and our officer-guide were useful. After telephoning from the military hospital to headquarters, everything was arranged; and we were authorized to remain in Soissons, at our own risk and peril. Madame Bornier prepared rooms for us all; but there weren't enough to go round, so Brian and Julian O'Farrell were put together, and Dierdre and I! She, by the way, is in bed at this moment, whether asleep or not I don't know; but if not she is pretending. Her lashes are very long, and she looks prettier than I ever saw her look before. But that may be because I like her better. I told you, that after what she did for Brian I could never dislike that girl again:

but there has been another incident since then, about which I will tell you to-morrow. You know, I'm not easily tired, but this is our second night at Soissons. I sat up all last night with Mother Beckett, and oh, how glad I was, Padre, that Fate had forced me to train as a nurse! I've been glad—thankful—ever since the war: but this is the first time my gladness has been so personal. Brian's illness was in hospital. I could do nothing for him. But you can hardly think what it has meant to me, to know that I've been of real use to this dear woman, that I've been able to spare her suffering. Before, I had no right to her love.[Pg 279] I'd stolen it. Now, maybe I am beginning to earn a little of the affection which she and Father Beckett give me.

I was all "keyed up" when I began to write to you to-night, Padre; but I was supposed to spend my three hours "off" in sleep. One hour is gone. Even if I can't sleep, I shall pass the other two trying to rest, in my narrow bed, which is close to Dierdre's.[Pg 280]

CHAPTER XXVI

This is the next day. Mother Beckett is better, and I've been praised by the *médecin major* for my nursing. We've got our luggage from Compiègne, and may be here for days. We shall miss the pleasure of travelling to Amiens with the war correspondents, who must go without us, and we women will get no glimpse of the British front!

Now I'm going to tell you about the incident which has made me almost love Dierdre O'Farrell—a miracle, it would have seemed two weeks ago, when my best mental pet name for her was "little cat!"

When I wrote last night, I mentioned that the room Mother Beckett has in this little hotel had been intended for the wife of a French officer coming out of hospital. Another room was prepared for that lady, and it happened to be the one next door to Mother Beckett's. Through the thin partition wall I heard voices, a man's and a woman's, talking in French. I couldn't make out the words—in fact, I tried not to!—but the woman's tones were soft and sweet as the coo of a dove. I pictured her beautiful and young, and I was sure from her way of speaking that she adored her husband. The two come into my story presently, but I think it should begin with a walk that Brian and Dierdre (and Sirius, of course) took together.

With me shut up in Mother Beckett's room, my blind[Pg 281] brother and Julian O'Farrell's sister were thrown more closely together even than before. I'm sure Julian saw to that, eliminating himself as he couldn't do when travelling all three in the Red Cross taxi! Perhaps Dierdre and Brian had never been alone in each other's company so long; and Brian found the chance he'd wished for, to get at the *real* girl, behind her sulky "camouflage."

He has repeated the whole conversation to me, because he wanted me to know Dierdre as he has learned to know her; and I shall write everything down as I remember it, though the words mayn't be precisely right. Never was there any one like Brian for drawing out confidences from shut-up souls (except *you*, Padre!) if he chooses to open his own soul, for that end; and apparently he thought it worth while in the case of Dierdre. He began by telling her things about himself—his old hopes and ambitions and the change in them since his blindness. He confessed to the girl (as he confessed to me long ago) how at first he wished desperately to die, because life without eyesight wasn't life. He has so loved colour, and beauty, and success in his work had been so close, that he felt he couldn't endure blindness.

"I came near being a coward," he said. "A man who puts an end to his life because he's afraid to face it is a coward. So I tried to see if I could readjust the balance. I fell back on my imagination—and it saved me. Imagination was always my best friend! It took me by the hand and led me into a garden—a secret sort of garden that belongs to the blind, and to no one else. It's the place where the spirits of colour and the spirits of flowers live—the spirit of music, too—and all sorts of beautiful[Pg 282] strange things which people who've never been blind can't see—or even hear. They're not '*things*,' exactly. They're more like the reality behind the things: God's thoughts of things as they should be, before He created them; artists' thoughts of their pictures; musicians' thoughts of their compositions—all better than the things resulting from the thoughts. Nothing in the outside world is as wonderful as what grows in that garden! I couldn't go on being unhappy there. Nobody could—once he'd found the way in."

"It must be hard finding the way in!" Dierdre said.

"It is at first—alone, without help. That's why, if I can, I want to help my fellow blind men to get there."

"Only men? Not women, too?"

"I've never met a blind woman. Probably I never shall."

"You're talking to one this minute! When I'm with you, I always feel as if I were blind, and you could see."

"You're unjust to yourself."

"No, but I'm unjust to you—I mean, I have been. I must tell you before we go on, because you're too kind, too generous. I'm blind about lots of things, but I do see that, now. I see how good you are. I used to think you were too good to be true—that you must be a *poseur*. I was always waiting for the time when you'd give yourself away—when you'd show yourself on the same level with my brother and me."

"But I am on the same level."

"Don't say it! I don't feel that horrid, bitter wish now. I'm glad you're higher than we are. It makes me better to look up to the place where you are. But I wish I could get nearer."[Pg 283]

"You are very near. We're friends, aren't we? You don't really mind because I'm from the North and you from the South, and because we don't quite agree about politics?"

"I'd forgotten about politics between you and me! But there are other distances. Do take me into your garden. You say it belongs only to blind people; but if I am blind—with a different kind of blindness, and worse—can't I get there with you? I need such a garden, dreadfully. I'm so disappointed in life."

"Tell me how you're unhappy, and how you've been disappointed," said Brian. "Then perhaps we can find the right flowers to cure you, in the garden."

So she told him what Julian had told me: about trying to get on the stage, and not succeeding, and realizing that she couldn't act; feeling that there was no vocation, no place for her anywhere. To comfort the girl, Brian opened the gate of his garden of the blind, and gave her its secrets, as he has given them to me. He explained to her his trick of "seeing across far spaces," with the eyes of his mind, and heart: saying aloud, to himself, names of glorious places—"Athens—Rome—Venice," and going there in the airship of imagination; calling up visions of rose-sunset light on the yellowing marble of the Acropolis, or moonlight in the Pincian gardens, with great umbrella-pines like blots of ink on steel, or the opal colours shimmering deep down, under the surface of the Grand Canal. He made Dierdre understand his way of "listening to a landscape," knowing by the voice of the wind what trees it touched; the buzz of olive leaves bunched like hives of silver bees against the blue; the sea-murmur of pines; the skeleton swish of [Pg 284] palms; the gay, dancing rustle of poplars. And he showed her how he gathered beauty and colour from words, which made pictures in his brain.

"I never thought of all these things when I could see pictures with my eyes—and paint them with my hands," he said. And perhaps he gave a sigh for the past, which touched Dierdre's heart as the wind, in his fancy, touched the trees. "Couldn't you use your old knowledge, and learn to paint without seeing?" she asked. "You might have a line for the horizon, and with someone to mix your colours under your directions—someone who'd tell you where to find the reds, where the greens, and so on, someone to warn you if you went wrong. You might make wonderful effects."

"I've thought of that," said Brian. "I've hoped—it might be. Sometime, when this trip is over, I may ask my sister's help —"

"Oh, your sister's!" Dierdre broke in. "But she may marry. Or she may go back to nursing again. I wish I could help you. It would make me happy. It would be helping myself, more than you! And we could begin soon. I could buy you paints from a list you'd give me. If we succeeded, you could surprise your sister and the Becketts. It would be splendid."

Brian agreed that it would be splendid, but he said that his sister must be "in" it, too. He wouldn't have secrets from her, even for the pleasure of a surprise.

"She won't let me help you," Dierdre said. "She'll want to do everything for you herself."

Brian assured the girl that she was mistaken about his sister. "She's mistaken about you, too," he added. [Pg 285] "You'll see! Molly'll be grateful to you for inventing such a plan for me. She'll want you to be the one to carry it out."

No argument of his could convince the girl, however. They came back to the hotel at last, after a walk by the river, closer friends than before, but Dierdre depressed, if no longer sulky. She seemed in a strange, tense mood, as though there were more she wished to say—if she dared.

Dusk was falling (this was evening of the day we arrived, you must realize, Padre) and Brian admitted that he was tired. He'd taken no such walk since he came out of hospital, weeks and weeks ago.

"Let's go and sit in the *salon*, to rest a few minutes and finish our talk," he proposed. "We're almost sure to have the room to ourselves."

But for once Brian's intuition was at fault. There were two persons in the little *salon*, a lady writing letters at a desk by the window, and a French officer who had drawn the one easy chair in the room in front of a small wood fire. This fire had evidently not existed long, as the room was cold, with the grim, damp chill of a place seldom occupied or opened to the air.

As Dierdre led Brian in, the lady at the desk glanced up at the newcomers, and the officer in the big chair turned his head. The woman was young and very remarkable looking, with the pearl-pale skin of a true Parisian, large dark eyes under clearly sketched black brows, and masses of prematurely white hair.

For a second, Dierdre thought this beautiful hair must be blonde, as the woman could not be more than twenty-[Pg 286]eight; but the light from the window fell full upon the silver ripples, blanching them to dazzling whiteness.

"What a lovely creature," the girl thought. "What can have happened to turn her hair white?"

As for the man, Dierdre took an instant dislike to him, for his selfishness. His face was burned a deep, ruddy brown, and his eyes, lit by the red glow of the fire, were bright with a black, bead-like brightness. They stared so directly, so unblinkingly at Brian, that Dierdre was vexed. She was his chosen friend, his confidante, his champion now! Not even Sirius could be more fiercely devoted than she, who had to atone for her past injustice. She was angry that blind Brian should be thus coldly stared at, and that a man in better health than he should calmly sprawl in the best chair, screening the fire.

By this time, Padre, you will have learned enough about Dierdre O'Farrell to know what her temper is! She forgot that a stranger might not realize Brian's blindness at first sight in a room where the dusk was creeping in, and she spoke sharply, in her almost perfect French.

"There's quite a nice fire," she said, "and I should have thought there was room for everybody to enjoy it, but it seems there's only enough for *one*! We'd better try the *salle à manger*, instead, I suppose."

Brian, puzzled, paused at the door, his hand on Sirius's head, Dierdre standing in front of them both like a ruffled

sparrow.

The French officer straightened up in his chair with an astonished look, but did not rise. It was the woman by the window (Dierdre had not connected her with the man by the fire) who sprang to her feet. "Mademoiselle," she [Pg 287] said quietly, in a voice of exquisite sweetness, "my husband would be the first one in the world to move, and give his place to others, if he had known that he was monopolizing the fire. But he did not know. It was I who placed him there. Those eyes of his which look so bright are made of crystal. He lost his sight at the Chemin des Dames."

As she spoke, choking on the last words, the woman with white hair crossed the room swiftly, and caught the hand of her husband, which was stretched out as if groping for hers. He stumbled to his feet, and she stood defending him like a gentle creature of the woods at bay.

Perhaps at no other moment of her life would Dierdre O'Farrell have been struck with such poignant repentance. That she, who had just been shown the secret, inner heart of one blind man, should deliberately wound another, seemed more than she could bear, and live.

Brian remained silent, partly because he was still confused, and partly to give Dierdre the chance to speak, which he felt instinctively she would wish to seize.

She took a step forward, then stopped, with a sob, shamed tears stinging her eyes. "Will you forgive me?" she begged. "I would rather have died than hurt a blind man, or—or any one who loves a blind man. Lately I've been finding out how sacred blindness is. I ought to have guessed, Madame, that you were with him—that you were his wife. I ought to have known that only a great grief could have turned your wonderful hair white—you, so young——"

"Her hair white!" cried the blind officer. "No, I'll not believe it. Suzanne, tell this lady she's mistaken. I [Pg 288] remember, in some lights, it was the palest gold, almost silver—your beautiful hair that I fell in love with——"

His voice broke. No one answered. There fell a dead silence, and Dierdre had time to realize what she had done. She had been cruel as the grave! She had accused a helpless blind man of selfishness; and not content with that, on top of all she had given away the secret that a brave woman's love had hidden.

"Suzanne—you don't speak!"

"Oh!" the trembling woman tried to laugh. "Of course, Mademoiselle is mistaken. That goes without saying."

"Yes—I—of *course*," Dierdre echoed. "It was the light—deceived me."

"And now," said the blind man slowly, "you are trying to deceive *me*—you are both trying! Suzanne, why did you keep it from me that your hair had turned white with grief? Didn't you know I'd love you more, for such a proof of love for me?"

"Indeed, I—oh, you mustn't think——" she began to stammer. "I loved your dear eyes as you loved my hair. But I love it twice as much now. I——"

He cut her short. "I don't think. I *know*. *Chérie*, you need have had no fear. I shall worship you after this."

"She could never have been so lovely before. Her hair is like spun glass," Dierdre tried to atone. "People would turn to look at her in the street. Monsieur le Capitaine, you should be proud of such a beautiful wife."

"I am," the man answered, "proud of her beauty, more proud of her heart." [Pg 289]

"But it is I who am proud!" the woman caught him up. "He has lost his dear eyes that all women admired, yet he has won honours such as few men have. What does it matter about my poor hair? You can see by the ribbons on his breast, Mademoiselle, what he is—what he has done for his country. You also, Monsieur, you see——"

"I don't see, Madame, because I, too, am blind," said Brian. "But I feel—I feel that your husband has won something which means more than his eyes, more than all his honours and decorations: a great love."

"You are *blind*!" exclaimed the Frenchwoman. "I should never have guessed. Ah, Madame, it is I who must now ask your pardon! I called you 'Mademoiselle.' Already I had forgiven you what you said in error. But I did not understand, or the forgiveness would have been easier. Your first thought was for your husband—your blind husband—just as my thought always is and will be for mine! You wanted him to have a place by the fire. Your temper was in arms, not for yourself, but for him—his comfort. How well I understand now! Madame, you and I have the same cross laid upon us. But it's a cross of honour. It is *le croix de guerre*!"

"I wish I had a right to it!" Dierdre broke out. "I haven't, because he is not my husband. He doesn't care for me—except maybe, as a friend. But to atone to him for injustice, to punish myself for hurting *you*, I'll confess something. I'd marry him to-morrow, blind as he is—perhaps *because* he is blind!—and be happy and proud all my life—if he would have me. Only,—*I know he won't*."

"My child! I care too much for you," Brian answered, after an instant of astonished silence, "far too much to [Pg 290] take you at your word. Some men might—but not I! Monsieur le Capitaine here, and Madame, were husband and wife before their trouble came. That is different——"

"No!" cried the woman whose name was Suzanne. "It is not different. My husband's the one man on earth for me. If we were not married—if he had lost his legs and arms as well as his eyes, I'd still want to be his wife—want it more than a kingdom."

"You hear, Monsieur," her husband said, laughing a little, and holding her close, with that perfect independence of

onlookers which the French have when they're thoroughly in love.

"I hear, Madame," said Brian. "But you, Monsieur le Capitaine—you would not have accepted the sacrifice——"

"I'm not sure I could have resisted," the Frenchman smiled.

"You love her!—that is why," Dierdre said. "My friend—doesn't love me. He never could. I'm not worthy. No one good could love me. If he knew the worst of me, he'd not even be my friend. And I suppose, after this, he won't be. If, by and by, I'm not ashamed of myself for what I've said, he'll be ashamed for me, because——"

"Don't!" Brian stopped her. "You know I mustn't let myself love you, Dierdre. And you don't really love me. It's only pity and some kind of repentance—for nothing at all—that you feel. But we'll be greater friends than ever. I understand just why you spoke, and it's going to help me a lot—like a strong tonic. You must have known it would. And if Monsieur and Madame have forgiven us——"[Pg 291]

"Us? What have *you* done? If they've forgiven me——"

"They have, indeed, forgiven," said the blind Frenchman. "They even thank you. If possible you've drawn them closer together than before."

