# GALSWORTHY JOHN

# SAINT'S PROGRESS

John Galsworthy

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**Galsworthy J.**

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# Содержание

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## PART I

### I

Such a day made glad the heart. All the flags of July were waving; the sun and the poppies flaming; white butterflies spiring up and twining, and the bees busy on the snapdragons. The lime-trees were coming into flower. Tall white lilies in the garden beds already rivaled the delphiniums; the York and Lancaster roses were full-blown round their golden hearts. There was a gentle breeze, and a swish and stir and hum rose and fell above the head of Edward Pierson, coming back from his lonely ramble over Tintern Abbey. He had arrived at Kestrel, his brother Robert's home on the bank of the Wye only that morning, having stayed at Bath on the way down; and now he had got his face burnt in that parti-coloured way peculiar to the faces of those who have been too long in London. As he came along the narrow, rather overgrown avenue, the sound of a waltz thrummed out on a piano fell on his ears, and he smiled, for music was the greatest passion he had. His dark grizzled hair was pushed back off his hot brow, which he fanned with his straw hat. Though not broad, that brow was the broadest part of a narrow oval face whose length was increased by a short, dark, pointed beard – a visage such as Vandyk might have painted, grave and gentle, but for its bright grey eyes, cinder-lashed and crow's-footed, and its strange look of not seeing what was before it. He walked quickly, though he was tired and hot; tall, upright, and thin, in a grey parsonical suit, on whose black kerseymere vest a little gold cross dangled.

Above his brother's house, whose sloping garden ran down to the railway line and river, a large room had been built out apart. Pierson stood where the avenue forked, enjoying the sound of the waltz, and the cool whipping of the breeze in the sycamores and birches. A man of fifty, with a sense of beauty, born and bred in the country, suffers fearfully from nostalgia during a long unbroken spell of London; so that his afternoon in the old Abbey had been almost holy. He had let his senses sink into the sunlit greenery of the towering woods opposite; he had watched the spiders and the little shining beetles, the flycatchers, and sparrows in the ivy; touched the mosses and the lichens; looked the speedwells in the eye; dreamed of he knew not what. A hawk had been wheeling up there above the woods, and he had been up there with it in the blue. He had taken a real spiritual bath, and washed the dusty fret of London off his soul.

For a year he had been working his parish single-handed – no joke – for his curate had gone for a chaplain; and this was his first real holiday since the war began, two years ago; his first visit, too, to his brother's home. He looked down at the garden, and up at the trees of the avenue. Bob had found a perfect retreat after his quarter of a century in Ceylon. Dear old Bob! And he smiled at the thought of his elder brother, whose burnt face and fierce grey whiskers somewhat recalled a Bengal tiger; the kindest fellow that ever breathed! Yes, he had found a perfect home for Thirza and himself. And Edward Pierson sighed. He too had once had a perfect home, a perfect wife; the wound of whose death, fifteen years ago, still bled a little in his heart. Their two daughters, Gratian and Noel, had not "taken after" her; Gratian was like his own mother, and Noel's fair hair and big grey eyes always reminded him of his cousin Leila, who – poor thing! – had made that sad mess of her life, and now, he had heard, was singing for a living, in South Africa. Ah! What a pretty girl she had been!

Drawn by that eternal waltz tune he reached the doorway of the music-room. A chintz curtain hung there, and to the sound of feet slipping on polished boards, he saw his daughter Noel waltzing

slowly in the arms of a young officer in khaki: Round and round they went, circling, backing, moving sideways with curious steps which seemed to have come in recently, for he did not recognise them. At the piano sat his niece Eve, with a teasing smile on her rosy face. But it was at his young daughter that Edward Pierson looked. Her eyes were half-closed, her cheeks rather pale, and her fair hair, cut quite short, curled into her slim round neck. Quite cool she seemed, though the young man in whose arms she was gliding along looked fiery hot; a handsome boy, with blue eyes and a little golden down on the upper lip of his sunny red-cheeked face. Edward Pierson thought: 'Nice couple!' And had a moment's vision of himself and Leila, dancing at that long-ago Cambridge May Week – on her seventeenth birthday, he remembered, so that she must have been a year younger than Nollie was now! This would be the young man she had talked of in her letters during the last three weeks. Were they never going to stop?

He passed into view of those within, and said:

"Aren't you very hot, Nollie?"

She blew him a kiss; the young man looked startled and self-conscious, and Eve called out:

"It's a bet, Uncle. They've got to dance me down."

Pierson said mildly:

"A bet? My dears!"

Noel murmured over her shoulder:

"It's all right, Daddy!" And the young man gasped:

"She's bet us one of her puppies against one of mine, sir!"

Pierson sat down, a little hypnotized by the sleepy strumming, the slow giddy movement of the dancers, and those half-closed swimming eyes of his young daughter, looking at him over her shoulder as she went by. He sat with a smile on his lips. Nollie was growing up! Now that Gratian was married, she had become a great responsibility. If only his dear wife had lived! The smile faded from his lips; he looked suddenly very tired. The struggle, physical and spiritual, he had been through, these fifteen years, sometimes weighed him almost to the ground: Most men would have married again, but he had always felt it would be sacrilege. Real unions were for ever, even though the Church permitted remarriage.

He watched his young daughter with a mixture of aesthetic pleasure and perplexity. Could this be good for her? To go on dancing indefinitely with one young man could that possibly be good for her? But they looked very happy; and there was so much in young creatures that he did not understand. Noel, so affectionate, and dreamy, seemed sometimes possessed of a little devil. Edward Pierson was naif; attributed those outbursts of demonic possession to the loss of her mother when she was such a mite; Gratian, but two years older, had never taken a mother's place. That had been left to himself, and he was more or less conscious of failure.

He sat there looking up at her with a sort of whimsical distress. And, suddenly, in that dainty voice of hers, which seemed to spurn each word a little, she said:

"I'm going to stop!" and, sitting down beside him, took up his hat to fan herself.

Eve struck a triumphant chord. "Hurrah I've won!"

The young man muttered:

"I say, Noel, we weren't half done!"

"I know; but Daddy was getting bored, weren't you, dear? This is Cyril Morland."

Pierson shook the young man's hand.

"Daddy, your nose is burnt!"

"My dear; I know."

"I can give you some white stuff for it. You have to sleep with it on all night. Uncle and Auntie both use it."

"Nollie!"

"Well, Eve says so. If you're going to bathe, Cyril, look out for that current!"

