GALSWORTHY JOHN

TATTERDEMALION

John Galsworthy

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Galsworthy J.

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PART I
OF WAR-TIME

I
THE GREY ANGEL

Her predilection for things French came from childish recollections of school-days in Paris, and a hasty removal thence by her father during the revolution of '48, of later travels as a little maiden, by diligence, to Pau and the then undiscovered Pyrenees, to a Montpellier and a Nice as yet unspoiled. Unto her seventy-eighth year, her French accent had remained unruffled, her soul in love with French gloves and dresses; and her face had the pale, unwrinkled, slightly aquiline perfection of the 'French marquise' type – it may, perhaps, be doubted whether any French marquise ever looked the part so perfectly.

How it came about that she had settled down in a southern French town, in the summer of 1914, only her roving spirit knew. She had been a widow ten years, which she had passed in the quest of perfection; all her life she had been haunted by that instinct, half-smothered in ministering to her husband, children, and establishments in London and the country. Now, in loneliness, the intrinsic independence of her soul was able to assert itself, and from hotel to hotel she had wandered in England, Wales, Switzerland, France, till now she had found what seemingly arrested her. Was it the age of that oldest of Western cities, that little mother of Western civilisation, which captured her fancy? Or did a curious perversity turn her from more obvious abodes, or was she kept there by the charm of a certain church which she would enter every day to steep herself in mellow darkness, the scent of incense, the drone of incantations, and quiet communion with a God higher indeed than she had been brought up to, high-church though she had always been? She had a pretty little apartment, where for very little – the bulk of her small wealth was habitually at the service of others – she could manage with one maid and no "fuss." She had some "nice" French friends there, too. But more probably it was simply the war which kept her there, waiting, like so many other people, for it to be over before it seemed worth while to move and re-establish herself. The immensity and wickedness of this strange event held her, as it were, suspended, body and spirit, high up on the hill which had seen the ancient peoples, the Romans, Gauls, Saracens, and all, and still looked out towards the flat Camargue. Here in her three rooms, with a little kitchen, the maid Augustine, a parrot, and the Paris *Daily Mail*, she dwelt as it were marooned by a world event which seemed to stun her. Not that she worried, exactly. The notion of defeat or of real danger to her country and to France never entered her head. She only grieved quietly over the dreadful things that were being done, and every now and then would glow with admiration at the beautiful way the King and Queen were behaving. It was no good to "fuss," and one must make the best of things, just as the "dear little Queen" was doing; for each Queen in turn, and she had seen three reign in her time, was always that to her. Her ancestors had been uprooted from their lands, their house burned, and her pedigree diverted, in the Stuart wars – a reverence for royalty was fastened in her blood.

Quite early in the business she had begun to knit, moving her slim fingers not too fast, gazing at the grey wool through glasses, specially rimless and invisible, perched on the bridge of her firm, well-shaped nose, and now and then speaking to her parrot. The bird could say, "Scratch a poll, Poll,"

already, and "Hullo!" those keys to the English language. The maid Augustine, having completed some small duty, would often come and stand, her head on one side, gazing down with a sort of inquiring compassion in her wise, young, clear-brown eyes. It seemed to her who was straight and sturdy as a young tree both wonderful and sad that *Madame* should be seventy-seven, and so frail —*Madame* who had no lines in her face and such beautiful grey hair; who had so strong a will-power, too, and knitted such soft comforters "*pour nos braves chers poilus*." And suddenly she would say: "*Madame n'est pas fatiguée?*" And *Madame* would answer: "No. Speak English, Augustine – Polly will pick up your French! Come here!" And, reaching up a pale hand, she would set straight a stray fluff of the girl's dark-brown hair or improve the set of her fichu.

Those two got on extremely well, for though madame was – oh! but very particular, she was always "*très gentille et toujours grande dame*." And that love of form so deep in the French soul promoted the girl's admiration for one whom she could see would in no circumstances lose her dignity. Besides, *Madame* was full of dainty household devices, and could not bear waste; and these, though exacting, were qualities which appealed to Augustine. With her French passion for "the family" she used to wonder how in days like these *Madame* could endure to be far away from her son and daughter and the grandchildren, whose photographs hung on the walls; and the long letters her mistress was always writing in a beautiful, fine hand, beginning, "My darling Sybil," "My darling Reggie," and ending always "Your devoted mother," seemed to a warm and simple heart but meagre substitutes for flesh-and-blood realities. But as *Madame* would inform her – they were too busy doing things for the dear soldiers, and working for the war; they could not come to her – that would never do. And to go to them would give so much trouble, when the railways were so wanted for the troops; and she had their lovely letters, which she kept – as Augustine observed – every one in a lavender-scented sachet, and frequently took out to read. Another point of sympathy between those two was their passion for military music and seeing soldiers pass. Augustine's brother and father were at the front, and *Madame's* dead brother had been a soldier in the Crimean war – "long before you were born, Augustine, when the French and English fought the Russians; I was in France then, too, a little girl, and we lived at Nice; it was so lovely, you can't think – the flowers! And my poor brother was so cold in the siege of Sebastopol." Somehow, that time and that war were more real to her than this.

In December, when the hospitals were already full, her French friends first took her to the one which they attended. She went in, her face very calm, with that curious inward composure which never deserted it, carrying in front of her with both hands a black silk bag, wherein she had concealed an astonishing collection of treasures for the poor men! A bottle of acidulated drops, packets of cigarettes, two of her own mufflers, a pocket set of drafts, some English riddles translated by herself into French (very curious), some ancient copies of an illustrated paper, boxes of chocolate, a ball of string to make "cat's cradles" (such an amusing game), her own packs of Patience cards, some photograph frames, post-cards of Arles, and – most singular – a kettle-holder. At the head of each bed she would sit down and rummage in the bag, speaking in her slow but quite good French, to explain the use of the acidulated drops, or to give a lesson in cat's cradles. And the *poilus* would listen with their polite, ironic patience, and be left smiling, and curiously fascinated, as if they had been visited by a creature from another world. She would move on to other beds, quite unconscious of the effect she had produced on them and of their remarks: "*Cette vieille dame, comme elle est bonne!*" or "*Espèce d'ange aux cheveux gris.*" "*L'ange anglaise aux cheveux gris*" became in fact her name within those walls. And the habit of filling that black silk bag and going there to distribute its contents soon grew to be with her a ruling passion which neither weather nor her own aches and pains, not inconsiderable, must interfere with. The things she brought became more marvellous every week. But, however much she carried coals to Newcastle, or tobacco pouches to those who did not smoke, or homœopathic globules to such as crunched up the whole bottleful for the sake of the sugar, as soon as her back was turned, no one ever smiled now with anything but real pleasure at sight of her calm and truly sweet smile, and the scent of soap on her pale hands. "*Cher fils, je croyais que ceci vous*

donnerait un peu de plaisir. Voyez-vous comme c'est commode, n'est ce pas?" Each newcomer to the wards was warned by his comrades that the English angel with the grey hair was to be taken without a smile, exactly as if she were his grandmother.

In the walk to the hospital Augustine would accompany her, carrying the bag and perhaps a large peasant's umbrella to cover them both, for the winter was hard and snowy, and carriages cost money, which must now be kept entirely for the almost daily replenishment of the bag and other calls of war. The girl, to her chagrin, was always left in a safe place, for it would never do to take her in and put fancies into her head, and perhaps excite the dear soldiers with a view of anything so taking. And when the visit was over they would set forth home, walking very slowly in the high, narrow streets, Augustine pouting a little and shooting swift glances at anything in uniform, and *Madame* making firm her lips against a fatigue which sometimes almost overcame her before she could get home and up the stairs. And the parrot would greet them indiscreetly with new phrases – "Keep smiling!" and "Kiss Augustine!" which he sometimes varied with "Kiss a poll, Poll!" or "Scratch Augustine!" to *Madame's* regret. Tea would revive her somewhat, and then she would knit, for as time went on and the war seemed to get farther and farther from that end which, in common with so many, she had expected before now, it seemed dreadful not to be always doing something to help the poor dear soldiers; and for dinner, to Augustine's horror, she now had nothing but a little soup, or an egg beaten up with milk and brandy. It saved such a lot of time and expense – she was sure people ate too much; and afterwards she would read the *Daily Mail*, often putting it down to sigh, and press her lips together, and think, "One must look on the bright side of things," and wonder a little where it was. And Augustine, finishing her work in the tiny kitchen, would sigh too, and think of red trousers and peaked caps, not yet out of date in that Southern region, and of her own heart saying "Kiss Augustine!" and she would peer out between the shutters at the stars sparkling over the Camargue, or look down where the ground fell away beyond an old, old wall, and nobody walked in the winter night, and muse on her nineteenth birthday coming, and sigh with the thought that she would be old before any one had loved her; and of how *Madame* was looking "*très fatiguée*."