Brian searched for Dierdre's hand, and found it. "Let us go now, and leave them," he whispered.

So they went away, and Brian softly shut the door of the little *salon*.

"I *did* mean every word I said!" the girl blurted out, turning upon him in the hall. "But—I shouldn't have dared say it if I hadn't been sure you didn't care. And even if you did care—or could—your sister wouldn't let you. She knows me exactly as I am."

"She *shall* know you as you are—my true and brave little friend!" Brian said.

He can find his way about wonderfully, even in a house with which he is merely making acquaintance: besides, Sirius was with him. But he felt an immense tenderness for Dierdre after that desperate confession. He didn't wish the girl to fancy that he could get on without her just then, or that he thought she had any reason for running away from him. He asked if she would take him to his room, so that he might rest there, alone, remembering an exquisite moment of his life.

"It's wonderful to feel that for a beautiful girl like you—blind as I am, I am a *man*!" he said. "Thank you with all my heart—for everything."

"Who told you I was beautiful?" Dierdre flung the question at him.

"My sister Mary told me," Brian answered. "Be[Pg 292]sides—I felt it. A man does feel such things—perhaps all the more if he is blind."

"Your sister Mary?" the girl echoed. "She doesn't think I'm beautiful. Or if she does, it's against her will."

"It won't be, after this."

"Why not? You won't tell her——"

"I'll tell her to love you, and—to help me not to!"

It was just then they came to Brian's door, and Dierdre fled, Sirius staring after her in dignified surprise.

But Dierdre herself came to me at once, and told me everything, with a kind of proud defiance.

"I *do* love your brother," she boasted. "I *would* marry him if he'd have me. I don't care what you think of me, or what you say!"

"Why, I love you for loving him," I threw back at her. "That's what I think of you—and that's what I say."

I was sincere, Padre. Yet I don't see how they can ever marry, even if Brian should learn to love the girl enough. Neither one has a penny—and—*Brian is blind*. Who can tell if he will ever get his sight again? I wish Dierdre hadn't come into our lives in just the way she did come! I wish she weren't Julian O'Farrell's sister! I hope she won't be pricked by that queer conscience of hers to tell Brian any secrets which concern me as well as Julian and herself. And I hope—whatever happens!—that I shan't be mean enough to be jealous. But—with such a new, exciting "friendship" for Brian's prop, it seems as if, for me—Othello's occupation would be gone![Pg 293]

CHAPTER XXVII

We're at Amiens, where we came by way of Montdidier and Moreuil; and nearly two weeks have dragged or slipped away since I wrote last. Meanwhile a thousand things have happened. But I'll begin at the beginning and write on till I am called by Mother Beckett.

We stopped at Soissons three more days after I told you about Dierdre and Brian, and Captain Devot and his wife. Not only did they forgive Dierdre—those two—but they took her to their hearts, perhaps more for Brian's sake than her own. I was introduced to them, and they were kind to me, too. Of the blind man I have a beautiful souvenir. I must tell you

about it, Padre!

The evening before we left Soissons (when the doctor had pronounced Mother Beckett well enough for a short journey) I had an hour in the stuffy little *salon* with Dierdre and Brian and the Devots. We sat round the fire—plenty of room for us all, in a close circle—and Captain Devot began to talk about his last battle on the Chemin des Dames. Suddenly he realized that the story was more than his wife could bear—for it was in that battle he lost his eyes! How he realized what she was enduring, I don't know, for she didn't speak, or even sigh, and Brian sat between them; so he couldn't have known she was trembling. It must have been some electric[Pg 294] current of sympathy between the husband and wife, I suppose—a magnetic flash to which a blind man would be more sensitive than others. Anyhow, he suddenly stopped speaking of the fight, and told us instead about a dream he had the night before the battle—a dream where he saw the ladies for whom "The Ladies' Way" was made, go riding by, along the "Chemin des Dames."

"In silks and satins the ladies went
Where the breezes sighed and the poplars bent,
Taking the air of a Sunday morn
Midst the red of poppies and gold of corn—
Flowery ladies in gold brocades,
With negro pages and serving maids,
In scarlet coach or in gilt sedan,
With brooch and buckle and flounce and fan,
Patch and powder and trailing scent,
Under the trees the ladies went,
Lovely ladies that gleamed and glowed,
As they took the air of the Ladies' Road."

That verse came from *Punch*, not from Captain Devot. I happen to remember it because it struck my fancy when I read it, and added to the romance of the road made for Louis XV's daughters—daughters of France, where now so many sons of France have died for France! But the ladies of Captain Devot's dream were like that, travelling with a gorgeous cavalcade, and as they rode, they were listening to a song about the old Abbey of Vauclair on the plateau of the Craonne. When they came to a place where the poppies clustered thickest, the three princesses insisted on stopping—Princess Adelaide, Princess Sophia,[Pg 295] Princess Victoire. They wished to gather the flowers to take with them to the Château de Bove, where they were going to visit their *dame d'honneur*, Madame de Narbonne, but their guards argued that already it was growing late: they had better hurry on. At this the girls laughed silvery laughter. What did time matter to them? This was *their* road, made and paved for their pleasure! They would not be hurried along it. No indeed; to show that time as well as the road was theirs, to do with as they liked, they would get down and make a chain of poppies long enough to stretch across the whole plateau before it dipped to the valley of the Ailette!

So, in Captain Devot's dream, the princesses descended, and they and all their pretty ladies began weaving a chain of poppies. As they wove, the flower-chain fell from their little white fingers and trailed along the ground in a crimson line. The sun dropped toward the west, and thunder began to roll: still they worked on! Their gentlemen-in-charge begged them to start again, and at last they rose up petulantly to go; but they had stayed too late. The storm burst. Lightning flashed; thunder roared; rain fell in torrents; and—strange to see—the poppy petals melted, so that the long chain of flowers turned to a liquid stream, red as a river of blood. The princesses were frightened and began to cry. Their tears fell into the crimson flood. Captain Devot, who seemed in his dream to be one of the ladies' attendants, jumped from his horse to pick up the princesses' tears, which turned into little, rattling stones as they fell. With that, he waked. The princesses were gone—"all but *Victoire*," he said, smiling, "she shall stay with us! The thunder was the thunder[Pg 296] of German guns. The poppies were there—and the blood was there. So also were the stones that had been the princesses' tears. They lie all along the Chemin des Dames to this day. I gathered some for my wife, and if you like she will give a few to you, ladies—souvenirs of the Ladies' Way!"

Of course we did like; so Dierdre and I each have a small, glistening gray stone, with a faint splash of red upon it. I would not sell mine for a pearl!

Father Beckett proposed to take his wife back to Paris; but while she rested after the fever, industriously she built up another plan. You remember, Padre, my telling you that the Becketts were negotiating for a château, before they arrived in France to visit their son? When they heard that Jim had fallen, they no longer cared to live in this château (which was to let, furnished), nevertheless, they felt bound in honour to stick to their bargain. Well, at Soissons, Mother Beckett had it "borne in upon her" that Jim would wish his father and mother to stay at the old house he had loved and coveted for himself.

"I can't go back across the sea and settle down at home while this war goes on!" she said. "Home just wouldn't be *home*. It's too far away from Jim. I don't mean from his *body*," she went on. "His body isn't *Jim*, I know! I've thought that out, and made myself realize the truth of it. But it's Jim's spirit I'm talking about, Father. I guess his soul—Jim himself—won't care to be flitting back and forth, crossing the ocean to visit us, while his friends are fighting in France and Belgium, to save the world. I know my boy well enough to be sure he's too[Pg 297] strong to change much just because he is what some folks call 'dead'; and he'd like us to be near. Paris won't do for me. No city would. I'd be too restless there. Do, *do* let's go and live till the end of the war in Jim's château! That's what he's wanting. I feel it every minute."

I was in the room when she made this appeal to her husband, and I longed to put into their hearts the thought Jack Curtis had put into mine. But, of course, I dared not. It would have been cruel. Jack Curtis had nothing to go upon except his impression—the same impression I myself have at times, of Jim's vital presence in the midst of life. I have it often, though never quite so strongly as that night in Paris, when he would not let me kill myself.

It wasn't difficult to make Father Beckett consent to the new plan. He told me afterward that his own great wish was to find Jim's grave, when the end of the war would make search possible. Beckett interests were being safeguarded in

America. They would not suffer much from his absence. Besides, business no longer seemed vitally important to him as of old. Money mattered little now that Jim was gone.

He would have abandoned his visit to the British front, since Mother Beckett could not have the glimpse half promised by the authorities. But she would not let him give it up. "Molly" would take good care of her. When she could move, we would all go to Amiens. There she and I could be safely left for a few days, while Brian and Father Beckett were at the front. As for Julian O'Farrell and Dierdre, at first it appeared as if the little[Pg 298] lady had left them out of her calculations. But I might have known—knowing her—that she wouldn't do that for long.

She believed implicitly in their Red Cross mission, which, ever since the little car joined the big one, has been constantly aided with Beckett money and Beckett influence. Julian would, she supposed, wish to "carry on his good work," when our trip came to an end. But as he had no permission for the British front (he hadn't cared to make himself conspicuous to the British authorities by asking for it!) he and Dierdre might like to keep us two women company at Amiens. By the time we wanted to leave, Mother Beckett confidently expected "Jim's château" to be ready for occupation, and Dierdre must visit "us" there indefinitely, while her brother dutifully continued distributing supplies to hospitals and refugees. ("Us," according to Mother Beckett, meant Brian and me, Father Beckett and herself, for we now constituted the "family"!) Telegrams had given the Paris house-letting agency *carte blanche* for hasty preparations at the Château d'Andelle, where several old servants had been kept on as caretakers: and being a spoiled American millionairess, the little lady was confident that a week would see the house aired, warmed, staffed, and altogether habitable.

"You wouldn't object to having that poor little girl stay with us, would you, dear?" Mother Beckett asked me, patting my hand when she had revealed her ideas concerning the O'Farrells.

"Oh, no," I answered, looking straight into her inquiring eyes, and trying not to change colour. "But you shouldn't speak as if I had any right——"[Pg 299]

"You have every right!" she cut me short. "Aren't you our daughter?"

"I love you and Father Beckett enough to be your daughter," I said. "But that gives me no right——"

"It does. Your love for us, and ours for you. I don't believe we could have lived through our sorrow if it hadn't been for you and Brian. He saved our reason by showing us what Jim would want us to do for the good of others. And he taught us what we couldn't seem to realize fully, through religion, that death doesn't count. Now, since I've been ill, I guess you've saved my life. And much as I want to see Jim, I want even more to live for Father. He needs me—and we both need you and Brian. You two belong to us, just as if you'd been given to us by Jim. We want to do what's best for you both. I thought, for Brian, it would be good perhaps to have Dierdre——"

"Perhaps," I murmured, when she paused.

"You're not sure? I wasn't at first. I mean, I wasn't sure she was good enough. But since the night when she threw herself in front of him to keep off the dog, I saw she cared. Maybe she didn't know it herself till then. But she's known ever since. You've only to see the way she looks at him. And she's growing more and more of a woman—Brian's influence, and the influence of her love—such a great influence, dear! It might be for his happiness, if——"

"I don't think Brian would marry Dierdre or any girl, unless his sight came back," I said. "He's often told me he wouldn't marry."

"Was that before he went to Paris with the O'Farrells? Things have been rather different since then—and a good[Pg 300] *deal* different since the night we met Jack Curtis with Sirius."

"I know," I admitted. "But if Brian wanted to change his mind about marrying, he couldn't. Neither he nor Dierdre O'Farrell have a penny——"

"Brian's got as much as we have," the dear woman assured me.

"Do you think he'd take your money to marry on? No, dearest! Brian's very unworldly. So far, he hasn't worried about finances for the present. The future is different. If he doesn't get back his sight——"

"But he will—he must!" she urged. "That great specialist you saw in Paris gave him hope. And then there's the other one that your doctor friend recommended——."

"He's somewhere at the front. We can't get at him now."

"We'll get at him later," Mother Beckett persisted. "In the meantime—let's give those two hearts the chance to draw together, if it's best for them."

I could not go on objecting. One can't, for long, when that little angel of a woman wants a thing—she who never wants anything for herself, only for others! But I thought Fate might step between Brian and Dierdre—Fate, in the shape of Puck. I wasn't at all sure that Julian O'Farrell could be contented to leave his sister and continue his own wanderings. The Red Cross taxi had in truth been only a means to an end. I didn't fancy that his devotion to duty would carry him far from the Château d'Andelle while Dierdre was comfortably installed in it. Unless he were invited to *embusquer* himself there, in our[Pg 301] society, I expected a crash. Which shows how little I knew my Julian!

When the plan was officially suggested to him, he agreed as if with enthusiasm. It was only when he'd consented to Dierdre's visit at the château on the other side of the Somme, and promised to drop in now and then himself on his way somewhere else, that he allowed himself a second thought. To attract attention to it, he started, ran his hand through his hair, and stopped in the middle of a sentence. "I am heaven's own fool!" he exclaimed.

Of course Father Beckett wanted to know why. (This was two days before we started for Amiens.) Julian "registered reluctance." Father Beckett persisted, and drew forth the information that Julian *might* have to cut short his career as a ministering Red Cross angel. "If it hadn't been for you," he said, "my funds and my supplies would have run short before this. You've helped me carry on. But I'm getting pretty close to the bone again now, I'm afraid. A bit closer and I shall have to settle down and give music lessons. That's all I'm fit for in future! And Dierdre wouldn't want me to set up housekeeping alone. While I'm on this Red Cross job it's all right, but——"

Of course Father Beckett broke in to say that there was no question of not carrying on. Money should be forthcoming for supplies as long as Julian felt inclined to drive the Red Cross taxi from one scene of desolation and distress to another. Holidays must be frequent, and all spent at the Château d'Andelle. Let the future decide itself!

So matters were settled—on the surface. Julian was [Pg 302] ready to pose before an admiring audience as the self-sacrificing hero, giving all his time and energy to a noble cause. Only his sister and I knew that he was the villain of the piece, and for different reasons neither of us could explain the mistake about his rôle. He was sure of us both; impudently, aggravatingly, yet (I can't *help* it, Padre!) amusingly sure of me. He tried to "isolate" me, as if I'd been a microbe while we were still at Soissons, and again just after Father Beckett and Brian went away from Amiens in the big gray car. There was something, something very special that he wished to say to me, I could tell by his eyes. But I contrived to thwart him. I never left Mother Beckett for a moment!

The first day at Amiens it was easy to keep out of his way altogether, for I was nurse as well as friend, and my dear little invalid was worn out after the journey from Soissons. She asked nothing better than to stop in her room. The next day, however, exciting news acted upon her like a tonic. The Amiens address had been wired to Paris, and in addition to a mass of letters (mostly for Father Beckett) there was a telegram from the Château d'Andelle, despatched by an agency messenger, who had been sent to Normandy. All was going well. The house would be ready on the date named. Two large boxes from the Ritz had safely arrived by *grande vitesse*.

"Darling Jimmy's own things!" Mother Beckett explained to me. "Do you remember my telling you we'd brought over to France the treasures out of his den at home?"