The young man, gazing at her with undisguised adoration, muttered:

"Rather!" and went out.

Noel's eyes lingered after him; Eve broke a silence.

"If you're going to have a bath before tea, Nollie, you'd better hurry up."

"All right. Was it jolly in the Abbey, Daddy?"

"Lovely; like a great piece of music."

"Daddy always puts everything into music. You ought to see it by moonlight; it's gorgeous then. All right, Eve; I'm coming." But she did not get up, and when Eve was gone, cuddled her arm through her father's and murmured:

"What d'you think of Cyril?"

"My dear, how can I tell? He seems a nice-looking young man."

"All right, Daddy; don't strain yourself. It's jolly down here, isn't it?" She got up, stretched herself a little, and moved away, looking like a very tall child, with her short hair curling in round her head.

Pierson, watching her vanish past the curtain, thought: 'What a lovely thing she is!' And he got up too, but instead of following, went to the piano, and began to play Mendelssohn's Prelude and Fugue in E minor. He had a fine touch, and played with a sort of dreamy passion. It was his way out of perplexities, regrets, and longings; a way which never quite failed him.

At Cambridge, he had intended to take up music as a profession, but family tradition had destined him for Holy Orders, and an emotional Church revival of that day had caught him in its stream. He had always had private means, and those early years before he married had passed happily in an East-End parish. To have not only opportunity but power to help in the lives of the poor had been fascinating; simple himself, the simple folk of his parish had taken hold of his heart. When, however, he married Agnes Heriot, he was given a parish of his own on the borders of East and West, where he had been ever since, even after her death had nearly killed him. It was better to go on where work and all reminded him of one whom he had resolved never to forget in other ties. But he knew that his work had not the zest it used to have in her day, or even before her day. It may well be doubted whether he, who had been in Holy Orders twenty-six years, quite knew now what he believed. Everything had become circumscribed, and fixed, by thousands of his own utterances; to have taken fresh stock of his faith, to have gone deep into its roots, would have been like taking up the foundations of a still-standing house. Some men naturally root themselves in the inexpressible – for which one formula is much the same as another; though Edward Pierson, gently dogmatic, undoubtedly preferred his High-Church statement of the inexpressible to that of, say, the Zoroastrians. The subtleties of change, the modifications by science, left little sense of inconsistency or treason on his soul. Sensitive, charitable, and only combative deep down, he instinctively avoided discussion on matters where he might hurt others or they hurt him. And, since explanation was the last thing which o could be expected of one who did not base himself on Reason, he had found but scant occasion ever to examine anything. Just as in the old Abbey he had soared off into the infinite with the hawk, the beetles, and the grasses, so now, at the piano, by these sounds of his own making, he was caught away again into emotionalism, without realising that he was in one of his, most religious moods.

"Aren't you coming to tea, Edward?"

The woman standing behind him, in a lilac-coloured gown, had one of those faces which remain innocent to the end of the chapter, in spite of the complete knowledge of life which appertains to mothers. In days of suffering and anxiety, like these of the great war, Thirza Pierson was a valuable person. Without ever expressing an opinion on cosmic matters, she reconfirmed certain cosmic truths, such as that though the whole world was at war, there was such a thing as peace; that though all the sons of mothers were being killed, there remained such a thing as motherhood; that while everybody was living for the future, the present still existed. Her tranquil, tender, matter-of-fact busyness, and the dew in her eyes, had been proof against twenty-three years of life on a tea-plantation in the hot

part of Ceylon; against Bob Pierson; against the anxiety of having two sons at the front, and the confidences of nearly every one she came across. Nothing disturbed her. She was like a painting of "Goodness" by an Old Master, restored by Kate Greenaway. She never went to meet life, but when it came, made the best of it. This was her secret, and Pierson always felt rested in her presence.

He rose, and moved by her side, over the lawn, towards the big tree at the bottom of the garden.

"How d'you think Noel is looking, Edward?"

"Very pretty. That young man, Thirza?"

"Yes; I'm afraid he's over head and ears in love with her."

At the dismayed sound he uttered, she slipped her soft round arm within his. "He's going to the front soon, poor boy!"

"Have they talked to you?"

"He has. Nollie hasn't yet."

"Nollie is a queer child, Thirza."

"Nollie is a darling, but rather a desperate character, Edward."

Pierson sighed.

In a swing under the tree, where the tea-things were set out, the "rather desperate character" was swaying. "What a picture she is!" he said, and sighed again.

The voice of his brother came to them, – high and steamy, as though corrupted by the climate of Ceylon:

"You incorrigible dreamy chap, Ted! We've eaten all the raspberries. Eve, give him some jam; he must be dead! Phew! the heat! Come on, my dear, and pour out his tea. Hallo, Cyril! Had a good bathe? By George, wish my head was wet! Squattez-vous down over there, by Nollie; she'll swing, and keep the flies off you."

"Give me a cigarette, Uncle Bob – "

"What! Your father doesn't – "

"Just for the flies. You don't mind, Daddy?"

"Not if it's necessary, my dear."

Noel smiled, showing her upper teeth, and her eyes seemed to swim under their long lashes.

"It isn't necessary, but it's nice."

"Ah, ha!" said Bob Pierson. "Here you are, Nollie!"

But Noel shook her head. At that moment she struck her father as startlingly grown-up-so composed, swaying above that young man at her feet, whose sunny face was all adoration. 'No longer a child!' he thought. 'Dear Nollie!'

# II

## 1

Awakened by that daily cruelty, the advent of hot water, Edward Pierson lay in his chintz-curtained room, fancying himself back in London. A wild bee hunting honey from the bowl of flowers on the window-sill, and the scent of sweetbrier, shattered that illusion. He drew the curtain, and, kneeling on the window-seat thrust his head out into the morning. The air was intoxicatingly sweet. Haze clung over the river and the woods beyond; the lawn sparkled with dew, and two wagtails strutted in the dewy sunshine. 'Thank God for loveliness!' he thought. 'Those poor boys at the front!' And kneeling with his elbows on the sill, he began to say his prayers. The same feeling which made him beautify his church, use vestments, good music, and incense, filled him now. God was in the loveliness of His world, as well as in His churches. One could worship Him in a grove of beech trees, in a beautiful garden, on a high hill, by the banks of a bright river. God was in the rustle of the leaves, and the hum of a bee, in the dew on the grass, and the scent of flowers; God was in everything! And he added to his usual prayer this whisper: "I give Thee thanks for my senses, O Lord. In all of us, keep them bright, and grateful for beauty." Then he remained motionless, prey to a sort of happy yearning very near, to melancholy. Great beauty ever had that effect on him. One could capture so little of it – could never enjoy it enough! Who was it had said not long ago: "Love of beauty is really only the sex instinct, which nothing but complete union satisfies." Ah! yes, George – Gratian's husband. George Laird! And a little frown came between his brows, as though at some thorn in the flesh. Poor George! But then, all doctors were materialists at heart – splendid fellows, though; a fine fellow, George, working himself to death out there in France. One must not take them too seriously. He plucked a bit of sweetbrier and put it to his nose, which still retained the shine of that bleaching ointment Noel had insisted on his using. The sweet smell of those little rough leaves stirred up an acute aching. He dropped them, and drew back. No longings, no melancholy; one ought to be out, this beautiful morning!