Indeed, Madame was not merely *looking "très fatiguée"* in these days. The world's vitality and her own were at sad January ebb. But to think of oneself was quite impossible, of course; it would be all right presently, and one must not fuss, or mention in one's letters to the dear children that one felt at all poorly. As for a doctor – that would be sinful waste, and besides, what use were they except to tell you what you knew? So she was terribly vexed when Augustine found her in a faint one morning, and she found Augustine in tears, with her hair all over her face. She rated the girl soundly, but feebly, for making such a fuss over "a little thing like that," and with extremely trembling fingers pushed the brown hair back and told her to wash her face, while the parrot said reflectively: "Scratch a poll – Hullo!" The girl who had seen her own grandmother die not long before, and remembered how "*fatiguée*" she had been during her last days, was really frightened. Coming back after she had washed her face, she found her mistress writing on a number of little envelopes the same words: "*En bonne Amitié.*" She looked up at the girl standing so ominously idle, and said:

"Take this hundred-franc note, Augustine, and go and get it changed into single francs – the ironmonger will do it if you say it's for me. I am going to take a rest. I sha'n't buy anything for the bag for a whole week. I shall just take francs instead."

"Oh, *Madame!* You must not go out: *vous êtes trop fatiguée*."

"Nonsense! How do you suppose our dear little Queen in England would get on with all she has to do, if she were to give in like that? We must none of us give up in these days. Help me to put on my things; I am going to church, and then I shall take a long rest before we go to the hospital."

"Oh, *Madame!* Must you go to church? It is not your kind of church. You do not pray there, do you?"

"Of course I pray there. I am very fond of the dear old church. God is in every church, Augustine; you ought to know that at your age."

"But *Madame* has her own religion?"

"Now, don't be silly. What does that matter? Help me into my cloth coat – not the fur – it's too heavy – and then go and get that money changed."

"But *Madame* should see a doctor. If *Madame* faints again I shall die with fright. *Madame* has no colour – but no colour at all; it must be that there is something wrong."

Madame rose, and taking the girl's ear between thumb and finger pinched it gently.

"You are a very silly girl. What would our poor soldiers do if all the nurses were like you?"

Reaching the church she sat down gladly, turning her face up towards her favourite picture, a Virgin standing with her Baby in her arms. It was only faintly coloured now; but there were those who said that an Arlésienne must have sat for it. Why it pleased her so she never quite knew, unless it were by its cool, unrestored devotion, by the faint smiling in the eyes. Religion with her was a strange yet very real thing. Conscious that she was not clever, she never even began to try and understand what she believed. Probably she believed nothing more than that if she tried to be good she would go to God – whatever and wherever God might be – some day when she was too tired to live any more; and rarely indeed did she forget to try to be good. As she sat there she thought, or perhaps prayed, whichever it should be called: "Let me forget that I have a body, and remember all the poor soldiers who have them."

It struck cold that morning in the church – the wind was bitter from the northeast; some poor women in black were kneeling, and four candles burned in the gloom of a side aisle – thin, steady little spires of gold. There was no sound at all. A smile came on her lips. She was forgetting that she had a body, and remembering all those young faces in the wards, the faces too of her own children far away, the faces of all she loved. They were real and she was not – she was nothing but the devotion she felt for them; yes, for all the poor souls on land and sea, fighting and working and dying. Her lips moved; she was saying below her breath, "I love them all"; then, feeling a shiver run down her spine, she compressed those lips and closed her eyes, letting her mind alone murmur her chosen prayer: "O God, who makes the birds sing and the stars shine, and gives us little children, strengthen my heart so that I may forget my own aches and wants and think of those of other people."

On reaching home again she took gelseminum, her favourite remedy against that shivering, which, however hard she tried to forget her own body, would keep coming; then, covering herself with her fur coat, she lay down, closing her eyes. She was seemingly asleep, so that Augustine, returning with the hundred single francs, placed them noiselessly beside the little pile of envelopes, and after looking at the white, motionless face of her mistress and shaking her own bonny head, withdrew. When she had gone, two tears came out of those closed eyes and clung on the pale cheeks below. The seeming sleeper was thinking of her children, away over there in England, her children and their children. Almost unbearably she was longing for a sight of them, not seen for so long now, recalling each face, each voice, each different way they had of saying, "Mother darling," or "Granny, look what I've got!" and thinking that if only the war would end how she would pack at once and go to them, that is, if they would not come to her for a nice long holiday in this beautiful place. She thought of spring, too, and how lovely it would be to see the trees come out again, and almond blossom against a blue sky. The war seemed so long, and winter too. But she must not complain; others had much greater sorrows than she – the poor widowed women kneeling in the church; the poor boys freezing in the trenches. God in his great mercy could not allow it to last much longer. It would not be like Him! Though she felt that it would be impossible to eat, she meant to force herself to make a good lunch so as to be able to go down as usual, and give her little presents. They would miss them so if she didn't. Her eyes, opening, rested almost gloatingly on the piles of francs and envelopes. And she began to think how she could reduce still further her personal expenditure. It was so dreadful to spend anything on oneself – an old woman like her. Doctor, indeed! If Augustine fussed any more she would send her away and do for herself! And the parrot, leaving his cage, which he could always do, perched just behind her and said: "Hullo! Kiss me, too!"

That afternoon in the wards every one noticed what a beautiful colour she had. "*L'ange anglaise aux cheveux gris*" had never been more popular. One *poilu*, holding up his envelope, remarked to his neighbour: "*Elle verse des gouttes d'ciel, notr' 'tite gran'mè*." To them, grateful even for those mysterious joys "cat's cradles," francs were the true drops from heaven.

She had not meant to give them all to-day, but it seemed dreadful, when she saw how pleased they were, to leave any out, and so the whole ninety-seven had their franc each. The three over would buy Augustine a little brooch to make up to the silly child for her fright in the morning. The buying of this brooch took a long time at the jeweller's in the *rue des Romains*, and she had only just fixed on an amethyst before feeling deadly ill with a dreadful pain through her lungs. She went out with her tiny package quickly, not wanting any fuss, and began to mount towards home. There were only three hundred yards to go, and with each step she said to herself: "Nonsense! What would the Queen think of you! Remember the poor soldiers with only one leg! You have got both your legs! And the poor men who walk from the battlefield with bullets through the lungs. What is your pain to theirs! Nonsense!" But the pain, like none she had ever felt – a pain which seemed to have sharp double edges like a knife – kept passing through and through her, till her legs had no strength at all, and seemed to move simply because her will said: "If you don't, I'll leave you behind. So there!" She felt as if perspiration were flowing down, yet her face was as dry as a dead leaf when she put up her hand to it. Her brain stammered; seemed to fly loose; came to sudden standstills. Her eyes searched painfully each grey-shuttered window for her own house, though she knew quite well that she had not reached it yet. From sheer pain she stood still, a wry little smile on her lips, thinking how poor Polly would say: "Keep smiling!" Then she moved on, holding out her hand, whether because she thought God would put his into it or only to pull on some imaginary rope to help her. So, foot by foot, she crept till she reached her door. A most peculiar floating sensation had come over her. The pain ceased, and as if she had passed through no doors, mounted no stairs – she was up in her room, lying on her sofa, with strange images about her, painfully conscious that she was not in proper control of her thoughts, and that Augustine must be thinking her ridiculous. Making a great effort, she said:

"I forbid you to send for a doctor, Augustine. I shall be all right in a day or two, if I eat plenty of francs. And you must put on this little brooch – I bought it for you from an angel in the street. Put my fur coat on Polly – he's shivering; dry your mouth, there's a good girl. Tell my son he mustn't think of leaving the poor War Office; I shall come and see him after the war. It will be over to-morrow, and then we will all go and have tea together in a wood. Granny will come to you, my darlings."

And when the terrified girl had rushed out she thought: "There, now she's gone to get God; and I mustn't disturb Him with all He has to see to. I shall get up and do for myself." When they came back with the doctor they found her half-dressed, trying to feed a perch in the empty cage with a spoon, and saying: "Kiss Granny, Polly. God is coming; kiss Granny!" while the parrot sat away over on the mantelpiece, with his head on one side, deeply interested.