I did remember. (Do I ever forget anything she says about Jim?)[Pg 303]

"They were to be a surprise for him when he came to see us," his mother went on, tears misting the blueness of her eyes. "Not furniture, you know, but just the little things he loved best in his rooms: some he had when he was a child, and others when he was growing up—and the picture your brother painted. When we heard—the news—and knew we shouldn't see our boy again in this world, I couldn't bear to open the boxes—though I was longing to cry over his dear treasures. They've been stored at the Ritz ever since. But the first thing I asked Father to do when we decided the other day to live in Jim's château, after all—was to wire for the boxes to be sent there. I didn't suppose they'd arrive so soon—in war time. Dear me, I can hardly wait to start, now! I feel as strong as a girl."

To prove this—or because she was restless—she begged to be taken out in a cab to see the town, especially the cathedral, which Brian had told her was the largest in Europe except St. Peter's in Rome, St. Sophia in Constantinople, and something in Cologne which she didn't *want* to remember! Julian O'Farrell and his sister must go with us, of course. It wouldn't be kind to leave them to do their sightseeing alone. Besides, Julian was so good-natured, and said such funny things it would be pleasant to have his society.

This arrangement made it difficult for me to glue myself to Mother Beckett's side. Now and then she insisted upon getting out of the cab to try her strength, and Dierdre would obediently have taken her in tow, in order to hand me over to "Jule," if I hadn't been mulishly obstinate. I quite enjoyed manœuvring to use my dear [Pg 304] little invalid as a sort of standing barrage against enemy attacks, and even though Brian and I were parted for the first time since his blindness, I felt almost absurdly cheerful. It was so good to know that Mother Beckett was out of danger, and that it was I who had helped to drag her out! Besides, after all the stricken towns that have saddened our eyes, it was enlivening to be in one (as Mother Beckett said at Compiègne) with "whole houses." In contrast, good St. Firmin's ancient city looks almost as gay as Paris. Our hotel with its pleasant garden and the fine shops—(where it seems you can still buy every fascinating thing from newest jewellery and oldest curiosities, to Amiens' special "*roc*" chocolates)—the long, arbour'd boulevards, the cobbled streets, the quaint blue and pink houses of the suburbs, and the poplar-lined walk by the Somme, all, all have the friendliest air! Despite the crowds of soldiers in khaki and horizon blue who fill the streets and cafés, the place seems outside war. Even the stacked sandbags walling the west front and the side portals of the grandest cathedral in France suggest comfortable security rather than fear. The jackdaws and pigeons that used to be at home in the carvings, camp contentedly among the bags, or walk in the neglected grass where sleep the dead of long ago. I didn't want to remember just then, or let any one else remember, that twenty miles away were the trenches and thousands of the dead of to-day!

Never can Amiens have been such a kaleidoscope of colourful animation since Henri II of France and Edward VI of England signed the treaty of peace here, with trains of diplomatists and soldiers of church and state and dignified rejoicings![Pg 305]

It wasn't until we were inside the cathedral that I forgot my manœuverings. The soft, rich light gave such a bizarre effect to the sandbags protecting the famous choir carvings, that I was all eyes for a moment: and during that moment Julian must have signed to his sister to decoy Mother Beckett away from me. When I hauled my soul down from the soaring arches as one strikes a flag, there was Puck at my side and there were Mother Beckett and Dierdre disappearing behind sandbag-hillocks, in the direction of the celebrated Cherub.

"I suppose you want me jolly well to understand," said Puck, smiling, "that even if your brother Brian and my sister Dare are fools over each other, you won't be fooled into forgiving a poor, broken-voiced Pierrot?"

"I've nothing to forgive you for, personally," I said. "Only——"

"Only, you don't want to be friends?"

"No, I don't want to be friends," I echoed. "Why can't you be content with being treated decently before people, instead of following me about, trying always to bring upon yourself——"

"A lamp might ask that question of a moth."

I laughed. "You're less like a moth than any creature I ever met!"

"You don't believe I'm sincere."

"Do moths specialize in sincerity in the insect world?"

"Yes," Puck said, more gravely than usual. "Come to think of it, that's just what they *do*. They risk their lives for the light they love. I 'follow you about,' as you put it, because I love you and want to persuade you that we're birds of a feather, made for each other by nature[Pg 306] and fate and our mutual behaviour. We belong together in life."

"Do you really believe you can blackmail me into a partnership?" I turned at bay. "You must have seen that I wanted to keep out of your way——"

"Oh, I saw all right. *You* thought that I thought Amiens would be my great chance, and you made up your mind it shouldn't be if you could help it. Well, you won't be able to help it much longer, because I've got something you want, and you can't get it except through me."

"I doubt very much that I could want anything you have," I said.

"Give your imagination wings."

"You are always teasing me to guess things I don't care to guess!"

"Here comes Dierdre back with Mrs. Beckett so I won't worry you to guess. I've got a message from the Wandering Jew. Do you want it, or don't you?"[Pg 307]

CHAPTER XXVIII

If Julian had suddenly popped down an apple on the top of my head, *à la* Gessler and the son of William Tell, and thereupon proceeded to shoot it off, I could have been no more amazed. For once he outflanked me, caught me completely off my guard! I saw by the impish gleam in his eye how delighted he was with himself.

"Yes or no, please; quick!" he fired the next volley as I stood speechless.

"Yes!" I gasped. "I do want the message—if it's for me. But why should he send word through you?"

"He didn't. I caught it as I might catch a homing carrier-pigeon. You know, my motto is 'All's fair in love and war.' In my case, both exist—your fault! Besides, what I did was for your good."

"What did you do—what did you *dare* to do?"

"Dare!" Puck mimicked my foolish fury. "'Dare' is such a melodramatic word from you to me. I can't tell you now what I did, or the message—no time. But I'm in as much of a hurry as you are. When can I see you alone?"

I hesitated, because it would be like him to cheat me with some trick, and chuckle at my rage. I couldn't see how a message from Paul Herter for me had reached Julian O'Farrell, unless he'd intercepted a letter. It seemed far more likely that Puck was romancing, yet I felt in my[Pg 308] bones and heart and solar plexus that he wasn't! I simply *had* to know—and in a flurry, before Mother Beckett and Dierdre were upon us, I said, "This afternoon, at three, when Mrs. Beckett is having her nap. I'll meet you in the garden of the hotel."

Though I dash along with this story of mine, Padre, as if I went straight on describing the scene between Julian and me from beginning to end, without a break, it isn't really so. I've been interrupted more than once, and may be again; but I shall tell you everything that's happened since we came to Amiens, as if I wrote consecutively. You can understand better in that way, and help me with your strength and love, through your understanding, as I feel you do help, whenever I make you my confessions. Since I've begun to write you, as in old days when you were in the flesh, I've felt your advice come to me in electric flashes. I'm sure I don't just imagine this. It's real, dear Padre, and makes all the difference to me that a rope flung out over dark waters would make to a drowning man.

At three o'clock I was in the garden. It was cold, but I didn't care. Besides, I was too excited to feel the chill. I wanted to be out of doors because there would be people about, and no chance for Julian to try and kiss my hand—no vulgar temptation for me to box his ears!

He was already waiting, strolling up and down, smoking a cigarette which he threw away at sight of me. Evidently he'd decided on this occasion not to be frivolous!

I selected a seat safely commanded by many windows. "Now!" I said, sitting down close to one end of the bench.

Julian took the other end, but sat gazing straight at me without a word. There was an odd expression on his[Pg 309] face. I didn't know how to read it, or to guess what was to come. But there was nothing Puckish about the enemy at that moment. He looked nervous—almost as if he were afraid. I thought of something you told me when I was quite small,

Padre: how the Romans of old used to send packets of good news bound with laurel, or of bad news, tied with the plumes of ravens. I stared into Julian O'Farrell's stare, and wished that he'd stuck a green leaf or a black feather in his buttonhole to prepare my mind.

"Yes—now!" he echoed at last, as if he'd suddenly waked up to my challenge. "Well, a man blew into this hotel last night—a lame Frenchman with a face like a boiled ghost. I was writing an important telegram (I'll tell you about that later), when I heard this person ask the concierge if a Miss Mary O'Malley was staying in the house. That made me open my eyes—because he was of the lower *bourgeois* class, and hadn't the air of being—so to speak—in your set. It seemed as if 'twas up to me to tackle him; so I did. I introduced myself as a friend of Miss O'Malley's, travelling with her party. I explained that Miss O'Malley was taking care of an old lady who'd been ill and was tired after a long journey. I asked if he'd like to give a message. He said he would. But first he began to explain who he was: an Alsatian by birth, named Muller, corporal in an infantry regiment; been a prisoner in Germany, I forget how long—taken wounded; leg amputated; and fitted with artificial limb in a Boche hospital; just exchanged for a *grand blessé* Boche, and repatriated; been in Paris on important business, apparently with the War Office—sounded more exciting than he looked! After I'd prodded the chap tactfully, he came[Pg 310] back to the subject of the message: asked me if I knew Doctor Paul Herter. I said I did know him. Herter mended up my sister after an air raid. I inquired politely where Herter was, but Muller evaded that question. He led me to suppose he'd seen Herter in Paris; but putting two and two together, I got a different idea—*altogether* different."

Julian paused on those words, and tried piercingly to read my thoughts. But I made my face expressionless as the front of a shut-up house, with "to let unfurnished" over the door.

"I expect you've guessed what my idea was, and I bet you know for a fact whether I was on the right track," he ventured.

"The only thing so far which I know for a fact," I said, "is that you had no right to talk to the man at all. You should have sent for me at once."

"You couldn't have come if I had. Dierdre had told me about five minutes before that you were putting Mrs. Beckett to bed, and giving her a massage treatment with a rub-down of alcohol."

"Why didn't you ask the man to wait?"

"I did ask him if he *could* wait, and he said he couldn't. He'd stopped at Amiens on purpose to deliver his message, and he had to catch a train on to Allonville, to where it seems his people have migrated."

"You asked him that because you hoped he couldn't wait—and if he could, you'd have found some reason for not letting me meet him. You thought you saw a way of getting a new hold over me!"

"Some such dramatic idea may have flitted through my[Pg 311] head. I've often warned you, I *am* dramatic! I enjoy dramatizing life for myself and others! But honestly, he couldn't wait for you to finish with Mrs. Beckett. I know too well how devoted you are to think you'd have left the old lady before you'd soothed her off to sleep."

"Where is the message?" I snatched Julian back to the point.

"In my brain at present."

"You destroyed the letter?"

"There wasn't a letter. Oh, make grappling hooks of your lovely eyes if you like! You can't drag anything out of me that doesn't exist. Herter's message to you was verbal for safety. That was one thing set me thinking the men hadn't met in Paris. Muller admitted going to a bank to get your address. The people there didn't want to give it, but when he explained that it was important, and mentioned where he was going, they saw that he might have time to meet you at Amiens on his way home. So they told him where you were. Now, there's no good your being cross with *me*. What's done is done, and can't be undone. I acted for the best—*my* best; and in my opinion for your best. Listen! Here's the message, word for word. You'll see that a few hours' delay for me to think it over could make no difference to any one concerned. Paul Herter, from somewhere—but maybe not 'somewhere in France'—sends you a verbal greeting, because it was more sure of reaching you—not coming to grief *en route*. He reminds you that he asked for an address in case he had something of interest to communicate. He hoped to find the grave of a man you loved. Instead, he thinks he has found that there is no grave—that the man[Pg 312] is above ground and well. He isn't sure yet whether he may be deceived by a likeness of names. But he's sure enough to say: 'Hope.' If he's right about the man, you may get further news almost any minute by way of Switzerland or somewhere neutral. That's all. Yet it's enough to show you what danger you're in. If Herter hadn't been practically certain, he wouldn't have sent any message. He'd have waited. Evidently you made him believe that you loved Jim Beckett, so he wanted to prepare your mind by degrees. I suppose he imagined a shock of joy might be dangerous. Well, you ought to thank Herter just the same for sparing you a worse sort of shock. And I thank him, too, for it gives me a great chance—the chance to save you. Mary, the time's come for you and me to fade off the Beckett scene—together."

I listened without interrupting him once: at first, because I was stunned, and a thousand thoughts beat dully against my brain without finding their way in, as gulls beat their wings against the lamp of a lighthouse; at last, because I wished to hear Julian O'Farrell to the very end before I answered. I fancied that in answering I could better marshal my own thoughts.

He misunderstood my silence—I expected him to do that, but I cared not at all—so, when he had paused and still I said nothing, he went on: "Of course I—for the best of reasons—know you didn't love Jim Beckett, and couldn't love him."

Hearing those words of his, suddenly I knew just what I wanted to say. I'd been like an amateur actress wild with stage

fright, who'd forgotten her part till the right[Pg 313] cue came. "There you're mistaken," I contradicted him. "I did love Jim Beckett."

Julian gave an excited, brutal laugh. "Tell that to the Marines, my child, not to yours truly! You never set eyes on Jim Beckett. He never went near your hospital. You never came near the training-camp. You seem to have forgotten that I was on the spot."

"I met him before the war," I said.

"What's that?" Julian didn't know whether to believe me or not, but his forehead flushed to the black line of his low-growing hair.

"I never told you, because there was no need to tell," I went on. "But it's true. I fell in love with Jim Beckett then, and—*he cared for me.*"

For the first time I realized that Julian O'Farrell's "love" wasn't all pretence. His flush died, and left him pale with that sick, greenish-olive pallor which men of Latin blood have when they're near fainting. He opened his lips, but did not speak, because, I think, he could not. If I'd wanted revenge for what he made me suffer when he first thrust himself into my life, I had it then; but to my own surprise I felt no pleasure in striking him. Instead I felt vaguely sorry, though very distant from his plans and interests.

"You—you weren't engaged to Beckett, anyhow. I'm sure you weren't, or you'd have had nothing to worry about when Dierdre and I turned up," he faced me down.

"No, we weren't engaged," I admitted. "I—was just as much of a fraud as you meant Dierdre to be with Father and Mother Beckett. I've no excuse—except that it was[Pg 314] for Brian's sake. But that's no excuse really, and Brian would despise me if he knew."

"There you are!" Julian burst out, with a relieved sigh, a more natural colour creeping back to his face. "If Jim Beckett let you go before the war without asking you to marry him, I'm afraid his love couldn't have been very deep—not deep enough to make him forgive you after all this time for deceiving his old father and mother the way you have. My God, no! In spite of your beauty, he'd have no mercy on you!"

"That's what I think," I said. "My having met him, and his loving me a little, makes what I've done more shameful than if I'd never met him at all."