It was Sunday; but he had not to take three Services and preach at least one sermon; this day of rest was really to be his own, for once. It was almost disconcerting; he had so long felt like the cab horse who could not be taken out of the shafts lest he should fall down. He dressed with extraordinary deliberation, and had not quite finished when there came a knock on his door, and Noel's voice said: "Can I come in, Daddy?"

In her flax-blue frock, with a Gloire de Dijon rose pinned where it met on her faintly browned neck, she seemed to her father a perfect vision of freshness.

"Here's a letter from Gratian; George has been sent home ill, and he's gone to our house. She's got leave from her hospital to come home and nurse him."

Pierson read the letter. "Poor George!"

"When are you going to let me be a nurse, Daddy?"

"We must wait till you're eighteen, Nollie."

"I could easily say I was. It's only a month; and I look much more."

Pierson smiled.

"Don't I?"

"You might be anything from fifteen to twenty-five, my dear, according as you behave."

"I want to go out as near the front as possible."

Her head was poised so that the sunlight framed her face, which was rather broad – the brow rather too broad – under the waving light-brown hair, the nose short and indeterminate; cheeks still round from youth, almost waxen-pale, and faintly hollowed under the eyes. It was her lips, dainty yet

loving, and above all her grey eyes, big and dreamily alive, which made her a swan. He could not imagine her in nurse's garb.

"This is new, isn't it, Nollie?"

"Cyril Morland's sisters are both out; and he'll be going soon. Everybody goes."

"Gratian hasn't got out yet: It takes a long time to get trained."

"I know; all the more reason to begin."

She got up, looked at him, looked at her hands, seemed about to speak, but did not. A little colour had come into her cheeks. Then, obviously making conversation, she asked:

"Are you going to church? It's worth anything to hear Uncle Bob read the Lessons, especially when he loses his place. No; you're not to put on your long coat till just before church time. I won't have it!"

Obediently Pierson resigned his long coat.

"Now, you see, you can have my rose. Your nose is better!" She kissed his nose, and transferred her rose to the buttonhole of his short coat. "That's all. Come along!" And with her arm through his, they went down. But he knew she had come to say something which she had not said.

## 2

Bob Pierson, in virtue of greater wealth than the rest of the congregation, always read the Lessons, in his high steamy voice, his breathing never adjusted to the length of any period. The congregation, accustomed, heard nothing peculiar; he was the necessary gentry with the necessary finger in the pie. It was his own family whom he perturbed. In the second row, Noel, staring solemnly at the profile of her father in the front row, was thinking: 'Poor Daddy! His eyes look as if they were coming out. Oh, Daddy! Smile! or it'll hurt you!' Young Morland beside her, rigid in his tunic, was thinking: 'She isn't thinking of me!' And just then her little finger crooked into his. Edward Pierson was thinking: 'Oh! My dear old Bob! Oh!' And, beside him, Thirza thought: 'Poor dear Ted I how nice for him to be having a complete rest! I must make him eat he's so thin!' And Eve was thinking: 'Oh, Father! Mercy!' But Bob Pierson was thinking: 'Cheer oh! Only another three verses!' Noel's little finger unhooked itself, but her eyes stole round to young Morland's eyes, and there was a light in them which lingered through the singing and the prayers. At last, in the reverential rustle of the settling congregation, a surpliced figure mounted the pulpit.

"I come not to bring Peace, but a sword."

Pierson looked up. He felt deep restfulness. There was a pleasant light in this church; the hum of a country bluebottle made all the difference to the quality of silence. No critical thought stirred within him, nor any excitement. He was thinking: 'Now I shall hear something for my good; a fine text; when did I preach from it last?' Turned a little away from the others, he saw nothing but the preacher's homely face up there above the carved oak; it was so long since he had been preached to, so long since he had had a rest! The words came forth, dropped on his forehead, penetrated, met something which absorbed them, and disappeared. 'A good plain sermon!' he thought. 'I suppose I'm stale; I don't seem – ' "Let us not, dear brethren," droned the preacher's earnest voice, "think that our dear Lord, in saying that He brought a sword, referred to a physical sword. It was the sword of the spirit to which He was undoubtedly referring, that bright sword of the spirit which in all ages has cleaved its way through the fetters imposed on men themselves by their own desires, imposed by men on other men in gratification of their ambitions, as we have had so striking an example in the invasion by our cruel enemies of a little neighbouring country which had done them no harm. Dear brethren, we may all bring swords." Pierson's chin jerked; he raised his hand quickly and passed it over his face. 'All bring swords,' he thought, 'swords – I wasn't asleep – surely!' "But let us be sure that our swords are bright; bright with hope, and bright with faith, that we may see them flashing among the

carnal desires of this mortal life, carving a path for us towards that heavenly kingdom where alone is peace, perfect peace. Let us pray."

Pierson did not shut his eyes; he opened them as he fell on his knees. In the seat behind, Noel and young Morland had also fallen on their knees their faces covered each with a single hand; but her left hand and his right hung at their sides. They prayed a little longer than any others and, on rising, sang the hymn a little louder.

## 3

No paper came on Sundays – not even the local paper, which had so long and so nobly done its bit with headlines to win the war. No news whatever came, of men blown up, to enliven the hush of the hot July afternoon, or the sense of drugging – which followed Aunt Thirza's Sunday lunch. Some slept, some thought they were awake; but Noel and young Morland walked upward through the woods towards a high common of heath and furze, crowned by what was known as Kestrel rocks. Between these two young people no actual word of love had yet been spoken. Their lovering had advanced by glance and touch alone.