When she had been properly undressed and made to lie down on the sofa, for she insisted so that she would not go to bed that they dared not oppose her, the doctor made his diagnosis. It was double pneumonia, of that sudden sort which declares for life or death in forty-eight hours. At her age a desperate case. Her children must be wired to at once. She had sunk back, seemingly unconscious; and Augustine, approaching the drawer where she knew the letters were kept, slipped out the lavender sachet and gave it to the doctor. When he had left the room to extract the addresses and send those telegrams, the girl sat down by the foot of the couch, leaning her elbows on her knees and her face on her hands, staring at that motionless form, while the tears streamed down her broad cheeks. For many minutes neither of them stirred, and the only sound was the restless stropping of the parrot's beak against a wire of his cage. Then her mistress's lips moved, and the girl bent forward. A whispering came forth, caught and suspended by breathless pausing:

"Mind, Augustine – no one is to tell my children – I can't have them disturbed – over a little thing – like this – and in my purse you'll find another – hundred-franc note. I shall want some more

francs for the day after to-morrow. Be a good girl and don't fuss, and kiss poor Polly, and mind – I won't have a doctor – taking him away from his work. Give me my gelseminum and my prayer-book. And go to bed just as usual – we must all – keep smiling – like the dear soldiers – " The whispering ceased, then began again at once in rapid delirious incoherence. And the girl sat trembling, covering now her ears from those uncanny sounds, now her eyes from the flush and the twitching of that face, usually so pale and still. She could not follow – with her little English – the swerving, intricate flights of that old spirit mazed by fever – the memories released, the longings disclosed, the half-uttered prayers, the curious little half-conscious efforts to regain form and dignity. She could only pray to the Virgin. When relieved by the daughter of *Madame's* French friend, who spoke good English, she murmured desperately: "*Oh! mademoiselle, madame est très fatiguée – la pauvre tête – faut-il enlever les cheveux? Elle fait ça toujours pour elle-même.*" For, to the girl, with her reverence for the fastidious dignity which never left her mistress, it seemed sacrilege to divest her of her crown of fine grey hair. Yet, when it was done and the old face crowned only by the thin white hair of nature, that dignity was still there surmounting the wandering talk and the moaning from her parched lips, which every now and then smiled and pouted in a kiss, as if remembering the maxims of the parrot. So the night passed, with all that could be done for her, whose most collected phrase, frequently uttered in the doctor's face, was: "Mind, Augustine, I won't have a doctor – I can manage for myself quite well." Once for a few minutes her spirit seemed to recover its coherence, and she was heard to whisper: "God has given me this so that I may know what the poor soldiers suffer. Oh! they've forgotten to cover Polly's cage." But high fever soon passes from the very old; and early morning brought a deathlike exhaustion, with utter silence, save for the licking of the flames at the olive-wood logs, and the sound as they slipped or settled down, calcined. The firelight crept fantastically about the walls covered with tapestry of French-grey silk, crept round the screen-head of the couch, and betrayed the ivory pallor of that mask-like face, which covered now such tenuous threads of life. Augustine, who had come on guard when the fever died away, sat in the armchair before those flames, trying hard to watch, but dropping off into the healthy sleep of youth. And out in the clear, hard shivering Southern cold, the old clocks chimed the hours into the winter dark, where, remote from man's restless spirit, the old town brooded above plain and river under the morning stars. And the girl dreamed – dreamed of a sweetheart under the acacias by her home, of his pinning their white flowers into her hair, till she woke with a little laugh. Light was already coming through the shutter chinks, the fire was but red embers and white ash. She gathered it stealthily together, put on fresh logs, and stole over to the couch. Oh! how white! how still! Was her mistress dead? The icy clutch of that thought jerked her hands up to her full breast, and a cry mounted in her throat. The eyes opened. The white lips parted, as if to smile; a voice whispered: "Now, don't be silly!" The girl's cry changed into a little sob, and bending down she put her lips to the ringed hand that lay outside the quilt. The hand moved faintly as if responding, the voice whispered: "The emerald ring is for you, Augustine. Is it morning? Uncover Polly's cage, and open his door."

Madame spoke no more that morning. A telegram had come. Her son and daughter would arrive next morning early. They waited for a moment of consciousness to tell her; but the day went by, and in spite of oxygen and brandy it did not come. She was sinking fast; her only movements were a tiny compression now and then of the lips, a half-opening of the eyes, and once a smile when the parrot spoke. The rally came at eight o'clock. *Mademoiselle* was sitting by the couch when the voice came fairly strong: "Give my love to my dear soldiers, and take them their francs out of my purse, please. Augustine, take care of Polly. I want to see if the emerald ring fits you. Take it off, please"; and, when it had been put on the little finger of the sobbing girl: "There, you see, it does. That's very nice. Your sweetheart will like that when you have one. What do you say, *Mademoiselle*? My son and daughter coming? All that way?" The lips smiled a moment, and then tears forced their way into her eyes. "My darlings! How good of them! Oh! what a cold journey they'll have! Get my room ready, Augustine, with a good fire! What are you crying for? Remember what Polly says: 'Keep smiling!'

Think how bad it is for the poor soldiers if we women go crying! The Queen never cries, and she has ever so much to make her!"

No one could tell whether she knew that she was dying, except perhaps for those words, "Take care of Polly," and the gift of the ring.

She did not even seem anxious as to whether she would live to see her children. Her smile moved *Mademoiselle* to whisper to Augustine: "*Elle a la sourire divine*."

"*Ah! mademoiselle, comme elle est brave, la pauvre dame! C'est qu'elle pense toujours aux autres.*" And the girl's tears dropped on the emerald ring.

Night fell – the long night; would she wake again? Both watched with her, ready at the faintest movement to administer oxygen and brandy. She was still breathing, but very faintly, when at six o'clock they heard the express come in, and presently the carriage stop before the house. *Mademoiselle* stole down to let them in.

Still in their travelling coats her son and daughter knelt down beside the couch, watching in the dim candle-light for a sign and cherishing her cold hands. Daylight came; they put the shutters back and blew out the candles. Augustine, huddled in the far corner, cried gently to herself. *Mademoiselle* had withdrawn. But the two still knelt, tears running down their cheeks. The face of their mother was so transparent, so exhausted; the least little twitching of just-opened lips showed that she breathed. A tiny sigh escaped; her eyelids fluttered. The son, leaning forward, said:

"Sweetheart, we're here."

The eyes opened then; something more than a simple human spirit seemed to look through – it gazed for a long, long minute; then the lips parted. They bent to catch the sound.

"My darlings – don't cry; smile!" And the eyes closed again. On her face a smile so touching that it rent the heart flickered and went out. Breath had ceased to pass the faded lips.

In the long silence the French girl's helpless sobbing rose; the parrot stirred uneasily in his still-covered cage. And the son and daughter knelt, pressing their faces hard against the couch.

II
DEFEAT

She had been standing there on the pavement a quarter of an hour or so after her shilling's worth of concert. Women of her profession are not supposed to have redeeming points, especially when – like May Belinski, as she now preferred to dub herself – they are German; but this woman certainly had music in her soul. She often gave herself these "music baths" when the Promenade Concerts were on, and had just spent half her total wealth in listening to some Mozart and a Beethoven symphony.

She was feeling almost elated, full of divine sound, and of the wonderful summer moonlight which was filling the whole dark town. Women "of a certain type" have, at all events, emotions – and what a comfort that is, even to themselves! To stand just there had become rather a habit of hers. One could seem to be waiting for somebody coming out of the concert, not yet over – which, of course, was precisely what she *was* doing. One need not forever be stealthily glancing and perpetually moving on in that peculiar way, which, while it satisfied the police and Mrs. Grundy, must not quite deceive others as to her business in life. She had only "been at it" long enough to have acquired a nervous dread of almost everything – not long enough to have passed through that dread to callousness. Some women take so much longer than others. And even for a woman "of a certain type" her position was exceptionally nerve-racking in war-time, going as she did by a false name. Indeed, in all England there could hardly be a greater pariah than was this German woman of the night.

She idled outside a book-shop humming a little, pretending to read the titles of the books by moonlight, taking off and putting on one of her stained yellow gloves. Now and again she would move up as far as the posters outside the Hall, scrutinising them as if interested in the future, then stroll back again. In her worn and discreet dark dress, and her small hat, she had nothing about her to rouse suspicion, unless it were the trail of violet powder she left on the moonlight.