"Then you see why you must get away as quick as you can!" urged Julian, his eyes lighting as he drew nearer to me on the garden bench. "Oh, wait, don't speak yet! Let me explain my plan. There's time still. You're thinking of Brian before yourself, maybe. But he's safe. The Becketts adore him. They say he 'saved their reason.' He makes the mysticism they're always groping for seem real as their daily bread. He puts local colour into the fourth dimension for them! They can never do without Brian again. All that's needed is for him to propose to Dierdre. I know—you think he won't, no matter how he feels. But he'll have missed her while he's away. She's a missable little thing to any one who likes her, and she can tempt him to speak out in spite of himself when he gets back. I'll see to it that she does. The Becketts will be enchanted. The old lady's a born match-maker. We can announce our engagement at the same time. While they think Jim's dead, they won't grudge your being happy[Pg 315] with another man, especially with me. They're fond of me! And you're young. Your life's before you. They're too generous to stand in your way. They look on you as a daughter, and Brian as a son. They'll give each of you a handsome wedding present, and I don't doubt they'll ask Brian to live with them, or near them, if he's to be blind all his life. He'll have everything you wanted to win for him. Even when they get into communication with Jim, and find out the truth about you, why I bet anything they'll hide it from Brian to keep him happy! Meanwhile you and I will be in Paris, safely married. An offer came to me yesterday from Jean De Letzski—forwarded on. He's getting old. He wants me to take on some of his pupils, under his direction. I telegraphed back my acceptance. That's the wire I was sending when Herter's man turned up last night. There was a question last summer of my getting this chance with De Letzski, but I hardly dared hope. It's a great stroke of luck! In the end I shall stand in De Letzski's shoes, and be a rich man—almost as rich as if I'd kept my place as star tenor in opera. Even at the beginning you and I won't be poor. I count on a wedding gift from the Becketts to you of ten thousand dollars at least. The one way to save our reputations is to marry or die brilliantly. We choose the former. We can take a fine apartment. We'll entertain the most interesting set in Paris. With your looks and charm, and what's left of my voice, we——"

"Oh, *stop!*" I plunged into the torrent of his talk. "You are making me—*sick*. Do you really believe I'd accept money from Jim Beckett's parents, and—marry you?"[Pg 316]

He stared, round-eyed and hurt, like a misunderstood child. "But," he blundered on, "don't you see it's the only thing you can do—anyhow, to marry me? If you won't accept money, why it's a pity and a waste, but I want you enough to snap you up without a franc. You must marry me, dear. Think what I gave up for you!"

I burst out laughing. "What you gave up for me!"

"Yes. Have you forgotten already? If I hadn't fallen in love with you at first sight, and sacrificed myself and Dierdre for your good, wouldn't my sister have been in your place now, and you and your brother Lord knows where—in prison as impostors, perhaps?"

"According to you, my place isn't a very enviable one at present," I said. "But I'd rather be in prison for life than married to you. What a vision—what a couple!"

"Oh, I know having you for my wife would be a good deal like going to heaven in a strong mustard plaster; but I'd stand the smart for the sake of the bliss. If you won't marry me and if you won't take money from the Becketts, what will become of you? That's what I want to know! You can't stay on with them. You daren't risk going to their Château

d'Andelle, as things are turning out. Herter's certainly in Germany—ideal man for a spy! If he runs across Jim Beckett, as he's trying to do, he'll move heaven and earth to help him escape. He must have influence, and secret ways of working things. He may have got at Jim before this for all we can tell. Muller let it leak out that he left Herter—somewhere—a week ago. A lot can happen in a week—to a Wandering Jew. The ground's trembling under your feet. You'll have to skip without Brian, without money, without—"[Pg 317]

"I shall not stir," I said. "I can't leave Mrs. Beckett, I won't leave her! The only way I can atone even a little bit, is to stop and take care of her while she needs me, no matter what happens. When she finds out, she won't want me any longer. Then I'll go. But not before."

We glared at each other like two fencers through the veil of falling dusk. Suddenly I sprang up from the bench, remembering that, at least, I could escape from Julian, if not from the sword of Damocles. But he caught my dress, and held me fast.

"What if I tell the old birds the whole story up to date?" he blustered. "I can, you know."

"You can. Please give me fair warning if you're going to—that's all I ask. I'll try to prepare Mrs. Beckett's mind to bear the shock. She's not very strong, but—"

"If I don't tell, it won't be because of her. It will be for you—always, everything, for you! But I haven't decided yet. I don't know what I shall do yet. I must think. You'll have to make the best of that compromise unless you change your mind."

"I shall not change my mind," I said.[Pg 318]

CHAPTER XXIX

Later, Padre, when I'd broken away from Julian, I wondered if he had made up the whole story. The cruel trick would be impishly characteristic! But I went straight to the concierge to ask about Muller. He said that a man of that name had called the night before, inquiring for me, and had talked with "the Monsieur who looked like an Italian." This practically convinced me that Julian hadn't lied.

If only I could get direct advice from you! Do try to send me an inspiration of what to do for the best.

My first impulse was to give Mother Beckett a faint hint of hope. But I dared not run the risk. If Paul Herter proved to be mistaken, it would be for her like losing her son a second time, and the dear one's strength might not be equal to the strain. After thinking and unthinking all night, I decided to keep silent until our two men returned from the British front. Then, perhaps, I might tell Brian of the message from Doctor Paul, and ask his opinion about speaking to Father Beckett. As for myself, I resolved not to make any confession, unless it were certain that Jim lived. And I'm not sure, Padre, whether that decision was based on sheer, selfish cowardice, or whether I founded it partly on the arguments I presented to myself. I said in my mind: "If it's true that everything you did in the beginning was for Brian's[Pg 319] good, why undo it all at the most critical hour of his life, when perhaps there may never be any reason to speak?" Also I said: "Why make it impossible for yourself to give Mother Beckett the care she needs, and can hardly do without yet? Every day counts with her now. Why not wait unless you hear again more definitely?"

The annoying part of a specious argument is that there's always some truth in it, and it seems like kind advice from wise friends!

Anyhow, I *did* wait. Julian made no further appeal to me, and I felt sure that he said nothing to Dierdre. If he had taken her into his confidence, I should have known by her manner; because, from the shut-up, night-flower of a girl that she was, she has rather pathetically opened out for me into a daylight flower. All this since she came of her own free will and told me of the scene in the chill boarding house *salon* at Soissons. I used to think her as secret as the grave—and deeper. She used to make me "creep" as if a mouse ran over *mine*, by the way her eyes watched me: still as a cat's looking into the fire. If we had to shake hands, she used to present me with a limp little bunch of cold fingers, which made me long to ask what the deuce she wanted me to do with them? Now, because I'm Brian's sister, and because I'm human enough to love her love of him, the flower-part of her nature sheds perfume and distils honey for me: the cat-part purrs; the girl-part warms. The creature actually deigns to like me! It could not now conceal its anxiety for Brian and Brian's kith and kin, if it knew what Julian knows.

I waited until our last day at Amiens, and Father Beckett, Brian, and Sirius are back from the British front.[Pg 320] Perhaps I forgot to tell you that Sirius went. He wasn't on the programme, but he knew somehow that his master was planning a separation, and refused to fall in with the scheme. He was discovered in the motor-car when it was ready to start, looking his best, his dear face parted in the middle with an irresistible, ingratiating smile. When Brian tried to put him out he flattened himself, and clung like a limpet. By Father Beckett's intercession, he was eventually taken, trusting to luck for toleration by the British Army. Of course he continued to smile upon all possible arbiters of his fate; and the drama of his history, combined with the pathos of his blind master who fought on these battlefields of Flanders, which now he cannot see, made Brian's Sirius and Sirius's Brian *personæ gratæ* everywhere.

"I should have been nobody and nothing without them!" modestly insisted the millionaire philanthropist for whom all the privileges of the trip had been granted.

To me, with the one thought, the one word "Jim—Jim—*Jim*!" repeating in my head it was strange, even irrelevant to hear Jim's unsuspecting father and my blind brother discoursing of their adventures.

We all assembled in Mother Beckett's sitting room to listen to the recital, she on a sofa, a rug over her feet, and on her

transparent face an utterly absorbed, tense expression rather like a French spaniel trying to learn an English trick.

Father Beckett appointed Brian as spokesman, and then in his excitement broke in every instant with: "Don't forget this! Be sure to remember that! But so-and-so was the best!" Or he jumped up from his chair by the [Pg 321] sofa, and dropped his wife's hand to point out something on the map, spread like a cloth over the whole top of a bridge-table.

It was his finger that sketched for our eyes the sharp triangle which the road-journey had formed: Amiens to Albert: Albert to Péronne: Péronne to Bapaume: Bapaume to Arras: Arras to Bethune, and so on to Ypres: his finger that reminded Brian of the first forest on the road—a forest full of working German prisoners.

At Pont-Noyelles, between Amiens and Albert, they were met by an officer who was to be their guide for that part of the British front which they were to visit. He was sent from headquarters, but hadn't been able to afford time for Amiens. However, Pont-Noyelles was the most interesting place between there and Albert. A tremendous battle was fought on that spot in '70, between the French under famous General Faidherbe and the Germans under Manteuffel—a *perfect* name for a German general of these days, if not of those! There were two monuments to commemorate the battle—one high on a hill above the village; and the officer guide (with the face of a boy and the grim experience of an Old Contemptible) was well up in their history. He turned out to be a friend of friends of Brian and knew the history of Sirius as well as that of all the war-wasted land. He and Brian, though they'd never met, had fought near each other it seemed, and he could describe for the blind eyes all the changes that had come upon the Somme country since Brian's "day." The roads which had been remade by the British over the shell-scarred and honeycombed surface of the land; the aerodromes; the training-camps; the tanks; the wonderful [Pg 322] new railways for troops and ammunition: the bands of German prisoners docilely at work.

When the great gray car stopped, throbbing, at special view-points here and there, it was Brian who could listen for a lark's message of hope among the billowing downs, or draw in the tea-rose scent of earth from some brown field tilled by a woman. It was Father Beckett who saw the horrors of desolation—desolation more hideous even than on the French front; because, since the beginning, here had burned the hottest furnace of war: here had fallen a black, never-ceasing rain of bombardment, night and day, day and night, year after year.

It was the cherubic Old Contemptible who could tell each detail of war-history, when the car reached Albert. It was Brian who knew the ancient legend of the place, and the modern story of the spy, which, together, double the dramatic interest of the Bending Virgin. In the eleventh century a shepherd boy discovered, in a miraculous way, a statue of the Virgin. There was a far-off sound of music at night, when he was out in search of strayed sheep, and being young he forgot his errand in curiosity to learn whence came the mysterious chanting, accompanied by the silver notes of a flute. The boy wandered in the direction of the delicate sounds, and to his amazement found all the lost flock grazing round a statue which appeared to have risen from the earth. On that spot was built the basilica of Notre-Dame de Brébières, which became a place of pilgrimage. The Virgin of the Shepherds was supposed to send her blessings far, far over the countryside, and her gilded image, with the baby Christ in her arms, was a flaming beacon at sunrise and sunset. Thus

[Pg 323] on her high tower the golden Lady stood when the war began. Albert was pitilessly bombarded, and with a startling accuracy which none could understand: yet the church itself, with its temptingly high tower, remained intact. Through October, 1914, the shining figure blazed against the sky, while houses fell in all quarters of the town: but on November 1st, three bombs struck the church. They were the first heavy drops of rain in a thunderstorm. The roof crashed in: and presently the pedestal of the Virgin received a shattering blow. This was on the very day when Albert discovered why for so long the church had been immune. A spy had been safely signalling from the tower, telling German gunners how and where to strike with the most damage to the town. When all the factories which gave wealth to Albert, and the best houses, had been methodically destroyed, the spy silently stole away: and the Virgin of the Shepherds then bent over, face down, to search for this black sheep of the fold. Ever since she with the sacred Child in her arms has hung thus suspended in pity and blessing over mountainous piles of wreckage which once composed the market-place. She will not crash to earth, Albert believes, till the war is over. But so loved is she in her posture of protection that the citizens propose to keep her in it for ever to commemorate the war-history of Albert, when Albert is rebuilt for future generations.

From there the gray car ran on almost due east to Péronne, out of the country of Surrey-like, Chiltern-like downs, into a strange marshy waste, where the river Somme expands into vast meres, swarming with many fish. It looked, Father Beckett said, "Like a bit of [Pg 324] the world when God had just begun to create life out of chaos."

Poor Péronne! In its glorious days of feudal youth its fortress-castle was invincible. The walls were so thick that in days before gunpowder no assaults could hope to break through them. Down in its underground depths was a dungeon, where trapped enemy princes lay rotting and starving through weary years, never released save by death, unless tortured into signing shameful treaties. The very sound of the name, "Péronne," is an echo of history, as Brian says. Hardly a year-date in the Middle Ages could be pricked by a pin without touching some sensational event going on at that time at Péronne. I remember this from my schooldays; and more clearly still from "Quentin Durward," which I have promised to read aloud to Mother Beckett. I remember the Scottish monks who were established at Péronne in the reign of Clovis. I remember how Charles the Bold of Burgundy (who died outside Nancy's gates) imprisoned wicked Louis XI in a strong tower of the château, one of the four towers with conical roofs, like extinguishers of giant candles and kingly reputations! I remember best of all the heroine of Péronne, Catherine de Poix, "la belle Péronnaise," who broke with her own hand the standard of Charles's royal flag, in the siege of 1536, threw the bearer into the fosse, and saved the city.

When Wellington took the fortress in 1814, he did not desecrate or despoil the place: it was left for the Germans to do that, just a century later in the progress of civilization! My blood grew hot as I heard from our two men the story of what the new Vandals had done. Just [Pg 325] for a moment I almost forgot the secret burning in my heart. The proud pile of historic stone brought to earth at last, like a soldier-king, felled by an axe in his old age: the statue of Catherine

thrown from its pedestal, and replaced in mockery by a foolish manikin—this as a mean revenge for what she did to the standard-bearer, most of Charles's men in the siege being Germans, under Henry of Nassau.

"Toujours Francs-Péronnais
Auront bon jour,
Toujours et en tout temps
Francs-Péronnais auront bon temps,"

the girls used to sing in old days as they wove the wonderful linens and tissues of Péronne, or embroidered banners of gorgeous colours to commemorate the saving of the Picard city by Catherine: as Brian repeated to Father Beckett wandering through the ruins redeemed last spring for France by the British. And though Brian's eyes could not see the rubbish-heap where once had soared the citadel he saw through the mystic veil of his blindness many things which others did not see.

It seems that above these marshy flats of the Somme, where the river has wandered away from the hills and disguised itself in shining lakes, gauzy mists always hover. Brian had seen them with bodily eyes, while he was a soldier. Now, with the eyes of his spirit he saw them again, gleaming with the delicate, indescribable colours which only blind eyes can call up to lighten darkness. He saw the fleecy clouds streaming over Péronne like a vast, transparent ghost-banner. He saw on their filmy[Pg 326] folds, as if traced in blue and gold and royal purple, the ever famous scene on the walls when Catherine and her following beat back Nassau's men from the one breach where they might have captured the town. And this mystic banner of the spirit Germans can never capture or desecrate. It will wave over Péronne—what was Péronne, and what will again be Péronne—while the world goes on making history for free men.

After Péronne, Bapaume: the battered corpse of Bapaume, murdered in flame that reddened all the skies of Picardy before the British came to chase the Germans out!

In old times, when a place was destroyed the saying was, "Not one stone is left upon another." But in this war, destruction means an avalanche of stones upon each other. Bapaume as Father Beckett saw it, is a Herculeum unexcavated. Beneath lie buried countless precious things, and still more precious memories; the feudal grandeur of the old château where Philippe-Auguste married proud Isabelle de Hainaut, with splendid ceremony as long ago as 1180: the broken glory of ancient ramparts, where modern lovers walked till the bugles of August 2, 1914, parted them for ever; the arcaded Town Hall, old as the domination of the Spaniards in Picardy; the sixteenth-century church of St. Nicolas with its quaint Byzantine Virgin of miracles: the statue of Faidherbe who beat back the German wave from Bapaume in 1871: all, all burned and battered, and mingled inextricably with débris of pitiful little homes, nobles' houses, rich shops and tiny *boutiques*, so that, when Bapaume rises from the dead, she will rise as one—even as France has risen.[Pg 327]

Of the halting places on this pilgrimage along the British front, I should best have liked to be with Brian and Father Beckett at Arras. Brian and I were there together you know, Padre, on that happy-go-lucky tramping tour of ours—not long before I met Jim. We both loved Arras, Brian and I, and spent a week there in the most fascinating of ancient hotels. It had been a palace; and I had a huge room, big enough for the bedchamber of a princess (princesses should always have bedchambers, never mere bedrooms!) with long windows draped like the walls and stiff old furniture, in yellow satin. I was frightened when an aged servant with the air of a pontiff ushered me in; for Brian and I were travelling "on the cheap." But Arras, though delicious in its quaint charm, never attracted hordes of ordinary tourists. Consequently one could have yellow satin hangings without being beggared.