Young Morland was a school and college friend of the two Pierson boys now at the front. He had no home of his own, for his parents were dead; and this was not his first visit to Kestrel. Arriving three weeks ago, for his final leave before he should go out, he had found a girl sitting in a little wagonette outside the station, and had known his fate at once. But who knows when Noel fell in love? She was – one supposes – just ready for that sensation. For the last two years she had been at one of those high-class finishing establishments where, in spite of the healthy curriculum, perhaps because of it, there is ever an undercurrent of interest in the opposing sex; and not even the gravest efforts to eliminate instinct are quite successful. The disappearance of every young male thing into the maw of the military machine put a premium on instinct. The thoughts of Noel and her school companions were turned, perforce, to that which, in pre-war freedom of opportunity they could afford to regard as of secondary interest. Love and Marriage and Motherhood, fixed as the lot of women by the countless ages, were threatened for these young creatures. They not unnaturally pursued what they felt to be receding.

When young Morland showed, by following her about with his eyes, what was happening to him, Noel was pleased. From being pleased, she became a little excited; from being excited she became dreamy. Then, about a week before her father's arrival, she secretly began to follow the young man about with her eyes; became capricious too, and a little cruel. If there had been another young man to favour – but there was not; and she favoured Uncle Bob's red setter. Cyril Morland grew desperate. During those three days the demon her father dreaded certainly possessed her. And then, one evening, while they walked back together from the hay-fields, she gave him a sidelong glance; and he gasped out: "Oh! Noel, what have I done?" She caught his hand, and gave it a quick squeeze. What a change! What blissful alteration ever since!

Through the wood young Morland mounted silently, screwing himself up to put things to the touch. Noel too mounted silently, thinking: 'I will kiss him if he kisses me!' Eagerness, and a sort of languor, were running in her veins; she did not look at him from under her shady hat. Sun light poured down through every chink in the foliage; made the greenness of the steep wood marvellously vivid and alive; flashed on beech leaves, ash leaves, birch leaves; fell on the ground in little runlets; painted bright patches on trunks and grass, the beech mast, the ferns; butterflies chased each other in that sunlight, and myriads of ants and gnats and flies seemed possessed by a frenzy of life. The whole wood seemed possessed, as if the sunshine were a happy Being which had come to dwell therein. At a half-way spot, where the trees opened and they could see, far below them, the gleam of the river, she sat down on the bole of a beech-tree, and young Morland stood looking at her. Why should one face and not an other, this voice and not that, make a heart beat; why should a touch from one hand

awaken rapture, and a touch from another awaken nothing? He knelt down and pressed his lips to her foot. Her eyes grew very bright; but she got up and ran on – she had not expected him to kiss her foot. She heard him hurrying after her, and stopped, leaning against a birch trunk. He rushed to her, and, without a word spoken, his lips were on her lips. The moment in life, which no words can render, had come for them. They had found their enchanted spot, and they moved no further, but sat with their arms round each other, while the happy Being of the wood watched. A marvellous speeder-up of Love is War. What might have taken six months, was thus accomplished in three weeks.

A short hour passed, then Noel said:

"I must tell Daddy, Cyril. I meant to tell him something this morning, only I thought I'd better wait, in case you didn't."

Morland answered: "Oh, Noel!" It was the staple of his conversation while they sat there.

Again a short hour passed, and Morland said:

"I shall go off my chump if we're not married before I go out."

"How long does it take?"

"No time, if we hurry up. I've got six days before I rejoin, and perhaps the Chief will give me another week, if I tell him."

"Poor Daddy! Kiss me again; a long one."

When the long one was over, she said:

"Then I can come and be near you till you go out? Oh, Cyril!"

"Oh, Noel!"

"Perhaps you won't go so soon. Don't go if you can help it!"

"Not if I can help it, darling; but I shan't be able."

"No, of course not; I know."

Young Morland clutched his hair. "Everyone's in the same boat, but it can't last for ever; and now we're engaged we can be together all the time till I've got the licence or whatever it is. And then – !"

"Daddy won't like our not being married in a church; but I don't care!"

Looking down at her closed eyes, and their lashes resting on her cheeks, young Morland thought:

'My God! I'm in heaven!'

Another short hour passed before she freed herself.

"We must go, Cyril. Kiss me once more!"

It was nearly dinner-time, and they ran down. 4

Edward Pierson, returning from the Evening Service, where he had read the Lessons, saw them in the distance, and compressed his lips. Their long absence had vexed him. What ought he to do? In the presence of Love's young dream, he felt strange and helpless. That night, when he opened the door of his room, he saw Noel on the window-seat, in her dressing-gown, with the moonlight streaming in on her.

"Don't light up, Daddy; I've got something to say."

She took hold of the little gold cross on his vest, and turned it over.

"I'm engaged to Cyril; we want to be married this week."

It was exactly as if someone had punched him in the ribs; and at the sound he made she hurried on:

"You see, we must be; he may be going out any day."

In the midst of his aching consternation, he admitted a kind of reason in her words. But he said:

"My dear, you're only a child. Marriage is the most serious thing in life; you've only known him three weeks."

"I know all that, Daddy" her voice sounded so ridiculously calm; "but we can't afford to wait. He might never come back, you see, and then I should have missed him."

"But, Noel, suppose he never did come back; it would only be much worse for you."

She dropped the little cross, and took hold of his hand, pressing it against her heart. But still her voice was calm:

"No; much better, Daddy; you think I don't know my own feelings, but I do."

The man in Pierson softened; the priest hardened.

"Nollie, true marriage is the union of souls; and for that, time is wanted. Time to know that you feel and think the same, and love the same things."

"Yes, I know; but we do."

"You can't tell that, my dear; no one could in three weeks."

"But these aren't ordinary times, are they? People have to do things in a hurry. Oh, Daddy! Be an angel! Mother would have understood, and let me, I know!"

Pierson drew away his hand; the words hurt, from reminder of his loss, from reminder of the poor substitute he was.

"Look, Nollie!" he said. "After all these years since she left us, I'm as lonely as ever, because we were really one. If you marry this young man without knowing more of your own hearts than you can in such a little time, you may regret it dreadfully; you may find it turn out, after all, nothing but a little empty passion; or again, if anything happens to him before you've had any real married life together, you'll have a much greater grief and sense of loss to put up with than if you simply stay engaged till after the war. Besides, my child, you're much too young."