For the moonlight this evening was almost solid, seeming with its cool still vibration to replace the very air; in it the war-time precautions against light seemed fantastic, like shading candles in a room still full of daylight. What lights there were had the effect of strokes and stipples of dim colour laid by a painter's brush on a background of ghostly whitish blue. The dreamlike quality of the town was perhaps enhanced for her eyes by the veil she was wearing – in daytime no longer white. As the music died out of her, elation also ebbed. Somebody had passed her, speaking German, and she was overwhelmed by a rush of nostalgia. On this moonlight night by the banks of the Rhine – whence she came – the orchards would be heavy with apples; there would be murmurs, and sweet scents; the old castle would stand out clear, high over the woods and the chalky-white river. There would be singing far away, and the churning of a distant steamer's screw; and perhaps on the water a log raft still drifting down in the blue light. There would be German voices talking. And suddenly tears oozed up in her eyes, and crept down through the powder on her cheeks. She raised her veil and dabbed at her face with a little, not-too-clean handkerchief, screwed up in her yellow-gloved hand. But the more she dabbed, the more those treacherous tears ran. Then she became aware that a tall young man in khaki was also standing before the shop-window, not looking at the titles of the books, but eyeing her askance. His face was fresh and open, with a sort of kindly eagerness in his blue eyes. Mechanically she drooped her wet lashes, raised them obliquely, drooped them again, and uttered a little sob…

This young man, Captain in a certain regiment, and discharged from hospital at six o'clock that evening, had entered Queen's Hall at half-past seven. Still rather brittle and sore from his wound, he had treated himself to a seat in the Grand Circle, and there had sat, very still and dreamy, the whole concert through. It had been like eating after a long fast – something of the sensation Polar explorers must experience when they return to their first full meal. For he was of the New Army, and before the war had actually believed in music, art, and all that sort of thing. With a month's leave before him, he could afford to feel that life was extraordinarily joyful, his own experiences particularly wonderful;

and, coming out into the moonlight, he had taken what can only be described as a great gulp of it, for he was a young man with a sense of beauty. When one has been long in the trenches, lain out wounded in a shell-hole twenty-four hours, and spent three months in hospital, beauty has such an edge of novelty, such a sharp sweetness, that it almost gives pain. And London at night is very beautiful. He strolled slowly towards the Circus, still drawing the moonlight deep into his lungs, his cap tilted up a little on his forehead in that moment of unmilitary abandonment; and whether he stopped before the book-shop window because the girl's figure was in some sort a part of beauty, or because he saw that she was crying, he could not have made clear to any one.

Then something – perhaps the scent of powder, perhaps the yellow glove, or the oblique flutter of the eyelids – told him that he was making what he would have called "a blooming error," unless he wished for company, which had not been in his thoughts. But her sob affected him, and he said:

"What's the matter?"

Again her eyelids fluttered sideways, and she stammered:

"Not'ing. The beautiful evening – that's why!"

That a woman of what he now clearly saw to be "a certain type" should perceive what he himself had just been perceiving, struck him forcibly, and he said:

"Cheer up."

She looked up again swiftly: "Cheer up! You are not lonelee like me."

For one of that sort, she looked somehow honest; her tear-streaked face was rather pretty, and he murmured:

"Well, let's walk a bit, and talk it over."

They turned the corner, and walked east, along streets empty, and beautiful, with their dulled orange-glowing lamps, and here and there the glint of some blue or violet light. He found it queer and rather exciting – for an adventure of just this kind he had never had. And he said doubtfully:

"How did you get into this? Isn't it an awfully hopeless sort of life?"

"Ye-es, it ees – " her voice had a queer soft emphasis. "You are limping – haf you been wounded?"

"Just out of hospital to-day."

"The horrible war – all the misery is because of the war. When will it end?"

He looked at her attentively, and said:

"I say – what nationality are you?"

"Rooshian."

"Really! I never met a Russian girl."

He was conscious that she looked at him, then very quickly down. And he said suddenly:

"Is it as bad as they make out?"

She slipped her yellow-gloved hand through his arm.

"Not when I haf any one as nice as you; I never haf yet, though"; she smiled – and her smile was like her speech, slow, confiding – "you stopped because I was sad, others stop because I am gay. I am not fond of men at all. When you know, you are not fond of them."

"Well! You hardly know them at their best, do you? You should see them at the front. By George! they're simply splendid – officers and men, every blessed soul. There's never been anything like it – just one long bit of jolly fine self-sacrifice; it's perfectly amazing."

Turning her blue-grey eyes on him, she answered:

"I expect you are not the last at that. You see in them what you haf in yourself, I think."

"Oh! not a bit – you're quite out. I assure you when we made the attack where I got wounded, there wasn't a single man in my regiment who wasn't an absolute hero. The way they went in – never thinking of themselves – it was simply superb!"

Her teeth came down on her lower lip, and she answered in a queer voice: "It is the same too perhaps with – the enemy."

"Oh yes, I know that."

"Ah! You are not a mean man. How I hate mean men!"

"Oh! they're not mean really – they simply don't understand."

"Oh! you are a baby – a good baby, aren't you?"

He did not quite like being called a baby, and frowned; but was at once touched by the disconcertion in her powdered face. How quickly she was scared!

She said clingingly:

"But I li-ike you for it. It is so good to find a ni-ice man."

This was worse, and he said abruptly:

"About being lonely? Haven't you any Russian friends?"

"Rooshian! No!" Then quickly added: "The town is so beeg! Haf you been in the concert?"

"Yes."

"I, too – I love music."

"I suppose all Russians do."

She looked up at his face again, and seemed to struggle to keep silent; then she said quietly:

"I go there always when I haf the money."

"What! Are you so on the rocks?"

"Well, I haf just one shilling now." And she laughed.

The sound of that little laugh upset him – she had a way of making him feel sorry for her every time she spoke.

They had come by now to a narrow square, east of Gower Street.

"This is where I lif," she said. "Come in!"

He had one long moment of violent hesitation, then yielded to the soft tugging of her hand, and followed. The passage-hall was dimly lighted, and they went upstairs into a front room, where the curtains were drawn, and the gas turned very low. Opposite the window were other curtains dividing off the rest of the apartment. As soon as the door was shut she put up her face and kissed him – evidently formula. What a room! Its green and beetroot colouring and the prevalence of cheap plush disagreeably affected him. Everything in it had that callous look of rooms which seem to be saying to their occupants: "You're here to-day and you'll be gone to-morrow." Everything except one little plant, in a common pot, of maidenhair fern, fresh and green, looking as if it had been watered within the hour; in this room it had just the same unexpected touchingness that peeped out of the girl's matter-of-fact cynicism.

Taking off her hat, she went towards the gas, but he said quickly:

"No, don't turn it up; let's have the window open, and the moonlight in." He had a sudden dread of seeing anything plainly – it was stuffy, too, and pulling the curtains apart, he threw up the window. The girl had come obediently from the hearth, and sat down opposite him, leaning her arm on the window-sill and her chin on her hand. The moonlight caught her cheek where she had just renewed the powder, caught her fair crinkly hair; it caught the plush of the furniture, and his own khaki, giving them all a touch of unreality.

"What's your name?" he said.

"May. Well, I call myself that. It's no good askin' yours."

"You're a distrustful little party, aren't you?"

"I haf reason to be, don't you think?"

"Yes, I suppose you're bound to think us all brutes?"

"Well, I haf a lot of reasons to be afraid all my time. I am dreadfully nervous now; I am not trusting anybody. I suppose you haf been killing lots of Germans?"

He laughed.

"We never know, unless it happens to be hand to hand; I haven't come in for that yet."

"But you would be very glad if you had killed some?"

"Glad? I don't think so. We're all in the same boat, so far as that's concerned. We're not glad to kill each other. We do our job – that's all."

"Oh! it is frightful. I expect I haf my broders killed."

"Don't you get any news ever?"

"News! No indeed, no news of anybody in my country. I might not haf a country; all that I ever knew is gone – fader, moder, sisters, broders, all – never any more I shall see them, I suppose, now. The war it breaks and breaks, it breaks hearts." Her little teeth fastened again on her lower lip in that sort of pretty snarl. "Do you know what I was thinkin' when you came up? I was thinkin' of my native town, and the river there in the moonlight. If I could see it again, I would be glad. Were you ever homeseeck?"

"Yes, I have been – in the trenches; but one's ashamed, with all the others."

"Ah! ye-es!" It came from her with a hiss. "Ye-es! You are all comrades there. What is it like for me here, do you think, where everybody hates and despises me, and would catch me, and put me in prison, perhaps?"

He could see her breast heaving with a quick breathing painful to listen to. He leaned forward, patting her knee, and murmuring: "Sorry – sorry."

She said in a smothered voice:

"You are the first who has been kind to me for so long! I will tell you the truth – I am not Rooshian at all – I am German."

Hearing that half-choked confession, his thought was: "Does she really think we fight against women?" And he said:

"My dear girl, who cares?"

Her eyes seemed to search right into him. She said slowly:

"Another man said that to me. But he was thinkin' of other things. You are a veree ni-ice boy. I am so glad I met you. You see the good in people, don't you? That is the first thing in the world – because there is really not much good in people, you know."

He said, smiling:

"You're a dreadful little cynic!" Then thought: "Of course she is – poor thing!"

"Cyneec? How long do you think I would live if I was not a cyneec? I should drown myself to-morrow. Perhaps there are good people, but, you see, I don't know them."