Oh, how happy we were in that hotel, and in the adorable old town! While Brian painted in the Grande Place and the Petite Place, and sketched the Abbey of St. Waast (who brought Christianity to that part of the world) I wandered alone. I used to stand every evening till my neck ached, staring up at the beautiful belfry, to watch the swallows chase each other back and forth among the bells, whose peal was music of fairyland. And I never tired of wandering through the arcades under the tall old Flemish houses with their overhanging upper storeys, or peeping into the arcades' cool shadows, from the middle of the sunlit squares.

There were some delightful shops in those arcades, where they sold antique Flemish furniture, queer old pictures showing Arras in her proud, treaty-making days (you know[Pg 328] what a great place she was for treaty-making!) and lovely faded tapestries said to be "genuinely" of the time when no one mentioned a piece of tapestry save as an "arras." But the shop I haunted was a cake-shop. It was called "*Au Cœur d'Arras*," because the famous speciality of Arras was a heart-shaped cake; but I wasn't lured there so much by the charm of *les cœurs* as by that of the person who sold them.

I dare say I described her to you in letters, or when I got back to England after that trip. The most wonderful old lady who ever lived! She didn't welcome her customers at all. She just sat and knitted. She had an architectural sort of face, framed with a crust of snow—I mean, a frilled cap! And if one furtively stared, she looked at one down her nose, and made one feel cheap and small as if one had snored, or hiccupped out aloud in a cathedral! But it seems I won her esteem by enquiring if "*les cœurs d'Arras*" had a history. Nobody else had ever shown enough intelligence to care! So she gave me the history of the cakes, and of everything else in Arras; also, before we went away, she escorted Brian and me into a marvellous cellar beneath her shop. It went down three storeys and had fireplaces and a well! The earth under La Grande Place was honeycombed with such *souterrains*, she said. They'd once been quarries, in days so old as to be forgotten—quarries of "tender stone" (what a nice expression!), and the people of Arras had cemented and made them habitable in case of bombardment. They must have been useful in 1914!

As for the cakes, they were invented by an abbess who was sent to Spain. Before reluctantly departing, she[Pg 329] gave the recipe to her successor, saying she "left her heart in Arras." According to the legend (the old shop-lady assured me) a girl who had never loved was certain to fall in love within a month after first eating a Heart of Arras. Well, Padre, I ate almost a hundred hearts, and less than a month after I met Jim!

You may believe that I asked Brian and Father Beckett a dozen questions at once about dear Arras. But alas, alas! all

the answers were sad.

The beautiful belfry? Only a phantom remaining. The Hôtel de Ville? Smashed. La Grande Place—La Petite Place? Stone quarries above ground as well as below, the old Flemish façades crumbled like sheets of barley sugar. The arcades? Ruined. The charming old shops? Vanished. The seller of Hearts? Dead. But the Hearts—*they* still existed! The children of Arras who have come back "since the worst was over" (that is their way of putting it!) would not feel that life was life without the Arras Hearts. Besides, Arras without the Hearts would be like the Altar of the Vestal Virgins without the ever-burning lamp. So they are still baked, and still eaten, those brave little Hearts of Arras—and Brian asked Father Beckett to bring me a box.

They bought it of a cousin of my old woman, an ancient man who had lurked in a cellar during the whole of the bombardment. He said that all Arras knew, in September, 1914, how the Kaiser had vowed to march into the town in triumph, and how, when he found the place as hard to take "as quicksilver is to grasp," he revenged himself by destroying its best-beloved treasures. He must have rejoiced that July day of 1915, when Wolff's Agency was [Pg 330] able to announce at last, that the Abbey of St. Waast and its museum were in flames!

As the gray car bumped on to Bethune, Vimy Ridge floated blue in the far distance, to the right of the road, and Father Beckett and Brian took off their hats to it. Still farther away, and out of sight lay Lens, in German possession, but practically encircled by the British. The Old Contemptible had been there, and described the town as having scarcely a roof left, but being an "ant heap" of Boches, who swarm in underground shelters bristling with machine guns. Between Lens and the road stood the celebrated Colonne de Condé, showing where the prince won his great victory over Spain; and farther on, within gun-sound distance though out of sight, lay Loos, on the Canal de l'Haute Deule. Who thinks nowadays of its powerful Cistercian Abbey, that dominated the country round? Who thinks twice, when travelling this Apian Way which Germany has given France, of any history which began or ended before the year 1914?

Bethune they found still existing as a town. It has been bombarded often but not utterly destroyed, and from there they ran out four miles to Festubert, because the little that the Germans have left of the thirteenth-century church and village, burns with an eternal flame of interest.

Bethune itself was a famous fortress once, full of history and legend: but isn't the whole country in its waste and ruin, like a torn historic banner, crusted with jewels—magic jewels, which cannot be stolen by enemy hands?

On the way to Ypres—crown and climax of the tour—the car passed Lillers and Hazebrouck, places never to be forgotten by hearts that beat in the battles of Flanders.[Pg 331] Then came the frontier at Steenwoorde; and they were actually in Belgium, passing Poperinghe to Ypres, the most famous British battleground of the war.

When Brian was fighting, and when you were on earth, Padre, everyone talked about the "Ypres Salient." Now, though for soldiers Ypres will always be the "salient" since the battle of Wytschaete Ridge, the *material* salient has vanished. Yet the same trenches exist, in the same gray waste which Brian used to paint in those haunting, impressionist war sketches of his that all London talked about, after the Regent Street exhibition that he didn't even try for leave to see! The critics spoke of the mysterious, spiritual quality of his work, which gave "without sentimentality" picturesqueness to the shell-holes and mud, the shattered trees and wooden crosses, under eternally dreaming skies.

Well, Brian tells me that going back as a blind man to the old scenes, he had a strange, thrilling sense of *seeing* them—seeing more clearly than before those effects of mysterious beauty, hovering with prophecy above the squalor of mud and blood, hovering and mingling as the faint light of dawn mingles, at a certain hour, with the shadows of night. People used to call his talent a "blend of vision with reality." Now, all that is left him is "vision"—vision of the spirit. But with help—I used to think it would be *my* help: now I realize it will be Dierdre's—who knows what extraordinary things my blind Brian may accomplish? His hope is so beautiful, and so strong, that it has lit an answering flame of hope in me.

He and I were in Ypres for a few days, just about the time I was wondering why "Jim Wyndham" didn't keep [Pg 332] his promise to find me again. It was in Ypres, I remember, that I came across the box of "*Cœurs d'Arras*" I'd brought with me. Opening it, I recalled the legend about a girl who has never loved, falling in love within a month after first eating an Arras Heart. It was then I said to myself, "Why, it has *come true!* I have fallen in love with Jim Wyndham—and *he has forgotten me!*"

Oh, Padre, how that pain comes back to me now, in the midst of the new pain, like the "core of the brilliance within the brilliance!" Which hurt is worse, to love a man, and believe oneself forgotten, or to love and know one has been loved, and then become unworthy? I can't be sure. I can't even be sure that, if I could, I would go back to being the old self before I committed the one big sin of my life, which gave me Jim's father and mother, and the assurance that *he had cared*. For a while, after Mother Beckett told me about Jim's love for "The Girl," in spite of my wickedness I glowed with a kind of happiness. I felt that, through all the years of my life—even when I grew old—Jim would be *mine*, young, handsome, gay, just as I had seen him on the Wonderful Day: that I could always run away from outside things and shut the gate of the garden on myself and Jim—that rose-garden on the border of Belgium. Now, when I know—or almost know—that he will come back in the flesh to despise me, and that the gate of the garden will be forever shut—why, I shall be punished as perhaps no woman has ever been punished before. Still—*still* I can't be sure that I would escape, if I could, by going back to my old self!

It is writing of Belgium, and my days there with Brian [Pg 333] while I still hoped to see Jim, that brings all these thoughts crowding so thickly to my mind, they seem to drip off my pen!

But what a different Ypres Father Beckett has now seen, and Brian *felt*, from that dear, pleasant Ypres into which we two drove in a cart, along a cobbled causeway as straight as a tight-drawn string! Tourists who loved the blue, and yellow, and red bath-houses on the golden beach of Ostend, didn't worry to motor over the bumpy road, through the Flemish plain to Ypres. The war was needed to bring its sad fame to "Wipers!" But Brian and I interrupted our walking tour with that cart, because we knew that the interminable causeway would take us deep into the inner quaintness of

Flanders. We adored it all: and at every stopping-place on the twenty-mile road, I had the secret joy of whispering; "Perhaps it is *here* that He will suddenly appear, and meet us!"

There was one farmhouse on the way, where I longed to have him come. I wanted him so much that I almost *created* him! I was listening every moment, and through every sound, for his car. It never came. But because I so wished the place to be a background for our meeting I can see the two large living-rooms of the old house, with the black-beamed ceilings, the Flemish stoves, the tall, carved sideboards and chests with armorial bearings, the deep window-seats that were flower-stands and work-tables combined, and the shelves of ancient pottery and gleaming, antique brass. There was a comfortable fragrance of new-baked bread, mingling with the spicy scent of grass-pinks, in that house: and the hostess who gave us luncheon—a young married woman—had a mild,[Pg 334] sweet face, strongly resembling that of St. Geneviève of Brabant, as pictured in a coloured lithograph on the wall.

St. Geneviève's story is surely the most romantic, the most pathetic of any saint who ever deigned to tread on earth!—and her life and death might serve as an allegory of Belgium's martyrdom, poor Belgium, the little country whose patron she is. Since that day at the farmhouse on the road to Ypres, I've thought often of the gentle face with its forget-me-not eyes and golden hair; and of Golo the dark persecutor who—they say now—was a *real* person and an ancestor of the Hohenzollerns through the first Duc de Bavière.

At Ypres, Brian painted for me a funny "imagination picture" imitating earliest Flemish work. It showed Ypres when there was no town save a few tiny houses and a triangular stronghold, with a turret at each corner, built on a little island in the river Yperlee. He named the picture "The Castle of the Three Strong Towers," and dated it in the year 900. A thousand years have passed since then. Slowly, after much fighting (the British fought as hard to take Ypres once, as they fight to save it now), the town grew great and powerful, and became the capital of Flanders. The days of the rough earthen stockades and sharp thorn-bush defences of "Our Lady of the Enclosures" passed on to the days of casemates and moats; and still on, to the days when the old fortifications could be turned into ornamental walks—days of quaintly beautiful architecture, such as Brian and I saw before the war, when we spent hours in the Grand' Place, admiring the wonderful Cloth Hall and the Spanish-looking Nieuwerck.[Pg 335] The people of Ypres told us proudly that nothing in Bruges itself, or anywhere in Flanders, could compare with those noble buildings massed together at the west end of the Grand' Place, each stone of which represented so much wealth of the richest merchant kings of Europe.

And now, the work of those thousand busy years has crumbled in a few monstrous months, like the sand-houses of children when the tide comes in! What Father Beckett saw of Ypres after three years' bombardment, was not much more than that shown in Brian's picture, dated 900! A blackened wall or two and a heap of rubble where stood the *Halle des Drapiers*—pride of Ypres since the thirteenth century—its belfry, its statues, its carvings, its paintings, all vanished like the contours and colours of a sunset cloud. The cathedral is a skeleton. Hardly a pointed gable is left to tell where the quaint and prosperous houses once grouped cosily together. Ypres the town is a mourner draped in black with the stains of fire which killed its beauty and joy. But there is a glory that can never be killed, a glory above mere beauty, as a living soul is above the dead body whence it has risen. That glory is Ypres. She is a ghost, but she is an inspiration, a name of names, a jewel worth dying for—"worth giving a man's eyes for," Brian says!

"Has your brother told you about the man we met at the Visitors' Château?" asked Father Beckett, when between the two men—and my reminiscences—the story of the tour was finished with those last words of Brian's.

"No, I haven't told her yet," Brian answered for me.

My nerves jumped. I scarcely knew what I expected to[Pg 336] hear. "Not Doctor Paul Herter?" I exclaimed—and was surprised to hear on my own lips the name so constantly in my mind.

"Well, that's queer she should speak of *him*, isn't it, Brian? How did you come to think of Herter?" Father Beckett wanted to know.

"Was it he?" I insisted.

"No. But—you'd better tell her, Brian. I guess you'll have to."

"There isn't much to tell, really," Brian said. "It was only that oculist chap Herter told you about—Dr. Henri Chrevreuil. He's been working at the front, as you know: lately it's been the British front; and they'd taken him in at the château for a few days' rest. We met him there and talked of his friend—your friend, Molly—Doctor Paul."

"What did he say about your eyes?" Dierdre almost gasped. (I should not have ventured to put the question suddenly, and before people. I should have been too afraid of the answer. But her nickname is "*Dare!*") "He must have said something, or Mr. Beckett wouldn't have spoken so. He *did* look at your eyes—didn't he? He would, for Herter's sake."

"Yes, he did look at them," Brian admitted. "He didn't say much."

"But what—*what?*"

"He said: 'Wait, and—see.'"

"And see!" Dierdre echoed.

The same thought was in all our minds. As I gazed mutely at Brian, he gave me the most beautiful smile of his life. He must have felt that I was looking at him, or he[Pg 337] would not so have smiled. Let Jim hate and—punish me when he comes back, and drive me out of Paradise! Wherever I may go, there will be the reflection of that smile and the thought behind it. How can I be unhappy, if Brian need only wait, to see?[Pg 338]

CHAPTER XXX

Padre, my mind is like a thermometer exposed every minute to a different temperature, but always high or low—never normal.

To tell, or not to tell, Father Beckett what the man I didn't see said about Jim—or rather, what Julian O'Farrell said that he said! This has been the constant question; but the thermometer invariably flies up or down, far from the answer-point.

When our men came back to Amiens, I almost hoped that Puck would do his worst—carry out his threat and "give me away" to Father Beckett. In that case I should at least have been relieved from responsibility. But Puck didn't. In my heart I had known all along that he would not.

If I could have felt for a whole minute at a time that it would be fair to wake hopes which mightn't be fulfilled, out would have burst the secret. But whenever I'd screwed up my courage to speak, Something would remind me: "Herter sent word that there might be a message from Switzerland. Better wait till it comes, for he wasn't sure of his facts. He may have been misled." Or, when I'd decided *not* to speak, another Something would say: "Jim is alive. You *know* he is alive! Herter is helping him to escape. Don't let these dear old people suffer a minute longer than they need." [Pg 339]

But—well—so far I have waited. A week has passed since I wrote at Amiens. We have arrived at Jim's château—the little, quaint, old Château d'Andelle, with thick stone walls, black-beamed ceilings, and amusing towers, set in the midst of an enchanted forest of Normandy. No wonder he fell in love with the place before the war, and wanted to live there! It must have seemed an impossible dream at the time, for the owners (the château has been in the same family for generations) had money in those days, and wouldn't have let their home to strangers. The war has made all the difference. They couldn't afford to keep up the place, and were eager to let. Beckett money is a boon to them, so everyone is satisfied. The agents in Paris secured two or three extra servants to help the old pair left in the house as caretakers; and there is a jewel of a maid for Mother Beckett—a Belgian refugette. I shall give her some training as a nurse, and by and by I shall be able to fade away in peace. Already I'm beginning to prepare my dear lady's mind for a parting. I talk of my hospital work, and drop hints that I'm only on leave—that Brian's hopes and Father Beckett's splendid new-born plan for him, will permit me to take up duty again soon.