She sat so still that he looked at her in alarm. "But I must!"

He bit his lips, and said sharply: "You can't, Nollie!"

She got up, and before he could stop her, was gone. With the closing of the door, his anger evaporated, and distress took its place. Poor child! What to do with this wayward chicken just out of the egg, and wanting to be full-fledged at once? The thought that she would be lying miserable, crying, perhaps, beset him so that he went out into the passage and tapped on her door. Getting no answer, he went in. It was dark but for a streak of moonlight, and in that he saw her, lying on her bed, face down; and stealing up laid his hand on her head. She did not move; and, stroking her hair, he said gently:

"Nollie dear, I didn't mean to be harsh. If I were your mother, I should know how to make you see, but I'm only an old bumble-daddy."

She rolled over, scrambling into a cross-legged posture on the bed. He could see her eyes shining. But she did not speak; she seemed to know that in silence was her strength.

He said with a sort of despair:

"You must let me talk it over with your aunt. She has a lot of good sense."

"Yes."

He bent over and kissed her hot forehead.

"Good night, my dear; don't cry. Promise me!"

She nodded, and lifted her face; he felt her hot soft lips on his forehead, and went away a little comforted.

But Noel sat on her bed, hugging her knees, listening to the night, to the emptiness and silence; each minute so much lost of the little, little time left, that she might have been with him.

# III

Pierson woke after a troubled and dreamful night, in which he had thought himself wandering in heaven like a lost soul.

After regaining his room last night nothing had struck him more forcibly than the needlessness of his words: “Don’t cry, Nollie!” for he had realised with uneasiness that she had not been near crying. No; there was in her some emotion very different from the tearful. He kept seeing her cross-legged figure on the bed in that dim light; tense, enigmatic, almost Chinese; kept feeling the feverish touch of her lips. A good girlish burst of tears would have done her good, and been a guarantee. He had the uncomfortable conviction that his refusal had passed her by, as if unspoken. And, since he could not go and make music at that time of night, he had ended on his knees, in a long search for guidance, which was not vouchsafed him.

The culprits were demure at breakfast; no one could have told that for the last hour they had been sitting with their arms round each other, watching the river flow by, talking but little, through lips too busy. Pierson pursued his sister-in-law to the room where she did her flowers every morning. He watched her for a minute dividing ramblers from pansies, cornflowers from sweet peas, before he said:

“I’m very troubled, Thirza. Nollie came to me last night. Imagine! They want to get married – those two!”

Accepting life as it came, Thirza showed no dismay, but her cheeks grew a little pinker, and her eyes a little rounder. She took up a sprig of mignonette, and said placidly:

“Oh, my dear!”

“Think of it, Thirza – that child! Why, it’s only a year or two since she used to sit on my knee and tickle my face with her hair.”

Thirza went on arranging her flowers.

“Noel is older than you think, Edward; she is more than her age. And real married life wouldn’t begin for them till after – if it ever began.”

Pierson experienced a sort of shock. His sister-in-law’s words seemed criminally light-hearted.

“But – but – ” he stammered; “the union, Thirza! Who can tell what will happen before they come together again!”

She looked at his quivering face, and said gently:

“I know, Edward; but if you refuse, I should be afraid, in these days, of what Noel might do. I told you there’s a streak of desperation in her.”

“Noel will obey me.”

“I wonder! There are so many of these war marriages now.”

Pierson turned away.

“I think they’re dreadful. What do they mean – Just a momentary gratification of passion. They might just as well not be.”

“They mean pensions, as a rule,” said Thirza calmly.

“Thirza, that is cynical; besides, it doesn’t affect this case. I can’t bear to think of my little Nollie giving herself for a moment which may come to nothing, or may turn out the beginning of an unhappy marriage. Who is this boy – what is he? I know nothing of him. How can I give her to him – it’s impossible! If they had been engaged some time and I knew something of him – yes, perhaps; even at her age. But this hasty passionateness – it isn’t right, it isn’t decent. I don’t understand, I really don’t – how a child like that can want it. The fact is, she doesn’t know what she’s asking, poor little Nollie. She can’t know the nature of marriage, and she can’t realise its sacredness. If only her mother were here! Talk to her, Thirza; you can say things that I can’t!”

Thirza looked after the retreating figure. In spite of his cloth, perhaps a little because of it, he seemed to her like a child who had come to show her his sore finger. And, having finished the arrangement of her flowers, she went out to find her niece. She had not far to go; for Noel was standing in the hall, quite evidently lying in wait. They went out together to the avenue.

The girl began at once:

"It isn't any use talking to me, Auntie; Cyril is going to get a license."

"Oh! So you've made up your minds?"

"Quite."

"Do you think that's fair by me, Nollie? Should I have asked him here if I'd thought this was going to happen?"

Noel only smiled.

"Have you the least idea what marriage means?"

Noel nodded.

"Really?"

"Of course. Gratian is married. Besides, at school – "

"Your father is dead against it. This is a sad thing for him. He's a perfect saint, and you oughtn't to hurt him. Can't you wait, at least till Cyril's next leave?"

"He might never have one, you see."

The heart of her whose boys were out there too, and might also never have another leave; could not but be responsive to those words. She looked at her niece, and a dim appreciation of this revolt of life menaced by death, of youth threatened with extinction, stirred in her. Noel's teeth were clenched, her lips drawn back, and she was staring in front of her.

"Daddy oughtn't to mind. Old people haven't to fight, and get killed; they oughtn't to mind us taking what we can. They've had their good time."

It was such a just little speech that Thirza answered:

"Yes; perhaps he hasn't quite realised that."

"I want to make sure of Cyril, Auntie; I want everything I can have with him while there's the chance. I don't think it's much to ask, when perhaps I'll never have any more of him again."

Thirza slipped her hand through the girl's arm.

"I understand," she said. "Only, Nollie, suppose, when all this is over, and we breathe and live naturally once more, you found you'd made a mistake?"

Noel shook her head. "I haven't."

"We all think that, my dear; but thousands of mistakes are made by people who no more dream they're making them than you do now; and then it's a very horrible business. It would be especially horrible for you; your father believes heart and soul in marriage being for ever."

"Daddy's a darling; but I don't always believe what he believes, you know. Besides, I'm not making a mistake, Auntie! I love Cyril ever so."

Thirza gave her waist a squeeze.

"You mustn't make a mistake. We love you too much, Nollie. I wish we had Gratian here."