"I know lots."

She leaned forward eagerly.

"Well now – see, ni-ice boy – you haf never been in a hole, haf you?"

"I suppose not a real hole."

"No, I should think not, with your face. Well, suppose I am still a good girl, as I was once, you know, and you took me to some of your good people, and said: 'Here is a little German girl that has no work, and no money, and no friends.' Your good people they will say: 'Oh! how sad! A German girl!' and they will go and wash their hands."

Silence fell on him. He saw his mother, his sisters, others – good people, he would swear! And yet – ! He heard their voices, frank and clear; and they seemed to be talking of the Germans. If only she were not German!

"You see!" he heard her say, and could only mutter:

"I'm sure there *are* people."

"No. They would not take a German, even if she was good. Besides, I don't want to be good any more – I am not a humbug – I have learned to be bad. Aren't you going to kees me, ni-ice boy?"

She put her face close to his. Her eyes troubled him, but he drew back. He thought she would be offended or persistent, but she was neither; just looked at him fixedly with a curious inquiring stare; and he leaned against the window, deeply disturbed. It was as if all clear and simple enthusiasm had been suddenly knocked endways; as if a certain splendour of life that he had felt and seen of late

had been dipped in cloud. Out there at the front, over here in hospital, life had been seeming so – as it were – heroic; and yet it held such mean and murky depths as well! The voices of his men, whom he had come to love like brothers, crude burring voices, cheery in trouble, making nothing of it; the voices of doctors and nurses, patient, quiet, reassuring voices; even his own voice, infected by it all, kept sounding in his ears. All wonderful somehow, and simple; and nothing mean about it anywhere! And now so suddenly to have lighted upon this, and all that was behind it – this scared girl, this base, dark, thoughtless use of her! And the thought came to him: "I suppose my fellows wouldn't think twice about taking her on! Why! I'm not even certain of myself, if she insists!" And he turned his face, and stared out at the moonlight. He heard her voice:

"Eesn't it light? No air raid to-night. When the Zepps burned – what a horrible death! And all the people cheered – it is natural. Do you hate us veree much?"

He turned round and said sharply:

"Hate? I don't know."

"I don't hate even the English – I despise them. I despise my people too – perhaps more, because they began this war. Oh, yes! I know that. I despise all the peoples. Why haf they made the world so miserable – why haf they killed all our lives – hundreds and thousands and millions of lives – all for not'ing? They haf made a bad world – everybody hating, and looking for the worst everywhere. They haf made me bad, I know. I believe no more in anything. What is there to believe in? Is there a God? No! Once I was teaching little English children their prayers – isn't that funnee? I was reading to them about Christ and love. I believed all those things. Now I believe not'ing at all – no one who is not a fool or a liar can believe. I would like to work in a hospital; I would like to go and help poor boys like you. Because I am a German they would throw me out a hundred times, even if I was good. It is the same in Germany and France and Russia, everywhere. But do you think I will believe in love and Christ and a God and all that? – not I! I think we are animals – that's all! Oh! yes – you fancy it is because my life has spoiled me. It is not that at all – that's not the worst thing in life. Those men are not ni-ice, like you, but it's their nature, and," she laughed, "they help me to live, which is something for me anyway. No, it is the men who think themselves great and good, and make the war with their talk and their hate, killing us all – killing all the boys like you, and keeping poor people in prison, and telling us to go on hating; and all those dreadful cold-blooded creatures who write in the papers – the same in my country, just the same; it is because of all them that I think we are only animals."

He got up, acutely miserable. He could see her following him with her eyes, and knew she was afraid she had driven him away. She said coaxingly: "Don't mind me talking, ni-ice boy. I don't know any one to talk to. If you don't like it, I can be quiet as a mouse."

He muttered:

"Oh! go on, talk away. I'm not obliged to believe you, and I don't."

She was on her feet now, leaning against the wall; her dark dress and white face just touched by the slanting moonlight; and her voice came again, slow and soft and bitter:

"Well, look here, ni-ice boy, what sort of a world is it, where millions are being tortured – horribly tortured, for no fault of theirs, at all? A beautiful world, isn't it! 'Umbug! Silly rot, as you boys call it. You say it is all 'Comrade'! and braveness out there at the front, and people don't think of themselves. Well, I don't think of myself veree much. What does it matter – I am lost now, anyway; but I think of my people at home, how they suffer and grieve. I think of all the poor people there and here who lose those they love, and all the poor prisoners. Am I not to think of them? And if I do, how am I to believe it a beautiful world, ni-ice boy?"

He stood very still, biting his lips.

"Look here! We haf one life each, and soon it is over. Well, I think that is lucky."

He said resentfully:

"No! there's more than that."

"Ah!" she went on softly; "you think the war is fought for the future; you are giving your lives for a better world, aren't you?"

"We must fight till we win," he said between his teeth.

"Till you win. My people think that, too. All the peoples think that if they win the world will be better. But it will not, you know, it will be much worse, anyway."

He turned away from her and caught up his cap; but her voice followed him.

"I don't care which win, I despise them all – animals – animals – animals! Ah! Don't go, ni-ice boy – I will be quiet now."

He took some notes from his tunic pocket, put them on the table, and went up to her.

"Good-night."

She said plaintively:

"Are you really going? Don't you like me, enough?"

"Yes, I like you."

"It is because I am German, then?"

"No."

"Then why won't you stay?"

He wanted to answer: "Because you upset me so"; but he just shrugged his shoulders.

"Won't you kees me once?"

He bent, and put his lips to her forehead; but as he took them away she threw her head back, pressed her mouth to his, and clung to him.

He sat down suddenly and said:

"Don't! I don't want to feel a brute."

She laughed. "You are a funny boy, but you are veree good. Talk to me a little, then. No one talks to me. I would much rather talk, anyway. Tell me, haf you seen many German prisoners?"

He sighed – from relief, or was it from regret?

"A good many."

"Any from the Rhine?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Were they very sad?"

"Some were – some were quite glad to be taken."

"Did you ever see the Rhine? Isn't it beaudiful? It will be wonderful to-night. The moonlight will be the same here as there; in Rooshia too, and France, everywhere; and the trees will look the same as here, and people will meet under them and make love just as here. Oh! isn't it stupid, the war? – as if it was not good to be alive."

He wanted to say: "You can't tell how good it is to be alive, till you're facing death, because you don't live till then. And when a whole lot of you feel like that – and are ready to give their lives for each other, it's worth all the rest of life put together." But he couldn't get it out to this girl who believed in nothing.

"How were you wounded, ni-ice boy?"

"Attacking across open ground – four machine-gun bullets got me at one go off."

"Weren't you veree frightened when they ordered you to attack?" No, he had not been frightened just then! And he shook his head and laughed.

"It was great. We did laugh that morning. They got me much too soon, though – a swindle!"

She stared at him.

"You laughed?"

"Yes, and what do you think was the first thing I was conscious of next morning – my old Colonel bending over me and giving me a squeeze of lemon. If you knew my Colonel you'd still believe in things. There *is* something, you know, behind all this evil. After all, you can only die once, and if it's for your country all the better."

Her face, with intent eyes just touched with bistre, had in the moonlight a most strange, otherworld look. Her lips moved:

"No, I believe in nothing. My heart is dead."

"You think so, but it isn't, you know, or you wouldn't have been crying, when I met you."

"If it were not dead, do you think I could live my life – walking the streets every night, pretending to like strange men – never hearing a kind word – never talking, for fear I will be known for a German. Soon I shall take to drinking, then I shall be 'Kaput' very quick. You see, I am practical, I see things clear. To-night I am a little emotional; the moon is funny, you know. But I live for myself only, now. I don't care for anything or anybody."

"All the same, just now you were pitying your people, and prisoners, and that."

"Yes, because they suffer. Those who suffer are like me – I pity myself, that's all; I am different from your Englishwomen. I see what I am doing; I do not let my mind become a turnip just because I am no longer moral."

"Nor your heart either."

"Ni-ice boy, you are veree obstinate. But all that about love is 'umbug. We love ourselves, nothing more."