The plan developed on the trip: but I'm sure the first inspiration came from Mother Beckett. While she was ill, she did nothing but lie and think of things to do for other people. And she was determined to make it possible for Brian to have a love story of his own, provided he wanted one. It only needed Father Beckett's practical brain and unlimited purse to turn her vague suggestion into a full-grown plan. A whole block of buildings on [Pg 340] the outskirts of Paris, let as apartment houses, is to be bought by Mr. Beckett, for the use of blinded soldiers. Already his agents have got the refusal of the property for him; and with a few changes such as knocking down inner walls and putting in doors where doors don't exist, the houses will become one big mansion, to accommodate five or six hundred men. Each will have his own bedroom or cubicle. There'll be a gymnasium, with a Swedish instructor, and every trade or profession in which a blind man could possibly engage will be taught by experts. There will be a big dining hall with a musicians' gallery, and a theatre. The library will be supplied with quantities of books for the blind. There'll be a garden where the men will be taught to grow flowers and vegetables. They will have a resident doctor, and two superintendents. One of these two will himself be a blind man taught by his own experience how to teach others. Of course, Padre, you know that this blind teacher is already chosen, and that the whole scheme centers round him!

In a way Brian realizes that, if it were not for him, it would never have been thought of. In a way. But—it is *his* way. He doesn't torture himself, as I probably should in his place, by thinking: "All these immense sums of money being spent as an excuse to provide for me in life! Ought I to let it be done? Ought I to accept?"

Brian's way is not that. He says: "Now I understand why I lost my eyesight, and it's worth it a thousand times. This wonderful chance is to be given me to help others, as I never could have helped if I hadn't been blind. If sight comes back, I shall know what it is to be blind, and I can give counsel and courage to others. I am glad, glad to [Pg 341] be blind. It's a privilege and a mission. Even if I never see again, except with my spirit's eyes, I shall still be glad!"

He doesn't worry at all because carrying out the plan will cost Father Beckett one or more of his millions. What is money for, except to be spent? What pleasure is like spending to do good? He finds it quite natural that Father Beckett wants to do this thing; and though he's immensely grateful, he takes it blithely for granted that the benefactor should be happy and proud.

Travelling back from Ypres to Amiens they seem to have settled all the details between them, though they told us their adventures before even mentioning the Plan. Brian is to be guide, philosopher, and friend to the inmates and students of the James Wyndham Beckett College for the Blind. Also he is to give lectures on art and various other subjects. If he can learn to paint his blind impressions (as he believes he can, with Dierdre's promised help) he will be able to teach other blind artists to follow his example. And he is to have a salary for his services—not the big one Father Beckett wished: Brian wouldn't hear of that—but enough to live on. And Dierdre and Julian are offered official positions and salaries too. It's suggested that they should take a flat near by the College, within easy walking distance. Dierdre is to entertain the blind men with recitations, and teach the art of reciting to those who wish to learn. Julian is to sing and play for the men in the house-theatre, once or twice a week, as he can spare time from his work with De Letzski. Also he will give one lesson a week in singing and voice production.

Both the O'Farrells are to be well paid (no trouble in [Pg 342] persuading Julian to accept generous proposals for himself and his sister; for him the labourer is indeed worthy of his hire): and with American dash and money the scheme is expected to be in working order by next June. It's now well into November. But after seeing how other schemes have worked, and how this Château d'Andelle business has been rushed through, I have the most sublime faith in Beckett miracles.

They are astonishing, these Becketts! Father, the simplest, kindest man, with the air of liking his fireside better than any adventure: Mother, a slip of a creature—"a flower in a vase to be kept by her menfolk on a high shelf," as I told myself when I first saw her. Yet what adventures they have had, and what they have accomplished since the day Brian proposed this pilgrimage, two months ago! Not a town on our route that, after the war won't have cause to bless them and the son in whose name their good works have been done—cause to bless Beckett kindness, Beckett money for generations in the future! Yet now they have added this most ambitious plan of all to the list, and I know it will be carried out to perfection.

You see now, Padre, from what I've told you, how easy it is being made for me to slip out of this circle. Brian, beaming with happiness, and on the point of opening his heart to Dierdre's almost worshipping love: Mother Beckett slowly getting back a measure of frail, flower-like health, in this lovely place which she calls Jim's: Father Beckett more at ease about her, and intensely interested in his scheme: the small, neat Belgian refugette likely to prove at least a ministering mouse if not a ministering angel: above all, hope if not certainty that Jim will one[Pg 343] day return—not only in spirit but in body—to his château and his family. If I am needed anywhere on earth, it isn't here, but down in the south at my poor Hôpital des Épidémies. Would it be cowardly in me to fly, as soon as I've persuaded the Becketts to spare me, and throw the responsibility I haven't dared decide to take, upon my brave, blind Brian?

Ah, I don't mean telling him about myself and my sins. I shouldn't have the courage for that, I fear! I mean, shall I tell him about Doctor Paul's message—or *supposed* message? It has just occurred to me that I might do this, and let Brian decide whether Father Beckett ought to know, even if no further news comes through Switzerland. You see, if I were gone, and Jim came, I could trust the new Dierdre to do her best for me with Brian. He could never respect me, never love me in the old way—but he might forgive, because of Dierdre herself—and because of the great Plan. Hasn't my wickedness given them both to him?

Writing all this to you has done me good, Padre. I see more clearly ahead. I shall decide before morning what to do. I feel I *shall* this time! And I think it a good idea to speak to Brian. He will agree, though he doesn't know my secret need to escape, that it's right for me to take up hospital work again. But, Padre, I can't go—I *won't* go—until I've helped Mother Beckett arrange Jim's treasures in the room to be called his "den." She has been living for that, striving to grow strong enough for that. And I—oh, Padre!—I want to be the one to unpack his things and to touch each one with my hands. I want to leave something of myself in that room where, if he's dead,[Pg 344] his spirit will surely come: where, if he lives, his body will come. If I leave behind me thoughts of love, won't they linger between those walls like the scent of roses in a vase? Mayn't those thoughts influence Jim Beckett not to detest me as I deserve?[Pg 345]

CHAPTER XXXI

Five days later.

I did talk to Brian, Padre, and he said, better wait and give the letter from Switzerland a fair chance to arrive, before telling Father Beckett about Doctor Paul's messenger at Amiens.

Now I have had a letter, but not from Switzerland. I shall fold it up between the pages of this book of my confessions. I believe you will read it, Padre.

It came to-day. It explains itself. The envelope, postmarked Paris, was addressed to me in typewriting. If Mother Beckett had not had a slight relapse from working too hard in the den, I might perhaps have been gone before the letter came. Then it would have had to be forwarded. It's better that I stayed. You will see why. But—oh, Padre, Padre!

THE LETTER

"Miss O'Malley,

"Once I met a lady whose name, as I understood it, was not unlike yours now, given me by Doctor Paul Herter. I cannot think that you and she are one. That lady, I'd swear, would be incapable of—let me say, placing herself in a false position.

"Though you will not recognize my handwriting, I've said enough for you to guess that James Wyndham Beckett is your correspondent. I have had the address typed because, for my parents' sake and to spare them distress, it seems that you and I[Pg 346] must reach some understanding before I venture to let them know that I'm alive.

"If you are worthy to be called 'friend' by such a man as Paul Herter, you will wish to atone for certain conduct, by carrying out the request I make now. I must trust you to do so. But first let me relieve my mind of any fear for yourself. I have not contradicted the story you told Herter about our engagement. What I shall say to my parents when I meet them, as I hope soon to do, depends upon circumstances. Till you and I have had a private conversation, you will oblige me by letting things remain as they are. I have strong reasons for this wish. One of them—the only one I need explain now, is that it will seem natural to them I should write to my fiancée—a young, strong girl able to bear the shock of a great surprise—asking her to break the news gently and tactfully to my father and mother. I do ask you to do this. How to do it I must leave to you. But when you've told my parents that I'm alive, that I've escaped, that I'm in Paris with Herter, that as soon as my official business of reporting myself is finished, I'll get leave, you may put into their hands the following pages of this letter. They will not think it strange that the girl I am engaged to should keep the first part for her own eyes. Thus, without your being compromised, they will learn my adventures without having to wait until I come. But there's just room enough left on this first sheet to reiterate that, when Herter found me, and gave me the somewhat disconcerting news of my engagement to his friend, a Miss O'Malley travelling with my parents, I—simply listened. Rather than excite his suspicions I did not even yield to curiosity, and try to draw out a description. I could not be sure then that I should ever see you, or my people, for escape was difficult and there were more chances against than for my getting out of Germany alive. Now, in all human certainty I shall arrive at the Château d'Andelle (I got the

address[Pg 347] at the bank), and you owe it to me to remain on the spot till we can thrash out our affair together. I will begin on a *new* sheet the story of the last few months since my capture. You must forgive me if it bores you. In reality it is for my parents, when you have prepared their minds, and I don't think it will bore them....

"We came a bad cropper. I was thrown clear of the machine, but knew nothing until I waked up, feeling like a bag of broken bones. It was night, and I saw a huge fountain of red flame and a lot of dark figures like silhouettes moving between it and me. That brought me out of my stupor. I knew my plane must have taken fire as it crashed down, and I was pretty sure the silhouettes were Germans. I looked around for my observer, and called to him in a low voice, hoping the Bosch wouldn't hear, over the noise of the fire. Nobody answered. Later I found out that the poor chap had been caught under the car. I pray he died before the flames reached him!

"As I got my wits back, I planned to try and hide myself under some bushes I could see not far off, till the coast was clear; but I couldn't move. I seemed to be thoroughly smashed up, and began to think it was the end of things *ici-bas* for me. After a while I must have fainted. By and by I had a dream of jolting along through a blazing desert, on the back of a lame camel. It was rather fierce, that jolting! It shook me out of my faint, and when I opened my eyes it was to find myself on a stretcher carried by fellows in German gray. They took me to a field hospital, and I guessed by the look of things that it was close to the first lines. It made me sick to think how near I must be to our own front—yet so far!

"Well, I won't be long-winded about what happened next. I can go into details when we meet. It turned out that I had a leg, an arm, and some ribs smashed. The Bosch surgeon wasn't half bad, as Bosches go, but he was a bit brusque. I [Pg 348] heard him say right out to the anæsthetist, it seemed a pity to waste good ether on me, as there wasn't one chance in five to save my life. Still, I'd be an experiment! Before I went off under the stuff I told them who I was, for I'd heard they were sometimes fairly decent to enemy aviators, and I hoped to get a message through to my people. I was feeling as stupid as an owl, but I did think I saw a change come over the men's faces when they heard my name. Later, putting two and two together, I concluded that Germany was just the kind of business nation to know all about the dear old Governor. I might have realized that, out of sheer spite against the United States for bursting into the war, they'd enjoy letting a man of James Beckett Senior's importance go on believing his son was dead. I bet they put my name over the grave of my poor, burned pal, Hank Lee! It would be the thoroughgoing sort of thing they do, when they make up their minds to create an impression.

"I didn't die, though! Spite for spite, I got well. But it took some time. One of my lungs had been damaged a bit by a broken rib, and the doctors prescribed an open-air cure, after I'd begun to crawl again. I was put with a lot of T. B.'s, if you know what that means, in a camp hospital. Not far off was a huge 'camouflaged' aerodrome and a village of hangars. I heard that flying men were being trained there. I used to think I'd give my head to get to the place, but I never hoped to do it—till Herter came.

"Now I will tell you how he came—which I can freely do, as we are both safe in Paris, having come from somewhere near Compiègne. One of the first things Herter said about you was that you must have guessed where he was going, and more or less for what purpose. For that purpose he was the ideal man: a Lorrainer of Germanized Lorraine; German his native tongue—(though he hates it)—and clever as Machiavelli. He "escaped" from France into Germany, told a tale about killing [Pg 349] a French sentry and creeping across No Man's Land at night, in order to get to the German lines. It was a big risk, but Herter is as brave and resourceful a man as I ever met. He got the Bosches to believe that he was badly ill in Paris when the war broke out and couldn't slip away, otherwise he'd have sprung to do his loyal duty to the Fatherland. He persuaded them that his lot being cast in France for the time, he'd resolved to serve Germany by spying, until he could somehow bolt across the frontier. He spun a specious tale about pretending to the French to have French sympathies, and winning the confidence of high-up men, by serving as a surgeon on several fronts. To prove his German patriotism he had notes to show, realistically made on thin silk paper, and hidden inside the lining of his coat.

"Herter's mission in Boschland isn't my business or yours; but I'm allowed to say that it was concerned with aeroplanes. There was something he had to find out, and he *has* found it out, or he wouldn't be back on this side of the lines. Because he hoped to be among German flying-men, he hinted to you that he might be able to do you some service. It occurred to him that he might learn where my grave was and let you know. Nothing further was in his thoughts then—or until he happened to draw out a piece of unexpected information in a roundabout way.

"His trick of getting across to the flying-men was smart, like all his tricks. The valuable (?) notes he'd brought into Germany mostly concerned new French and American inventions in that line. That was his 'speciality.' And when he had handed the notes over with explanations, he continued his programme by asking for a job as surgeon in a field hospital. (You see, he hoped to get back to France before the worthlessness of his notes was discovered.) When he'd proved his qualifications, he got his job like a shot. They were only too glad of his services. Pre [Pg 350]tending to have been in American training-camps, it was easy to bring up my name in a casual way. Laughing that rather sinister laugh of his, which you will remember, Herter told a couple of flying chaps he had promised a girl to find Jim Beckett's grave. One of the fellows laughed too, and made a remark which set Herter thinking. Later, he was able to refer to the subject again, and learned enough to suspect that there was something fishy about the Bosch announcement of my death and burial. He tells me that, at this point, he was able to send you a verbal message by a consumptive prisoner about to be repatriated. Whether you got that message or not who knows?

"His idea was to send another (in a way he won't explain even to me) when he'd picked up further news. But as things turned out, there was no time. Besides, it wasn't necessary. It looked hopeful that we might be our own carrier pigeons, or else—cease to exist.

"What happened was that Herter heard I was alive and in a hospital not far behind the lines. Just at this time he had got hold of the very secret he'd come to seek. The sooner he could make a dash for home the better: but if possible, he wished to take me with him. He had the impression that to do so would please his friend Miss O'Malley! How it was to be worked he didn't see until an odd sort of American bombing machine fell, between an aerodrome it had attempted to destroy, and Herter's hospital. They knew it was American, only because of its two occupants, both killed. The machine was considerably smashed up, but experts found traces of something amazingly novel, which they couldn't understand.

Herter was called to the scene, because he had pretended to be up in the latest American flying 'stunts.' The minute he saw the wreckage an inspiration jumped into his head.

"He confessed himself puzzled by the mysterious details, thought them important, and said: 'It seems to me this[Pg 351] resembles the engine and wings of the James Beckett invention I heard so much about. But I didn't know it was far enough ahead yet to be in use. A pity the inventor was killed. He might have come in handy.