"Gratian would back me up," said Noel; "she knows what the war is. And you ought to, Auntie. If Rex or Harry wanted to be married, I'm sure you'd never oppose them. And they're no older than Cyril. You must understand what it means to me Auntie dear, to feel that we belong to each other properly before – before it all begins for him, and – and there may be no more. Daddy doesn't realise. I know he's awfully good, but – he's forgotten."

"My dear, I think he remembers only too well. He was desperately attached to your mother."

Noel clenched her hands.

"Was he? Well, so am I to Cyril, and he to me. We wouldn't be unreasonable if it wasn't – wasn't necessary. Talk, to Cyril, Auntie; then you'll understand. There he is; only, don't keep him long, because I want him. Oh! Auntie; I want him so badly!"

She turned; and slipped back into the house; and Thirza, conscious of having been decoyed to this young man, who stood there with his arms folded, like Napoleon before a battle, smiled and said:

"Well, Cyril, so you've betrayed me!"

Even in speaking she was conscious of the really momentous change in this sunburnt, blue-eyed, lazily impudent youth since the day he arrived, three weeks ago, in their little wagonette. He took her arm, just as Noel had, and made her sit down beside him on the rustic bench, where he had evidently been told to wait.

"You see, Mrs. Pierson," he said, "it's not as if Noel were an ordinary girl in an ordinary time, is it? Noel is the sort of girl one would knock one's brains out for; and to send me out there knowing that I could have been married to her and wasn't, will take all the heart out of me. Of course I mean to come back, but chaps do get knocked over, and I think it's cruel that we can't take what we can while we can. Besides, I've got money; and that would be hers anyway. So, do be a darling, won't you?" He put his arm round her waist, just as if he had been her son, and her heart, which wanted her own boys so badly, felt warmed within her.

"You see, I don't know Mr. Pierson, but he seems awfully gentle and jolly, and if he could see into me he wouldn't mind, I know. We don't mind risking our lives and all that, but we do think we ought to have the run of them while we're alive. I'll give him my dying oath or anything, that I could never change towards Noel, and she'll do the same. Oh! Mrs. Pierson, do be a jolly brick, and put in a word for me, quick! We've got so few days!"

"But, my dear boy," said Thirza feebly, "do you think it's fair to such a child as Noel?"

"Yes, I do. You don't understand; she's simply had to grow up. She is grown-up – all in this week; she's quite as old as I am, really – and I'm twenty-two. And you know it's going to be – it's got to be – a young world, from now on; people will begin doing things much earlier. What's the use of pretending it's like what it was, and being cautious, and all that? If I'm going to be killed, I think we've got a right to be married first; and if I'm not, then what does it matter?"

"You've known each other twenty-one days, Cyril."

"No; twenty-one years! Every day's a year when – Oh! Mrs. Pierson, this isn't like you, is it? You never go to meet trouble, do you?"

At that shrewd remark, Thirza put her hand on the hand which still clasped her waist, and pressed it closer.

"Well, my dear," she said softly, "we must see what can be done."

Cyril Morland kissed her cheek. "I will bless you for ever," he said. "I haven't got any people, you know, except my two sisters."

And something like tears started up on Thirza's eyelashes. They seemed to her like the babes in the wood – those two!

# IV

## 1

In the dining-room of her father's house in that old London Square between East and West, Gratian Laird, in the outdoor garb of a nurse, was writing a telegram: "Reverend Edward Pierson, Kestrel, Tintern, Monmouthshire. George terribly ill. Please come if you can. Gratian." Giving it to a maid, she took off her long coat and sat down for a moment. She had been travelling all night, after a full day's work, and had only just arrived, to find her husband between life and death. She was very different from Noel; not quite so tall, but of a stronger build; with dark chestnut-coloured hair, clear hazel eyes, and a broad brow. The expression of her face was earnest, with a sort of constant spiritual enquiry; and a singularly truthful look: She was just twenty; and of the year that she had been married, had only spent six weeks with her husband; they had not even a house of their own as yet. After resting five minutes, she passed her hand vigorously over her face, threw back her head, and walked up stairs to the room where he lay. He was not conscious, and there was nothing to be done but sit and watch him.

'If he dies,' she thought, 'I shall hate God for His cruelty. I have had six weeks with George; some people have sixty years.' She fixed her eyes on his face, short and broad, with bumps of "observation" on the brows. He had been sunburnt. The dark lashes of his closed eyes lay on deathly yellow cheeks; his thick hair grew rather low on his broad forehead. The lips were just open and showed strong white teeth. He had a little clipped moustache, and hair had grown on his clean-cut jaw. His pyjama jacket had fallen open. Gratian drew it close. It was curiously still, for a London day, though the window was wide open. Anything to break this heavy stupor, which was not only George's, but her own, and the very world's! The cruelty of it – when she might be going to lose him for ever, in a few hours or days! She thought of their last parting. It had not been very loving, had come too soon after one of those arguments they were inclined to have, in which they could not as yet disagree with suavity. George had said there was no future life for the individual; she had maintained there was. They had grown hot and impatient. Even in the cab on the way to his train they had pursued the wretched discussion, and the last kiss had been from lips on lips yet warm from disagreement.

Ever since, as if in compunction, she had been wavering towards his point of view; and now, when he was perhaps to solve the problem – find out for certain – she had come to feel that if he died, she would never see him after. It was cruel that such a blight should have come on her belief at this, of all moments.

She laid her hand on his. It was warm, felt strong, although so motionless and helpless. George was so vigorous, so alive, and strong-willed; it seemed impossible that life might be going to play him false. She recalled the unflinching look of his steel-bright eyes, his deep, queerly vibrating voice, which had no trace of self-consciousness or pretence. She slipped her hand on to his heart, and began very slowly, gently rubbing it. He, as doctor, and she, as nurse, had both seen so much of death these last two years! Yet it seemed suddenly as if she had never seen death, and that the young faces she had seen, empty and white, in the hospital wards, had just been a show. Death would appear to her for the first time, if this face which she loved were to be drained for ever of light and colour and movement and meaning.

A humblebee from the Square Garden boomed in and buzzed idly round the room. She caught her breath in a little sob…

## 2

Pierson received that telegram at midday, returning from a lonely walk after his talk with Thirza. Coming from Gratian so self-reliant – it meant the worst. He prepared at once to catch the next train. Noel was out, no one knew where: so with a sick feeling he wrote:

"DEAREST CHILD,

"I am going up to Gratian; poor George is desperately ill. If it goes badly you should be with your sister. I will wire to-morrow morning early. I leave you in your aunt's hands, my dear. Be reasonable and patient. God bless you.