Again, at that intense soft bitterness in her voice, he felt stifled, and got up, leaning in the window. The air out there was free from the smell of dust and stale perfume. He felt her fingers slip between his own, and stay unmoving. Since she was so hard, and cynical, why should he pity her? Yet he did. The touch of that hand within his own roused his protective instinct. She had poured out her heart to him – a perfect stranger! He pressed it a little, and felt her fingers crisp in answer. Poor girl! This was perhaps a friendlier moment than she had known for years! And after all, fellow-feeling was bigger than principalities and powers! Fellow-feeling was all-pervading as this moonlight, which she had said would be the same in Germany – as this white ghostly glamour that wrapped the trees, making the orange lamps so quaint and decoratively useless out in the narrow square, where emptiness and silence reigned. He looked around into her face – in spite of bistre and powder, and the faint rouging on her lips, it had a queer, unholy, touching beauty. And he had suddenly the strangest feeling, as if they stood there – the two of them – proving that kindness and human fellowship were stronger than lust, stronger than hate; proving it against meanness and brutality, and the sudden shouting of newspaper boys in some neighbouring street. Their cries, passionately vehement, clashed into each other, and obscured the words – what was it they were calling? His head went up to listen; he felt her hand rigid within his arm – she too was listening. The cries came nearer, hoarser, more shrill and clamorous; the empty moonlight seemed of a sudden crowded with footsteps, voices, and a fierce distant cheering. "Great victory – great victory! Official! British! Defeat of the 'Uns! Many thousand prisoners!" So it sped by, intoxicating, filling him with a fearful joy; and leaning far out, he waved his cap and cheered like a madman; and the whole night seemed to him to flutter and vibrate, and answer. Then he turned to rush down into the street, struck against something soft, and recoiled. The girl! She stood with hands clenched, her face convulsed, panting, and even in the madness of his joy he felt for her. To hear this – in the midst of enemies! All confused with the desire to do something, he stooped to take her hand; and the dusty reek of the table-cloth clung to his nostrils. She snatched away her fingers, swept up the notes he had put down, and held them out to him.

"Take them – I will not haf your English money – take them." And suddenly she tore them across twice, three times, let the bits flutter to the floor, and turned her back to him. He stood looking at her leaning against the plush-covered table which smelled of dust; her head down, a dark figure in a dark room with the moonlight sharpening her outline – hardly a moment he stayed, then made for the door…

When he was gone she still stood there, her chin on her breast – she who cared for nothing, believed in nothing – with the sound in her ears of cheering, of hurrying feet, and voices; stood, in the centre of a pattern made by fragments of the torn-up notes, staring out into the moonlight,

seeing, not this hated room and the hated square outside, but a German orchard, and herself, a little girl, plucking apples, a big dog beside her; a hundred other pictures, too, such as the drowning see. Her heart swelled; she sank down on the floor, laid her forehead on the dusty carpet, and pressed her body to it.

She who did not care – who despised all peoples, even her own – began, mechanically, to sweep together the scattered fragments of the notes, assembling them with the dust into a little pile, as of fallen leaves, and dabbling in it with her fingers, while the tears ran down her cheeks. For her country she had torn them, her country in defeat! She, who had just one shilling in this great town of enemies, who wrung her stealthy living out of the embraces of her foes! And suddenly in the moonlight she sat up and began to sing with all her might – "*Die Wacht am Rhein*."

1916.

III
FLOTSAM AND JETSAM

A REMINISCENCE

The tides of the war were washing up millions of wrecked lives on all the shores; what mattered the flotsam of a conscripted deep-sea Breton fisherman, slowly pining away for lack of all he was accustomed to; or the jetsam of a tall glass-blower from the 'invaded countries,' drifted into the hospital – no one quite knew why – prisoner for twenty months with the Boches, released at last because of his half-paralysed tongue – What mattered they? What mattered anything, or any one, in days like those?

Corporal Mignan, wrinkling a thin, parchmenty face, full of suffering and kindly cynicism, used to call them '*mes deux phénomènes*.' Riddled to the soul by gastritis, he must have found them trying roommates, with the tricks and manners of sick and naughty children towards a long-suffering nurse. To understand all is to forgive all, they say; but, though he had suffered enough to understand much, Mignan was tempted at times to deliver judgment – for example, when Roche, the Breton fisherman, rose from his bed more than ten times in the night, and wandered out into the little courtyard of the hospital, to look at the stars, because he could not keep still within four walls – so unreasonable of the '*type*.' Or when Gray, the tall glass-blower – his grandfather had been English – refused with all the tenacity of a British workman to wear an undervest, with the thermometer below zero, Centigrade.

They inhabited the same room, Flotsam and Jetsam, but never spoke to one another. And yet in all that hospital of French soldiers they were the only two who, in a manner of speaking, had come from England. Fourteen hundred years have passed since the Briton ancestors of Roche crossed in their shallow boats. Yet he was as hopelessly un-French as a Welshman of the hills is to this day un-English. His dark face, shy as a wild animal's, his peat-brown eyes, and the rare, strangely-sweet smile which once in a way strayed up into them; his creased brown hands always trying to tie an imaginary cord; the tobacco pouched in his brown cheek; his improperly-buttoned blue trousers; his silence eternal as the stars themselves; his habit of climbing trees – all marked him out as no true Frenchman. Indeed, that habit of climbing trees caused every soul who saw him to wonder if he ought to be at large: monkeys alone pursue this pastime. And yet, – surely one might understand that trees were for Roche the masts of his far-off fishing barque, each hand-grip on the branch of plane or pine-tree solace to his overmastering hunger for the sea. Up there he would cling, or stand with hands in pockets, and look out, far over the valley and the yellowish-grey-pink of the pan-tiled town-roofs, a mile away, far into the mountains where snow melted not, far over this foreign land of '*midi trois quarts*,' to an imagined Breton coast and the seas that roll from there to Cape Breton where the cod are. Since he never spoke unless spoken to – no, not once – it was impossible for his landsmen comrades to realise why he got up those trees, and they would summon each other to observe this '*phénomène*,' this human ourang-outang, who had not their habit of keeping firm earth beneath their feet. They understood his other eccentricities better. For instance, he could not stay still even at his meals, but must get up and slip out, because he chewed tobacco, and, since the hospital regulations forbade his spitting on the floor, he must naturally go and spit outside. For '*ces types-la*' to chew and drink was – life! To the presence of tobacco in the cheek and the absence of drink from the stomach they attributed all his un-French ways, save just that one mysterious one of climbing trees.

And Gray – though only one-fourth English – how utterly British was that 'arrogant civilian,' as the '*poilus*' called him. Even his clothes, somehow, were British – no one knew who had given them to him; his short grey workman's jacket, brown dingy trousers, muffler and checked cap; his

long, idle walk, his absolute *sans-gêne*, regardless of any one but himself; his tall, loose figure, with a sort of grace lurking somewhere in its slow, wandering movements, and long, thin fingers. That wambling, independent form might surely be seen any day outside a thousand British public-houses, in time of peace. His face, with its dust-coloured hair, projecting ears, grey eyes with something of the child in them, and something of the mule, and something of a soul trying to wander out of the forest of misfortune; his little, tip-tilted nose that never grew on pure-blooded Frenchman; under a scant moustache his thick lips, disfigured by infirmity of speech, whence passed so continually a dribble of saliva – sick British workman was stamped on him. Yet he was passionately fond of washing himself; his teeth, his head, his clothes. Into the frigid winter he would go, and stand at the '*Source*' half an hour at a time, washing and washing. It was a cause of constant irritation to Mignan that his '*phénomène*' would never come to time, on account of this disastrous habit; the hospital corridors resounded almost daily with the importuning of those shapeless lips for something clean – a shirt, a pair of drawers, a bath, a handkerchief. He had a fixity of purpose; not too much purpose, but so fixed. – Yes, he was English!

For '*les deux phénomènes*' the soldiers, the servants, and the 'Powers' of the hospital – all were sorry; yet they could not understand to the point of quite forgiving their vagaries. The twain were outcast, wandering each in a dumb world of his own, each in the endless circle of one or two hopeless notions. It was irony – or the French system – which had ordered the Breton Roche to get well in a place whence he could see nothing flatter than a mountain, smell no sea, eat no fish. And God knows what had sent Gray there. His story was too vaguely understood, for his stumbling speech simply could not make it plain. '*Les Boches – ils vont en payer cher – les Boches*,' muttered fifty times a day, was the burden of his song. Those Boches had come into his village early in the war, torn him from his wife and his '*petite fille*.' Since then he had 'had fear,' been hungry, been cold, eaten grass; eyeing some fat little dog, he would leer and mutter: '*J'ai mangé cela, c'est bon!*' and with fierce triumph add: '*Ils ont faim, les Boches!*' The 'arrogant civilian' had never done his military service, for his infirmity, it seemed, had begun before the war.