"Well, they put those words in their pipes and smoked them—knowing, of course, that I was very much alive and almost within a stone's throw.

"I had always pretended not to understand German: thought ignorance of the language might serve my plans some day or other. The chap they sent to fetch me dropped a few words to a doctor in my hearing. And so, though I wasn't told where I was being taken or why I was to go, I'd about caught on to the fact that I was supposed to have invented the plans for a new bombing biplane. That made me wonder if a friend was at work under the rose: and I was ready for anything when I got to the scene of the smash.

"Fortunately, none of the Bosches on the spot could speak English fluently, and I appeared more of a fool at French than German. Herter—entirely trusted by his German pals—was told off to talk English with me; and a flash of his eye said, *here* was the friend! It was only a flash, and I couldn't be sure, but it put me on the *qui vive*. I noticed that in asking me the question he was told to ask, he emphasized certain words which needed no emphasis, and spoke them slowly, with a look that made me determine to fix each one in my mind. This I did, and putting them together when I got the chance, I made out, 'I want to get you home. Say you invented this model, and could put the thing in working trim.'

"That was a big order! If I said it and could keep my word, would it be a patriotic job to present the enemy with a perfectly good machine, of a new make, in the place of a wreck they didn't understand? This was my first thought. But the second reminded me of a sentence I'd constructed with some of[Pg 352] the emphasized words; '*I want to get you home.*' How did he expect to get me home—if not by air?

"With that I caught a glimpse of the plan, as one sometimes catches sight of the earth through a break in massed clouds when flying. If the man meant to help me, I would help him. If he turned out a fraud, the Germans shouldn't profit by his treachery I'd stop that game at the last moment, if I died for it!

"You will know nothing about the new and curious bombing biplane of super-speed invented by Leroy Harman of Galbraith, Texas. But Father knows as much as any one not an expert in aeronautics can know. When the Government wouldn't believe in Harman, Father financed him by my advice. I left home for France before the trial machine that was to convince officialdom had come into being; and I didn't even know whether it had made good. But the minute I saw what lay on the ground, surrounded by a ring of Germans, I said to myself; 'Good old Leroy!'

"I'd seen so much of his plans that they remained printed on my brain, and I could—if I would—set that biplane on its wings again almost as easily as if I *had* invented it.

"Odd that the Bosches and I both trusted Herter, seeing he must be false to one side or other! But he's that sort of man. And I always take a tip from my own instinct before listening to my reason. Maybe that's why I didn't do badly in my brief career as a flier. Anyhow, I played up to Herter; and I got the job of superintending the reconstruction of poor Harman's damaged machine. It was a lovely job for a prisoner, though they watched me as a German cat would watch an Allied mouse. Herter was nearly always on the spot, however, for he'd made himself responsible for me. Also, he'd offered to pump me about what was best in the air world on my side of the water: how many aeroplanes of different sorts America could turn out in[Pg 353] six months, etc. We contrived a cypher on diagrams I made. It was a clever one, but the credit was Herter's.

"The Bosches were waiting impatiently for my work to be done, in order to try out the machine, and if satisfactory, spawn a brood of their own on the same model. I was equally impatient. I hoped to fly off with the biplane before they had time to copy it!

"A wounded Ace of theirs, Anton Hupfer, was for ever hanging round. He was to take up the 'plane when it was ready. But Herter industriously chummed with him, and not for nothing. To Herter was due the 'discovery' of the inventor; and as he boasted experience in flying, he asked the privilege of being Hupfer's companion on the trial trip.

"The success of this trip would depend even more on the machine's worth as a bomber than on her speed and climbing qualities. It was, therefore, to be undertaken at night, with a full complement of real bombs to drop upon headquarters at Compiègne. Herter had suggested this. Daylight wouldn't have suited for a start.

"An hour before the appointed time he dashed in upon Hupfer to confide that a sudden suspicion concerning me was troubling him. He had noticed a queer expression on my face as I gave the engine a last look over! If I had done some obscure damage to this so new type of machine, the mechanics might not detect its nature. Herter didn't wish to harm me, if his suspicion was unfounded, he explained, but he proposed a drastic proof of my good faith. I was to be hauled out of bed, and hurried without warning to look at the biplane in her hangar. The mechanics were to be sent outside, there to wait for a signal to open the doors: this to avoid gossip if I was honest after all. Hupfer was to spring it on me that he'd decided to take me up instead of Herter. My face was to be watched as this news was flung at me. If I showed the slightest trace of uneasiness, it[Pg 354] would be a sign that I had played a trick and feared to fall its victim. In that case the 'third degree' was to be applied until I owned up, and could be haled away for punishment.

"There was just time to carry out this programme, and Hupfer fell for it. Herter had put me wise beforehand, and I knew what to expect. His real plan was to stand behind Hupfer, the Bosch Ace, and bash him on the head with a spanner, while his (Hupfer's) whole attention was fixed on me. We would then undress the fellow. I would take his clothes, and we'd put him into mine. Hupfer's body (stunned, not dead, we hoped) we would lay behind a pile of petrol tins. I acting as pilot, would trust to my disguise and the darkness of night not to be spotted when the two mechanics

threw open the hangar doors.

"Everything happened as we'd arranged, without a hitch—again, all credit to Herter! When we'd hidden the limp Ace, trussed up in my prison rig, Herter yelled to the waiting men, in a good imitation of Hupfer's voice. We ran smoothly out of the hangar, and were given a fine send off. How soon the Bosches found out how they'd been spoofed, I don't know. It couldn't have been long though, as my prison guard was in attendance. The great thing was, we went up in grand style. Otherwise—but we needn't now think of the 'otherwise'!

"Our next danger lay in taking the wrong direction, getting farther back in Boschland instead of over the frontier. I kept my wits, fortunately, so that turned out all right. Still, there remained the chance of being shot down by the French, and blown with our own bombs into kingdom come. But, by good luck it was a clear night. No excuse for getting lost! And when I was sure we were well over the French lines, I planed down to alight in a field.

"The alert was out for us, of course, and a fierce barrage put up, but I flew high till I was ready for a dive. We'd hardly land[Pg 355]ed, when the *poilus* swarmed like bees, but that was what we wanted. You must imagine the scene that followed, till I can tell you by word of mouth!

"I shall have made my report, and have been given leave to start for a visit to my family by to-morrow I hope.

"Yours till the end,

"JIM."

"Yours till the end!" Rather a smart, cynical way of winding up those "exhibition pages" was it not, Padre? The secret translation of that signature is: "Yours, you brute, till I can get rid of you with least damage to my parents' susceptibilities!"

I shall obey, and wait for the interview. It's like waiting to be shot at dawn![Pg 356]

CHAPTER XXXII

I persuaded Brian to tell Father Beckett. I wasn't worthy. But the dear old man came straight to me, transfigured, to make me go with him to his wife, even before he had finished reading the letter.

"You must come," he said—and when Father Beckett says "must," in a certain tone, one does. It's then that the resemblance, more in expression than feature, between him and his son shines out like a light. "It will save mother the trouble of asking for you," he went on, dragging me joyously with him, his arm round my waist. "She'd do that, first thing, sure! Why, do you suppose we forget Jim's as much to you as to us? Haven't you shown us that, every day since we met?"

What answer could I give? I gave none.

Mother Beckett had been lying down for the afternoon nap which by my orders she takes every day. She'd just waked, and was sitting up on the lounge, when her husband softly opened the door to peep in. The only light was firelight, leaping in an open grate.

"Come in, come in!" she greeted us in her silver tinkle of a voice. "Oh, you didn't disturb me. I was awake. I thought I'd ring for tea. But I didn't after all. I'd had such a beautiful dream, I hated to come out of it."

"I bet it was a dream about Jim!" said Father Beckett. He drew me into the room, and the little lady pulled me[Pg 357] down beside her on the wide, cushiony lounge. Her husband's special arm-chair was close by, but he didn't subside into it as usual at this cosy hour of the afternoon. Instead, he knelt stiffly down on one knee, and took the tiny, ringed hand held out to him. "You wouldn't think a dream beautiful, unless Jim was in it!"

"Yes I would, if *you* were in it, dear," she reproached him. "Or Molly. But Jim was in this dream. I saw him as plainly as I see you both. He walked in at the door, the way he used to do at home, saying: 'Hello, Mother, I've been looking for you everywhere!' You know, Father how you and Jimmy used to feel injured if you called me and I couldn't be found in a minute. In this dream though, we didn't seem to be back home. I wasn't sure where we were: only—I was sure——" She stopped, with a catch in her voice. But Father Beckett took up the sentence where she let it drop. "Sure of Jim?"

"Yes. He was so real!"

"Well then, Mother darling, I guess the dream ought not to have been back home, but here, in this very house. For here's where Jim will come."

"Oh, I do feel that!" she agreed, trying to "camouflage" a tear with a smile. "Jim's with me all the time."

"Not yet," said Father Beckett, with a stolid gentleness. "Not yet. Not the real Jim. But he'll come."

"You mean, when Molly and I've finished putting out all his treasures in the den, just as he'd like to see them?"

"He might come before you get the den ready. He might come—any day now—even to-morrow." The gnarled brown hand smoothed the small, shrivelled white one with nervous strokes and passes.[Pg 358]

"Father!" she sat up suddenly, straight and rigid among her cushions. "You've heard—you're trying to break something to me. Tell me right out. Jim's alive!"

She snatched her hand free, and bending forward, flung both arms round the old man's neck before he could answer. I sprang up to give them room. I thought they had forgotten me. But no. Out came Father Beckett's big hand to snatch my dress.

"This child got the news—a letter," he explained. "The boy was afraid of the shock for us. He thought she——"

"A shock of joy—why, *that* gives life—not death!" sobbed and laughed Mother Beckett. "But it was right to let Molly know first. She's more to him than we are now. Oh, Father—Father—our Jim's alive—*alive!* I think in my soul I knew it all the time. I never felt he was gone. He must have sent me thoughts. Dear ones, I want to pray. I want to thank God—now, this instant, before I hear more—before I read the letter. We three together—on our knees!"

Padre, when I was on my knees, with the thin little arm of Jim's mother thrilling my shoulder, my face hidden in the cushions, I could only say: "God, forgive!" and echo the thanksgiving of those two loving hearts. I didn't pray not to be punished. I almost want to be punished—since Brian is safe, and my punishment can't spoil his future.

The patriotic Becketts have given up the big gray car, now they've settled down at the Château d'Andelle: and our one-legged soldier-chauffeur has departed, to conduct[Pg 359] a military motor. For the moment there's only the O'Farrell Red Cross taxi, not yet gone about its legitimate business; so it was Julian who took Father Beckett to the far-off railway station, to meet Jim Beckett the next day but one—Julian—of all people on earth!

Father Beckett begged me to be of the party, and Mother Beckett—too frail still for so long and cold a drive—piled up her persuasions. But I was firm. I didn't like going to meet trains, I said. It was prosaic. I was allowed to stop at home, therefore, with my dear little lady: the last time, I told myself, that she would ever love and "mother" me. Once Jim and I had settled our affairs in that "interview" I was ordered to wait for, I should be the black sheep, turned out of the fold.

There was just one reason why I'd have liked to be in the car to bring Jim back from the station. Knowing Julian-Puck, I was convinced that despite Father Beckett's presence he'd contrive a chance to thrust some entering wedge of mischief into Jim Beckett's head. Not that it was needed! If he'd read the first pages of Jim's letter—the secret pages—he would have known that. But the night the great news came to the château, he whispered into my ear: "You seem to be taking things easy. Sure you won't change your mind and bolt with me?—or do you count on your invincible charm, "*über alles*"?"

I didn't even answer. I merely looked. Perhaps he took it for a defiant look, though Heaven knows it wasn't. I was past defiance. In any case, such as the look was, it shut him up. And after that the brooding storm behind his eyes made me wonder (when I'd time to think of it) what *coup* he was meditating. There would never be a[Pg 360] chance like the chance at the station before Jim had met me. Julian was sharp enough, dramatic enough to see that. I pictured him somehow corralling Jim for an instant, while Father Beckett carried on a conversation of signs with a worried *porteuse*. Julian would be able to do in an instant as much damage to a character as most men could do in an hour!

A little added disgust for me on Jim's part, however, what could it matter? I tried to argue. When a thing is already black, can it be painted blacker?

Still, I was foolish enough to wish that our good old one-legged soldier might have stayed to bring Jim home.

Mother Beckett would have compelled me to be with her at the open door to meet "our darling boy," but that I could not bear. It would be as trying for him as for me, and I had to spare him the ordeal at any price.

"Don't make me do that," I begged, with real tears in my voice. "I—I've set my heart on seeing Jim for the first time alone. He wants it too—I know he does."

She gazed at me for some long seconds, with the clear blue eyes which seemed—though only seemed!—to read my soul. In reality she saw quite another soul than mine. The darling crystallizes to radiant beauty all souls of those she loves, as objects are crystallized by frost, or by sparkling salt in a salt mine.

"Well, you must have a good and loving reason, I'm sure. And probably your love has taught you to know better than I can, what Jim would want you to do," she said. "It shall be just as you wish, dear. Only you must grant one little favour in return to please me. You are to wait[Pg 361] for Jim in the *den*. When his Father and I have hugged and kissed him a few times, and made certain he's not one of my dreams, we'll lead him up to that door, and leave him outside. It shall be my hand that shuts the door when he's gone in. And I shan't tell him one word about the den. It shall be a surprise. But he won't notice a thing until—until you and he have been together for a while, I guess—not even the hobby-horse! He'll see nothing except you, Molly—*you!*"

I implored—I argued—in vain. The making of the den had been her inspiration. It was monstrous that I should have to greet her son there. The pleasure of the den-surprise would be for ever spoiled for Jim. But I couldn't explain that to his mother. I had to yield at last, tongue-tied and miserable beyond words.

I haven't described the den to you, Padre. I will do it now, in the pause, the hush, before the storm.

It's a quaint room, with a little round tower in each of the two front corners. One of these Mother Beckett has turned into a refuge for broken-down toys, all Jim's early favourites, which he'd never let her throw away: the famous spotted hobby-horse starred in the centre of the stage: oh, but a noble, red-nostrilled beast, whose eternal prance has something of the endless dignity of the Laocoön! The second tower is a miniature library, whose shelves are crowded with the pet books of Jim's boyhood—queer books, some of them, for a child to choose: "Byron," "Letters of Pliny," Plutarch's "Lives," Gibbon's "Rome," "Morte d'Arthur," Maeterlinck's "Life of the Bee," Kingsland's "Scientific Idealism," with several quite learned volumes of astronomy and geology, side by side[Pg 362] with Gulliver and all kinds of travel

and story-books which we have most of us adored. It was I who had the task of sorting and arranging this motley collection, and I can hardly tell you, Padre, how I loved doing it!

The room isn't large, so the ten or twelve pictures on the walls are not lost in a desert of bare spaces. These pictures, the toys, the books, tennis-rackets, golf-clubs and two lovely old Persian prayer-rugs are all of Jim's treasures brought to France. He must have been a boy of individual, independent nature, for it seems he disliked the idea of killing things for pleasure, and was never a hunter or even a fisherman. Consequently, there are no monster fish under glass, or rare birds or butterflies, or stuffed animals. He must have loved wild creatures though, for five of the beloved pictures are masterly oil-paintings by well-known artists, of lions and tigers and stags, *chez eux*, happy and at home, not being hunted, or standing agonized at bay. Oh, getting this den in order has taught me more about the real Jim than a girl can learn about a man in ordinary acquaintance in a year! But then I had a wonderful foundation to begin building upon: that day in the rose-arbour—the red-rose day of my life.