"Your devoted

"DADDY."

He was alone in his third-class compartment, and, leaning forward, watched the ruined Abbey across the river till it was out of sight. Those old monks had lived in an age surely not so sad as this. They must have had peaceful lives, remote down here, in days when the Church was great and lovely, and men laid down their lives for their belief in her, and built everlasting fanes to the glory of God! What a change to this age of rush and hurry, of science, trade, material profit, and this terrible war! He tried to read his paper, but it was full of horrors and hate. 'When will it end?' he thought. And the train with its rhythmic jolting seemed grinding out the answer: "Never – never!"

At Chepstow a soldier got in, followed by a woman with a very flushed face and curious, swimmy eyes; her hair was in disorder, and her lip bleeding, as if she had bitten it through. The soldier, too, looked strained and desperate. They sat down, far apart, on the seat opposite. Pierson, feeling that he was in their way, tried to hide himself behind his paper; when he looked again, the soldier had taken off his tunic and cap and was leaning out of the window. The woman, on the seat's edge, sniffing and wiping her face, met his glance with resentful eyes, then, getting up, she pulled the man's sleeve.

"Sit dahn; don't 'ang out o' there."

The soldier flung himself back on the seat and looked at Pierson.

"The wife an' me's 'ad a bit of a row," he said companionably. "Gits on me nerves; I'm not used to it. She was in a raid, and 'er nerves are all gone funny; ain't they, old girl? Makes me feel me 'ead. I've been wounded there, you know; can't stand much now. I might do somethin' if she was to go on like this for long."

Pierson looked at the woman, but her eyes still met his resentfully. The soldier held out a packet of cigarettes. "Take one," he said. Pierson took one and, feeling that the soldier wanted him to speak, murmured: "We all have these troubles with those we're fond of; the fonder we are of people, the more we feel them, don't we? I had one with my daughter last night."

"Ah!" said the soldier; "that's right. The wife and me'll make it up. 'Ere, come orf it, old girl."

From behind his paper he soon became conscious of the sounds of reconciliation – reproaches because someone had been offered a drink, kisses mixed with mild slappings, and abuse. When they got out at Bristol the soldier shook his hand warmly, but the woman still gave him her resentful stare, and he thought dreamily: 'The war! How it affects everyone!' His carriage was invaded by a swarm of soldiers, and the rest of the journey was passed in making himself small. When at last he reached home, Gratian met him in the hall.

"Just the same. The doctor says we shall know in a few hours now. How sweet of you to come! You must be tired, in this heat. It was dreadful to spoil your holiday."

"My dear! As if – May I go up and see him?"

George Laird was still lying in that stupor. And Pierson stood gazing down at him compassionately. Like most parsons, he had a wide acquaintance with the sick and dying; and one remorseless fellowship with death. Death! The commonest thing in the world, now – commoner than

life! This young doctor must have seen many die in these last two years, saved many from death; and there he lay, not able to lift a finger to save himself. Pierson looked at his daughter; what a strong, promising young couple they were! And putting his arm round her, he led her away to the sofa, whence they could see the sick man.

"If he dies, Dad – " she whispered.

"He will have died for the Country, my love, as much as ever our soldiers do."

"I know; but that's no comfort. I've been watching here all day; I've been thinking; men will be just as brutal afterwards – more brutal. The world will go on the same."

"We must hope not. Shall we pray, Gracie?"

Gratian shook her head.

"If I could believe that the world – if I could believe anything! I've lost the power, Dad; I don't even believe in a future life. If George dies, we shall never meet again."

Pierson stared at her without a word.

Gratian went on: "The last time we talked, I was angry with George because he laughed at my belief; now that I really want belief, I feel that he was right."

Pierson said tremulously:

"No, no, my dear; it's only that you're overwrought. God in His mercy will give you back belief."

"There is no God, Dad"

"My darling child, what are you saying?"

"No God who can help us; I feel it. If there were any God who could take part in our lives, alter anything without our will, knew or cared what we did – He wouldn't let the world go on as it does."

"But, my dear, His purposes are inscrutable. We dare not say He should not do this or that, or try to fathom to what ends He is working."

"Then He's no good to us. It's the same as if He didn't exist. Why should I pray for George's life to One whose ends are just His own? I know George oughtn't to die. If there's a God who can help, it will be a wicked shame if George dies; if there's a God who can help, it's a wicked shame when babies die, and all these millions of poor boys. I would rather think there's no God than a helpless or a wicked God – "

Her father had suddenly thrown up his hands to his ears. She moved closer, and put her arm round him.

"Dad dear, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Pierson pressed her face down to his shoulder; and said in a dull voice:

"What do you think would have happened to me, Gracie, if I had lost belief when your mother died? I have never lost belief. Pray God I never shall!"

Gratian murmured:

"George would not wish me to pretend I believe – he would want me to be honest. If I'm not honest, I shan't deserve that he should live. I don't believe, and I can't pray."

"My darling, you're overtired."

"No, Dad." She raised her head from his shoulder and, clasping her hands round her knees, looked straight before her. "We can only help ourselves; and I can only bear it if I rebel."

Pierson sat with trembling lips, feeling that nothing he could say would touch her just then. The sick man's face was hardly visible now in the twilight, and Gratian went over to his bed. She stood looking down at him a long time.

"Go and rest, Dad; the doctor's coming again at eleven. I'll call you if I want anything. I shall lie down a little, beside him."

Pierson kissed her, and went out. To lie there beside him would be the greatest comfort she could get. He went to the bare narrow little room he had occupied ever since his wife died; and, taking off his boots, walked up and down, with a feeling of almost crushing loneliness. Both his daughters in such trouble, and he of no use to them! It was as if Life were pushing him utterly aside!

He felt confused, helpless, bewildered. Surely if Gratian loved George, she had not left God's side, whatever she might say. Then, conscious of the profound heresy of this thought, he stood still at the open window.

Earthly love – heavenly love; was there any analogy between them?

From the Square Gardens the indifferent whisper of the leaves answered; and a newsvendor at the far end, bawling his nightly tale of murder. 3

George Laird passed the crisis of his illness that night, and in the morning was pronounced out of danger. He had a splendid constitution, and – Scotsman on his father's side – a fighting character. He came back to life very weak, but avid of recovery; and his first words were: "I've been hanging over the edge, Gracie!"