Dumb, each in his own way, and differing in every mortal thing except the reality of their misfortunes, never were two beings more lonely. Their quasi-nurse, Corporal Mignan, was no doubt right in his estimate of their characters. For him, so patient in the wintry days, with his '*deux phénomènes*,' they were divested of all that halo which misfortune sets round the heads of the afflicted. He had too much to do with them, and saw them as they would have been if undogged by Fate. Of Roche he would say: '*Il n'est pas mon rêve. Je n'aime pas ces types taciturnes; quand même, il n'est pas mauvais. Il est marin – les marins – !*' and he would shrug his shoulders, as who should say: 'Those poor devils – what can you expect?' '*Mais ce Gray*' – it was one bitter day when Gray had refused absolutely to wear his great-coat during a motor drive – '*c'est un mauvais type! Il est malin – il sait très bien ce qu'il veut. C'est un egoiste!*' An egoist! Poor Gray! No doubt he was, instinctively conscious that if he did not make the most of what little personality was left within his wandering form, it would slip and he would be no more. Even a winter fly is mysteriously anxious not to become dead. That he was '*malin*' – cunning – became the accepted view about Gray; not so '*malin*' that he could 'cut three paws off a duck,' as the old grey Territorial, Grandpère Poirot, would put it, but '*malin*' enough to know very well what he wanted, and how, by sticking to his demand, to get it. Mignan, typically French, did not allow enough for the essential Englishman in Gray. Besides, one *must* be *malin* if one has only the power to say about one-tenth of what one wants, and then not be understood once in twenty times. Gray did not like his great-coat – a fine old French-blue military thing with brass buttons – the arrogant civilian would have none of it! It was easier to shift the Boches on the Western front than to shift an idea, once in his head. In the poor soil of his soul the following plants of thought alone now flourished: Hatred of the Boches; love of English tobacco – '*Il est bon – il est bon!*' he would say, tapping his Virginian cigarette; the wish to see again his 'petite fille'; to wash himself; to

drink a '*café natur*' and bottled beer every day after the midday meal, and to go to Lyons to see his uncle and work for his living. And who shall say that any of these fixed ideas were evil in him?

But back to Flotsam, whose fixed idea was Brittany! Nostalgia is a long word, and a malady from which the English do not suffer, for they carry their country on their backs, walk the wide world in a cloud of their own atmosphere, making that world England. The French have eyes to see, and, when not surrounded by houses that have flatness, shutters, and subtle colouring – yellowish, French-grey, French-green – by café's, by plane-trees, by Frenchwomen, by scents of wood-smoke and coffee roasted in the streets; by the wines, and infusions of the herbs of France; by the churches of France and the beautiful silly chiming of their bells – when not surrounded by all these, they know it, feel it, suffer. But even they do not suffer so dumbly and instinctively, so like a wild animal caged, as that Breton fisherman, caged up in a world of hill and valley – not the world as he had known it. They called his case 'shell-shock' – for the French system would not send a man to convalescence for anything so essentially civilian as home-sickness, even when it had taken a claustrophobic turn. A system recognises only causes which you can see; holes in the head, hamstrung legs, frostbitten feet, with other of the legitimate consequences of war. But it was not shell-shock. Roche was really possessed by the feeling that he would never get out, never get home, smell fish and the sea, watch the bottle-green breakers roll in on his native shore, the sun gleaming through wave-crests lifted and flying back in spray, never know the accustomed heave and roll under his feet, or carouse in a seaport cabaret, or see his old mother —*la veuve* Roche. And, after all, there was a certain foundation for his fear. It was not as if this war could be expected to stop some day. There they were, in the trenches, they and the enemy set over against each other, 'like china dogs,' in the words of Grandpère Poirot; and there they would be, so far as Roche's ungeared nerves could grasp, for ever. And, while like china dogs they sat, he knew that he would not be released, not allowed to go back to the sea and the smells and the sounds thereof; for he had still all his limbs, and no bullet-hole to show under his thick dark hair. No wonder he got up the trees and looked out for sight of the waves, and fluttered the weak nerves of the hospital 'Powers,' till they saw themselves burying him with a broken spine, at the expense of the subscribers. Nothing to be done for the poor fellow, except to take him motor-drives, and to insist that he stayed in the dining-room long enough to eat some food.

Then, one bright day, a 'Power,' watching his hands, conceived the idea of giving him two balls of string, one blue, the other buff, and all that afternoon he stayed up a single tree, and came down with one of his rare sweet smiles and a little net, half blue, half buff, with a handle covered with a twist of Turkey-red twill – such a thing as one scoops up shrimps with. He was paid for it, and his eyes sparkled. You see, he had no money – the '*poilu*' seldom has; and money meant drink, and tobacco in his cheek. They gave him more string, and for the next few days it rained little nets, beautifully if simply made. They thought that his salvation was in sight. It takes an eye to tell salvation from damnation, sometimes… In any case, he no longer roamed from tree to tree, but sat across a single branch, netting. The 'Powers' began to speak of him as 'rather a dear,' for it is characteristic of human nature to take interest only in that which by some sign of progress makes you feel that you are doing good.

Next Sunday a distinguished doctor came, and, when he had been fed, some one conceived the notion of interesting him, too, in Flotsam. A learned, kindly, influential man – well-fed – something might come of it, even that '*réforme*,' that sending home, which all agreed was what poor Roche needed, to restore his brain. He was brought in, therefore, amongst the chattering party, and stood, dark, shy, his head down, like the man in Millet's 'Angelus,' his hands folded on his cap, in front of his unspeakably buttoned blue baggy trousers, as though in attitude of prayer to the doctor, who, uniformed and grey-bearded, like an old somnolent goat, beamed on him through spectacles with a sort of shrewd benevolence. The catechism began. So he had something to ask, had he? A swift, shy lift of the eyes: 'Yes.' 'What then?' 'To go home.' 'To go home? What for? To get married?' A swift, shy smile. 'Fair or dark?' No answer, only a shift of hands on his cap. 'What! Was there no

one – no ladies at home?' '*Ce n'est pas ça qui manque!*' At the laughter greeting that dim flicker of wit the uplifted face was cast down again. That lonely, lost figure must suddenly have struck the doctor, for his catechism became a long, embarrassed scrutiny; and with an: '*Eh bien! mon vieux, nous verrons!*' ended. Nothing came of it, of course. '*Cas de réforme?*' Oh, certainly, if it had depended on the learned, kindly doctor. But the system – and all its doors to be unlocked! Why, by the time the last door was prepared to open, the first would be closed again! So the 'Powers' gave Roche more string – so good, you know, to see him interested in something!.. It does take an eye to tell salvation from damnation! For he began to go down now of an afternoon into the little old town – not smelless, but most quaint – all yellowish-grey, with rosy-tiled roofs. Once it had been Roman, once a walled city of the Middle Ages; never would it be modern. The dogs ran muzzled; from a first-floor a goat, munching green fodder, hung his devilish black beard above your head; and through the main street the peasant farmers, above military age, looking old as sun-dried roots, in their dark *pélerines*, drove their wives and produce in little slow carts. Parched oleanders in pots one would pass, and old balconies with wilting flowers hanging down over the stone, and perhaps an umbrella with a little silver handle, set out to dry. Roche would go in by the back way, where the old town gossips sat on a bench in the winter sunshine, facing the lonely cross shining gold on the high hill-top opposite, placed there in days when there was some meaning in such things; past the little '*Place*' with the old fountain and the brown plane-trees in front of the Mairie; past the church, so ancient that it had fortunately been forgotten, and remained unfinished and beautiful. Did Roche, Breton that he was – half the love-ladies in Paris, they say – falsely, no doubt – are Bretonnes – ever enter the church in passing? Some rascal had tried to burn down its beautiful old door from the inside, and the flames had left on all that high western wall smears like the fingermarks of hell, or the background of a Velasquez Crucifixion. Did he ever enter and stand, knotting his knot which never got knotted, in the dark loveliness of that grave building, where in the deep silence a dusty-gold little angel blows on his horn from the top of the canopied pulpit, and a dim carved Christ of touching beauty looks down on His fellow-men from above some dry chrysanthemums; and a tall candle burned quiet and lonely here and there, and the flags of France hung above the altar, that men might know how God – though resting – was with them and their country? Perhaps! But, more likely, he passed it, with its great bell riding high and open among scrolls of ironwork, and – Breton that he was – entered the nearest cabaret, kept by the woman who would tell you that her soldier husband had passed 'within two fingers' of death. One cannot spend one's earnings in a church, nor appease there the inextinguishable longings of a sailor.