Well, when the car was expected back from the station, bringing Jim home to his mother, I went by her command to the den. Even that was better than having to meet him in the presence of those two dear souls who trusted and loved me only second to him. And yet everything in the den which had meant something in Jim's life, seemed to cry out at me, as I shut the door and stood alone with them—and my pounding heart—to wait.

I didn't know how to make the time pass. I was too[Pg 363] restless to sit down. I wouldn't let myself look out of the window to see the car come along the drive. I dared not walk up and down like the caged thing I was, lest the floor should creak, for the tower-room—the den—is over the entrance-hall. I felt like a hunted animal—I, the one creature to whom Jim Beckett deliberately meant to be cruel! I, in this room which was a tribute to his kindness of heart, his faithfulness, his loyalty! But why should it not be so? I had no right to call upon these qualities of his.

The horn of the little Red Cross taxi! It must be turning in at the gate. How well I knew its gay, conceited tootle! An eighth of a mile, and the car would reach the house. Even the poor worn-out taxi couldn't be five minutes doing that!...

If I ran to the window between the towers I could see! No, I wouldn't; I *couldn't*. I should scream—or faint—or do something else idiotic, if I saw Jim Beckett getting out of the car, and his mother flying to meet him. I had never felt like this in my whole life—not in any suspense, not in any danger.

Instinctively I walked as far from the window as I could. I sought sanctuary under Brian's cathedral picture—the picture that had introduced me to Jim. Yes, sanctuary I sought, for in that room my brother's work was my one excuse to intrude!

By this time the car must have arrived. The front door must have flown open in welcome. Now Mother Beckett must be crying tears of joy in the arms of her son, Father Beckett gazing at the blessed sight, speechless with ecstasy![Pg 364]

What should I be doing at this moment, if I had yielded to their wish and stopped downstairs with them? Just how far would Jim have gone in keeping up the tragic farce? Would he have kissed me? Would he—?

The vision was so blazing bright that I covered my eyes to shut it out. Not that I hated it. Oh no, I loved it too well!

So, for a while, I stood, my hands pressed over my eyes, my ears strained to catch distant sounds—yet wishing not to hear. Suddenly, close by, there came the click of a latch. My hands dropped like broken clock weights. I opened my eyes. Jim Beckett was in the room, and the door was shut.[Pg 365]

CHAPTER XXXIII

I stared, fascinated. Here was Jim-of-the-rose-arbour, and a new Jim-of-the-war—a browner, thinner, sterner Jim, a Jim that looked at me with a look I could not read. It may have been cruel, but it was not cold, and it pierced like a hot sword-blade through my flesh into my soul.

"You—after all!" he said. The remembered voice I had so often heard in dreams, struck on my nerves like a hand on the strings of a harp. I felt the vibration thrill through me.

"Yes—it's I." The answer came in a whisper from dry lips. "I'm sorry!"

"What are you sorry for? Because you are you?"

"It wouldn't be—*quite* so horrible if—I'd been a stranger."

"You think not?"

"I—it seems as if I took advantage of—oh, that's just what I did! I'm not asking you to forgive me—"

"It isn't so much a question of forgiving, as putting things straight. We *must* put them straight—"

"I'll do whatever you wish," I promised. "Only—let me go soon."

"Are you afraid of me?" There was sharpness in his tone.

"Not afraid. I am—utterly humiliated."[Pg 366]

"Why did you do this—thing? Let's have that out first."

"The thought came into my head when I was at my wits' end—for my brother. Not that that's an excuse!"

"I'm not worrying about excuses. It's explanations I need, I had my own theories—thinking it all over—and wondering—whether it would be you or a stranger I should find. The name was the one thing I had to go on: 'O'Malley' and its likeness to Ommalee. That was the way I heard your name pronounced, you know, when we met. I was coming back to see you and make sure. But I was laid up in Paris with an attack of typhoid. Perhaps Mother told you?"

"Yes. But please, let us not talk of that! There isn't much time. You'll have to go back to Fath—to Mr. and Mrs. Beckett. Tell me quickly what you want me to do."

"I was forgetting for a minute. You look very pale, Miss O'Malley. Hadn't you better sit down?"

"No, thank you. I like standing—where I am."

"Ah!" he gave a sudden exclamation. At last he had seen Brian's sketch. He had not noticed it, or any of the "den treasures," before. He had looked only at me.

"Why—it's *the* picture! And—Gee!"—his eyes travelled round the room—"all my dear old things! What a mother I've got!" He gazed about during a full minute of silence, then turned abruptly back to me. "You love her—don't you?"

"Who could help loving her?"

"And the dear old Governor—you're fond of him?"

"I should be even worse than I am, if I didn't adore[Pg 367] them both. They have been—angels to me and my brother."

"I'm told that you and he have been something of the same sort to them."

"Oh, they would speak kindly of us, of course!—They're so noble, themselves, they judge——"

"It was another person who told me the particular thing I'm thinking of now."

"Another person? Doctor Paul, I suppose."

"You must guess again, Miss O'Malley."

"I can't think of any one else who would——"

"What about your friend, Mr. O'Farrell?"

"He's not my friend!" I cried. "Oh, I *knew* he'd somehow contrive a chance to talk to you alone, about me!"

"He certainly did. And what he said impressed me a good deal."

"Most likely it's untrue."

"*Too* likely! I'm very anxious to find out from headquarters if it's true or not."

"If you ask me, I'll answer honestly. I can't and won't lie to you."

"I'll take you at your word and ask you—in a minute. You may be angry when I do. But—it will save time. It'll clear up all my difficulties at one fell swoop."

"Why wait a minute, then?" I ventured, with faint bitterness, because *his* "difficulties" seemed so small compared with mine. He was in the right in everything. This was his home. The dear Becketts were his people. All the world was his.

"I wait a minute, because something has to be told you[Pg 368] before I can ask you to answer any more questions. When I didn't know who or what my—er—official fiancée would turn out to be, this was the plan I made, to save my parents' feelings—and yours. I thought that, when we'd had the interview I asked you to give me, we could manage to quarrel, or discover that we didn't like each other as well as before. We could break off our engagement, and Father and Mother need never know—how it began."

"A very generous idea of yours!" I cried, the blood so hot in my cheeks that it forced tears to my eyes. "It had occurred to me, too, that for *their* sakes we might manage that way. Thank you, Mr. Beckett, for sparing me the pain—I deserve. I couldn't have dared hope for such a happy solution——"

"Couldn't you?"

"No. I——"

"Well, I'm hoping for an even happier one—a lot happier. But of course it depends on what you say to Mr. O'Farrell's—accusation."

"He—made an accusation?"

"Listen, and tell me what you'd call it. He said you told him at Amiens, when he asked you to marry him, that—you *loved* me."

"Oh!"

"Is it true?"

"Yes, I did tell him that——"

"I mean, is it true that you've loved me?"

"Mr. Beckett, after all, you are cruel! You're punishing me very hard."

"I don't wish to 'punish you hard'—or at all. Why am I 'cruel,' simply asking if it's true that you've loved me? Of course, when Mother told you of my fever, and what I'd said of this cathedral picture, she told you that I was dead in love with 'the Girl,' as I called you, and just about crazy because I'd lost her. Why shouldn't you have loved me a little bit—say, the hundredth part as much as I loved you? I'm not a monster, am I? And we both had exactly the same length of time to fall in love—whole hours on end. Cruel or not cruel, I've got to know. Was it the truth you told the O'Farrell man?"

I could not speak. I didn't try to speak. I looked up at him. It must have been some such look as the Princess gave St. George when he appeared at the last minute, to rescue her from the dragon. The tears I'd been holding back splashed over my cheeks. Jim gave a low cry of pity—or love (it sounded like love) as he saw them; and the next thing, he was kissing them away. I was in his arms so closely held that my breath was crushed out of my lungs. I wanted to sob. But how can you sob without breath? I could only let him kiss me on cheeks, and eyes, and mouth, and kiss him back again, with eager haste, lest I should wake up to find he had loved me for a fleeting instant, in a divine dream.

When he let me breathe for a second, I gasped that, of course, it *couldn't* be true, this wonderful thing that was happening?

"I've dreamed of you—a hundred times," I stammered. "Waking dreams—sleeping dreams. They've seemed as real—almost as real—as this."

"Did I kiss you like this, in the dreams?"

"Sometimes. But not in the realest ones. It never seemed real that you could care, in spite of all—that you'd forgive me, if you should come back——"

"Did you want me to come?"

"Oh, 'want' isn't the word to express it!"

"Even though you dreaded—being found out!"

"That didn't count, against having you alive, and knowing you were in the world—if only for your parents' sake. I wanted them to be happy, more than I wanted anything for myself except Brian's good. I had you for my own, in my dreams, while you were dead, and I expected to lose you if you were alive. But——"

"You really expected that?"

"Oh, indeed, yes!"

"Although you knew from Mother how I'd loved you, and searched for you?"

"You thought I was *good*—then."

"I think so now."

"But you can't! You know what a wicked, wicked wretch I was! Why, when you came into this room and looked at me, I saw how you felt! And your letter——"

"Don't you understand, I was testing you? If you hadn't cared for me, what you did might have been—(only 'might', mind you, for what man can judge a girl's heart?) what you did to my people *might* have been cruel and calculating. I had to find out the truth of things, before letting myself go. The letter was written to let a stranger see—if you turned out to be a stranger—what to expect. But O'Farrell made me sure in a minute, that the girl here must be *my* Girl. After that, I'd only to see you—to ask if he told the truth—to watch your face—your precious, beautiful face! I thought of it and pictured it. But I never thought of those tears! Forgive me, my darling, for making them come. If you'll let me love you all your life, they shall be the last I'll ever cause."

I laughed, and cried a little more, at the same time. "What a word from you to me—'Forgive!'"

"Well, it's more suitable than from you to me, because there's nothing you could do that I wouldn't forgive before you did it, or even be sure it was just the one right thing to do. My Girl—my lost, found love—do you suppose it was of your own accord you came to my people and said you belonged to me? No. It was the Great Power that's in us all, which made you do what you did—the Power they call Providence. You understand now what I meant, when I said that one question from me and an answer from you, would smooth away all my difficulties at once? Bless that O'Farrell fellow!"

I'd never thought to bless Julian O'Farrell, but now I willingly agreed. Sometimes, dimly, I had divined latent goodness in him, as one divines vague, lovely shapes floating under dark depths of water. And he had said once that love for me was bringing out qualities he hadn't credited himself with possessing. I had taken that as one of Puck's pleasantries! But I knew the true inwardness of him now, as I had learned to know the true inwardness of Dierdre. Julian had had his chance to hurt me with his rival. He had used it instead to do me good. He had laughed the other day, "Well, I'll always be *something* to you anyhow, if only a brother-in-law." But now, he would be more than that, even if he went out of my

life, and I never saw him again.

"Bless O'Farrell. Bless Providence. Bless you. Bless [Pg 372] me. Bless everybody and everything!" Jim was going on, joyfully exploding, still clasping me in his arms; for we clung as if to let each other go might be to lose one another forever! "How happy Mother dear—and the good old Governor are going to be! They absolutely adore you!"

"Did they say so?"

"They did. And almost hustled me into this room to meet you. I'm glad the best thing in my life has come to me here, among all the odds and ends of my childhood and youth, that I call my treasures! Of course Mother planned it specially that you should welcome me here."

"Yes, the darling! But it seemed to me a terrible plan. I thought you'd hate me so, I'd spoil the surprise of the room for you."

Those words were uttered with the last breath he let me draw for some time. But oh, Padre, if it had been my last on earth, how well worth while it would have been to live just till that minute, and no longer! I am *so* happy! I don't know how I am going to deserve this forgiveness, this deliverance, this joy!

"Even if I'd found a strange girl looking after my parents and saving their lives and winning their love, it would have been pretty difficult to chuck her," Jim was laughing. "You, on this side of the door, waiting to face the ogre Me, couldn't have felt much worse than I felt on my side, not knowing what I should see—or do. Darling, one more kiss for my people's sake, one more for myself, and then I must take you to them. It's not fair to keep them waiting any longer. But no—first I must put a ring on the Girl's finger—as I hoped to do long ago. You re[Pg 373]member—the ring of my bet, that almost made me lose you? I told you about it, didn't I, on our day together, when I thought I should come back in two weeks?"

"You told me you hoped not to lose a thing you wanted. You didn't say it was a ring. But at Royalieu—the newspaper correspondents' château near Compiègne—we came across a friend of yours, the one you made the bet with——"

"Jack Curtis!"

"Yes. He told me about the ring. And he was sure you were alive."

"Good old Jack! Well, now I'm going to slip that magic ring on your darling finger—the 'engaged' finger."

"But where is it?"

"The finger? Just now on the back of my neck, which it's making throb—like a star!... Oh, the *ring*? That's in the hobby-horse which I see over there, as large as life. At least, it's in him unless, unlike a leopard, he's changed his spots."

Jim wouldn't let me go, but drew me with him, our arms interlaced, to the tower end of the room where the hobby-horse he had once rescued from fire endlessly pranced. "This used to be my bank, when I was a little chap," he said. "Like a magpie, I always hid the things I valued most in a hole I made under the third smudge to the left, on Spot Cash's breast. 'Spot Cash' is the old boy's name, you know! When I won the bet and took the ring home, I had a fancy to keep it in this hidie hole, for luck, till I could find the Girl. Mother knew. She was with me at the time. But I was half ashamed of myself for my childishness, and asked her not to tell—not even the [Pg 374] Governor. I shouldn't wonder if that was why it occurred to her to pack up my treasures for France. Maybe she had a prophetic soul, and thought, if I found the Girl, I should want to lay my hand on the ring. Here it is, safe and sound."

As he spoke, he had somehow contrived to extract a particularly black smudge from the region of the hobby-horse's heart. It came out with a block of wood underneath, and left a gap which gave Spot Cash the effect of having suffered an operation. At the back of the cavity a second hole, leading downward, had been burrowed in the softish wood; and in this reposed a screwed-up wad of tissue paper. Jim hooked the tiny packet out with a finger, opened the paper as casually as though it enclosed a pebble, and brought to the light (which found and flashed to the depths of a large blue diamond) a quaintly fashioned ring of greenish gold.

"This belonged to the most beautiful woman of a day that's past," Jim said. "Now, it's for the most beautiful woman of a better day and a still grander to-morrow. May I wish it on your finger—with the greatest wish in the world?"

I gave him my hand—for the ring, and for all time.

One more moment in his arms, and he opened the door, to take "his Girl" to Father and Mother Beckett.

Somewhere in the distance Julian O'Farrell was singing, as he had sung on the first night we met, Mario's heartbreaking song in "La Tosca"—the song on the roof, at dawn. Always in remembering Julian I must remember Mario's love and sacrifice! I knew that he meant it should be so with me. [Pg 375]

The voice was the voice of love itself, such love as mine for Jim, as Jim's for me, which can never die. It made me sad and happy at the same time. But, as Jim and I paused at the door to listen, hand in hand, the music changed. Julian began to sing something new and strangely beautiful—a song he has composed, and dedicated to Brian. I was sad no longer, for this is a song of courage and triumph. He calls it: "Everyman's Land."

THE END

THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK [Pg 376]

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE
THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE
PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase “Project Gutenberg”), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be

copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase "Project Gutenberg" associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."
- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to

provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS', WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks

with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.