And lo! – on Christmas day Roche came back so drunk that his nurse Mignan took him to his bedroom and turned the key of the door on him. But you must not do this to a Breton fisherman full of drink and claustrophobia. It was one of those errors even Frenchmen may make, to the after sorrow of their victims. One of the female 'Powers,' standing outside, heard a roar, the crash of a foot against the panel of a door, and saw Roche, 'like a great cat' come slithering through the hole. He flung his arm out, brushed the 'Power' back against the wall, cried out fiercely: '*La boîte – je ne veux pas la boîte!*' and rushed for the stairs. Here were other female 'Powers'; he dashed them aside and passed down. But in the bureau at the foot was a young Corporal of the '*Legion Etrangère*' – a Spaniard who had volunteered for France – great France; he ran out, took Roche gently by the arm, and offered to drink with him. And so they sat, those two, in the little bureau, drinking black coffee, while the young Corporal talked like an angel and Roche like a wild man – about his mother, about his dead brother who had been sitting on his bed, as he said, about '*la boîte*,' and the turning of that key. And slowly he became himself – or so they thought – and all went in to supper. Ten minutes later one of the 'Powers,' looking for the twentieth time to make sure he was eating, saw an empty place: he had slipped out like a shadow and was gone again. A big cavalryman and the Corporal retrieved him that night from a *café* near the station; they had to use force at times to bring him in. Two days later he was transferred to a town hospital, where discipline would not allow him to get drunk or climb trees. For the 'Powers' had reasoned thus: To climb trees is bad; to get drunk is bad; but to do both puts on

us too much responsibility; he must go! They had, in fact, been scared. And so he passed away to a room under the roof of a hospital in the big town miles away —*la boîte* indeed! – where for liberty he must use a courtyard without trees, and but little tobacco came to his cheek; and there he eats his heart out to this day, perhaps. But some say he had no heart – only the love of drink, and climbing. Yet, on that last evening, to one who was paying him for a little net, he blurted out: 'Some day I will tell you something – not now – in a year's time. *Vous êtes le seul – !*' What did he mean by that, if he had no heart to eat?.. The night after he had gone, a little black dog strayed up, and among the trees barked and barked at some portent or phantom. 'Ah! the camel! Ah! the pig! I had him on my back all night!' Grandpère Poirot said next morning. That was the very last of Flotsam…

And now to Jetsam! It was on the day but one after Roche left that Gray was reported missing. For some time past he had been getting stronger, clearer in speech. They began to say of him: 'It's wonderful – the improvement since he came – wonderful!' His salvation also seemed in sight. But from the words 'He's rather a dear!' all recoiled, for as he grew stronger he became more stubborn and more irritable – 'cunning egoist' that he was! According to the men, he was beginning to show himself in his true colours. He had threatened to knife any one who played a joke on him – the arrogant civilian! On the day that he was missing it appears that after the midday meal he had asked for a '*café natur*' and for some reason had been refused. Before his absence was noted it was night already, clear and dark; all day something as of Spring had stirred in the air. The Corporal and a 'Power' set forth down the wooded hill into the town, to scour the *cafés* and hang over the swift, shallow river, to see if by any chance Gray had been overtaken by another paralytic stroke and was down there on the dark sand. The sleepy gendarmes too were warned and given his description. But the only news next morning was that he had been seen walking on the main road up the valley. Two days later he was found, twenty miles away, wandering towards Italy. '*Perdu*' was his only explanation, but it was not believed, for now began that continual demand: '*Je voudrais aller à Lyon, voir mon oncle – travailler!*' As the big cavalryman put it: 'He is bored here!' It was considered unreasonable, by soldiers who found themselves better off than in other hospitals; even the 'Powers' considered it ungrateful, almost. See what he had been like when he came – a mere trembling bag of bones, only too fearful of being sent away. And yet, who would not be bored, crouching all day long about the stoves, staunching his poor dribbling mouth, rolling his inevitable cigarette, or wandering down, lonely, to hang over the bridge parapet, having thoughts in his head and for ever unable to express them. His state was worse than dumbness, for the dumb have resigned hope of conversation. Gray would have liked to talk if it had not taken about five minutes to understand each thing he said – except the refrain which all knew by heart: '*Les Boches – ils vont en payer cher – les Boches!*' The idea that he could work and earn his living was fantastic to those who watched him dressing himself, or sweeping the courtyard, pausing every few seconds to contemplate some invisible difficulty, or do over again what he had just not done. But with that new access of strength, or perhaps the open weather – as if Spring had come before its time – his fixed idea governed him completely; he began to threaten to kill himself if he could not go to work and see his uncle at Lyon; and every five days or so he had to be brought back from far up some hill road. The situation had become so ridiculous that the 'Powers' said in despair: 'Very well, my friend! Your uncle says he can't have you, and you can't earn your own living yet; but you shall go and see for yourself!' And go he did, a little solemn now that it had come to his point – in specially bought yellow boots – he refused black – and a specially bought overcoat with sleeves – he would have none of a *pélerine*, the arrogant civilian, no more than of a military *capote*. For a week the hospital knew him not. Deep winter set in two days before he went, and the whole land was wrapped in snow. The huge, disconsolate crows seemed all the life left in the valley, and poplar-trees against the rare blue sky were dowered with miraculous snow-blossoms, beautiful as any blossom of Spring. And still in the winter sun the town gossips sat on the bench under the wall, and the cross gleamed out, and the church bell, riding high in its whitened ironwork, tolled almost every day for the passing of some wintered soul, and long processions, very black in the white street, followed it, followed it – home.

Then came a telegram from Gray's uncle: 'Impossible to keep Aristide (the name of the arrogant civilian), takes the evening train to-morrow. Albert Gray.' So Jetsam was coming back! What would he be like now that his fixed idea had failed him? Well! He came at midday; thinner, more clay-coloured in the face, with a bad cold; but he ate as heartily as ever, and at once asked to go to bed. At four o'clock a 'Power,' going up to see, found him sleeping like a child. He slept for twenty hours on end. No one liked to question him about his time away; all that he said – and bitterly – was: 'They wouldn't let me work!' But the second evening after his return there came a knock on the door of the little room where the 'Powers' were sitting after supper, and there stood Gray, long and shadowy, holding on to the screen, smoothing his jaw-bone with the other hand, turning eyes like a child's from face to face, while his helpless lips smiled. One of the 'Powers' said: 'What do you want, my friend?'

'*Je voudrais aller à Paris, voir ma petite fille.*'

'Yes, yes; after the war. Your *petite fille* is not in Paris, you know.'

'*Non?*' The smile was gone; it was seen too plainly that Gray was not as he had been. The access of vigour, stirring of new strength, 'improvement' had departed, but the beat of it, while there, must have broken him, as the beat of some too-strong engine shatters a frail frame. His 'improvement' had driven him to his own undoing. With the failure of his pilgrimage he had lost all hope, all 'egoism.'… It takes an eye, indeed, to tell salvation from damnation! He was truly Jetsam now – terribly thin and ill and sad; and coughing. Yet he kept the independence of his spirit. In that bitter cold, nothing could prevent him stripping to the waist to wash, nothing could keep him lying in bed, or kill his sense of the proprieties. He would not wear his overcoat – it was invalidish; he would not wear his new yellow boots and keep his feet dry, except on Sundays: '*Ils sont bons!*' he would say. And before he would profane their goodness, his old worn-out shoes had to be reft from him. He would not admit that he was ill, that he was cold, that he was – anything. But at night, a 'Power' would be awakened by groans, and, hurrying to his room, find him huddled nose to knees, moaning. And now, every evening, as though craving escape from his own company, he would come to the little sitting-room, and stand with that deprecating smile, smoothing his jaw-bone, until some one said: 'Sit down, my friend, and have some coffee.' '*Merci, ma sœur – il est bon, il est bon!*' and down he would sit, and roll a cigarette with his long fingers, tapering as any artist's, while his eyes fixed themselves intently on anything that moved. But soon they would stray off to another world, and he would say thickly, sullenly, fiercely: '*Les Boches – ils vont en payer cher – les Boches!*' On the walls were some trophies from the war of 'seventy.' His eyes would gloat over them, and he would get up and finger a long pistol, or old *papier-maché* helmet. Never was a man who so lacked *gêne*– at home in any company; it inspired reverence, that independence of his, which had survived twenty months of imprisonment with those who, it is said, make their victims salute them – to such a depth has their civilisation reached. One night he tried to tell about the fright he had been given. The Boches – it seemed – had put him and two others against a wall, and shot those other two. Holding up two tapering fingers, he mumbled: '*Assassins – assassins! Ils vont en payer cher – les Boches!*' But sometimes there was something almost beautiful in his face, as if his soul had rushed from behind his eyes, to answer some little kindness done to him, or greet some memory of the days before he was 'done for' —*foutu*, as he called it.

One day he admitted a pain about his heart; and time, too, for at moments he would look like death itself. His nurse, Corporal Mignan, had long left his *'deux phénomènes!*' having drifted away on the tides of the system, till he should break down again and drag through the hospitals once more. Gray had a room to himself now; the arrogant civilian's groaning at night disturbed the others. Yet, if you asked him in the morning if he had slept well, he answered invariably, '*Oui – oui – toujours, toujours!*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.