A very high cliff, and his body half over, balancing; one inch, the merest fraction of an inch more, and over he would have gone. Deuced rum sensation! But not so horrible as it would have been in real life. With the slip of that last inch he felt he would have passed at once into oblivion, without the long horror of a fall. So this was what it was for all the poor fellows he had seen slip in the past two years! Mercifully, at the end, one was not alive enough to be conscious of what one was leaving, not alive enough even to care. If he had been able to take in the presence of his young wife, able to realise that he was looking at her face, touching her for the last time – it would have been hell; if he had been up to realising sunlight, moonlight, the sound of the world's life outside, the softness of the bed he lay on – it would have meant the most poignant anguish of defraudment. Life was a rare good thing, and to be squashed out of it with your powers at full, a wretched mistake in Nature's arrangements, a wretched villainy on the part of Man – for his own death, like all those other millions of premature deaths, would have been due to the idiocy and brutality of men! He could smile now, with Gratian looking down at him, but the experience had heaped fuel on a fire which had always smouldered in his doctor's soul against that half emancipated breed of apes, the human race. Well, now he would get a few days off from his death-carnival! And he lay, feasting his returning senses on his wife. She made a pretty nurse, and his practised eye judged her a good one – firm and quiet.

George Laird was thirty. At the opening of the war he was in an East-End practice, and had volunteered at once for service with the Army. For the first nine months he had been right up in the thick of it. A poisoned arm; rather than the authorities, had sent him home. During that leave he married Gratian. He had known the Piersons some time; and, made conscious of the instability of life, had resolved to marry her at the first chance he got. For his father-in-law he had respect and liking, ever mixed with what was not quite contempt and not quite pity. The blend of authority with humility, cleric with dreamer, monk with artist, mystic with man of action, in Pierson, excited in him an interested, but often irritated, wonder. He saw things so differently himself, and had little of the humorous curiosity which enjoys what is strange simply because it is strange. They could never talk together without soon reaching a point when he wanted to say: "If we're not to trust our reason and our senses for what they're worth, sir – will you kindly tell me what we are to trust? How can we exert them to the utmost in some matters, and in others suddenly turn our backs on them?" Once, in one of their discussions, which often bordered on acrimony, he had expounded himself at length.

"I grant," he had said, "that there's a great ultimate Mystery, that we shall never know anything for certain about the origin of life and the principle of the Universe; but why should we suddenly shut up our enquiring apparatus and deny all the evidence of our reason – say, about the story of Christ, or the question of a future life, or our moral code? If you want me to enter a temple of little mysteries, leaving my reason and senses behind – as a Mohammedan leaves his shoes – it won't do to say to me simply: 'There it is! Enter!' You must show me the door; and you can't! And I'll tell you why, sir. Because in your brain there's a little twist which is not in mine, or the lack of a little twist which is in mine. Nothing more than that divides us into the two main species of mankind, one of whom worships, and one of whom doesn't. Oh, yes! I know; you won't admit that, because it makes your religions natural instead of what you call supernatural. But I assure you there's nothing more

to it. Your eyes look up or they look down – they never look straight before them. Well, mine do just the opposite."

That day Pierson had been feeling very tired, and though to meet this attack was vital, he had been unable to meet it. His brain had stammered. He had turned a little away, leaning his cheek on his hand, as if to cover that momentary break in his defences. Some days later he had said:

"I am able now to answer your questions, George. I think I can make you understand."

Laird had answered: "All right, sir; go ahead."

"You begin by assuming that the human reason is the final test of all things. What right have you to assume that? Suppose you were an ant. You would take your ant's reason as the final test, wouldn't you? Would that be the truth?" And a smile had fixed itself on his lips above his little grave beard.

George Laird also had smiled.

"That seems a good point, sir," he said, "until you recognise that I don't take, the human reason as final test in any absolute sense. I only say it's the highest test we can apply; and that, behind that test all is quite dark and unknowable."

"Revelation, then, means nothing to you?"

"Nothing, sir."

"I don't think we can usefully go on, George."

"I don't think we can, sir. In talking with you, I always feel like fighting a man with one hand tied behind his back."

"And I, perhaps, feel that I am arguing with one who was blind from birth."

For all that, they had often argued since; but never without those peculiar smiles coming on their faces. Still, they respected each other, and Pierson had not opposed his daughter's marriage to this heretic, whom he knew to be an honest and trustworthy man. It had taken place before Laird's arm was well, and the two had snatched a month's honeymoon before he went back to France, and she to her hospital in Manchester. Since then, just one February fortnight by the sea had been all their time together…

In the afternoon he had asked for beef tea, and, having drunk a cup, said:

"I've got something to tell your father."

But warned by the pallor of his smiling lips, Gratian answered:

"Tell me first, George."

"Our last talk, Gracie; well – there's nothing – on the other side. I looked over; it's as black as your hat."

Gratian shivered.

"I know. While you were lying here last night, I told father."

He squeezed her hand, and said: "I also want to tell him."

"Dad will say the motive for life is gone."

"I say it leaps out all the more, Gracie. What a mess we make of it – we angel-apes! When shall we be men, I wonder? You and I, Gracie, will fight for a decent life for everybody. No hands-upping about that! Bend down! It's good to touch you again; everything's good. I'm going to have a sleep…"

After the relief of the doctor's report in the early morning Pierson had gone through a hard struggle. What should he wire to Noel? He longed to get her back home, away from temptation to the burning indiscretion of this marriage. But ought he to suppress reference to George's progress? Would that be honest? At last he sent this telegram: "George out of danger but very weak. Come up." By the afternoon post, however, he received a letter from Thirza:

"I have had two long talks with Noel and Cyril. It is impossible to budge them. And I really think, dear Edward, that it will be a mistake to oppose it rigidly. He may not go out as soon as we think. How would it be to consent to their having banns published? – that would mean another three weeks anyway, and in absence from each other they might be influenced to put it off. I'm afraid this

is the only chance, for if you simply forbid it, I feel they will run off and get married somewhere at a registrar's."

Pierson took this letter out with him into the Square Garden, for painful cogitation. No man can hold a position of spiritual authority for long years without developing the habit of judgment. He judged Noel's conduct to be headlong and undisciplined, and the vein of stubbornness in his character fortified the father and the priest within him. Thirza disappointed him; she did not seem to see the irretrievable gravity of this hasty marriage. She seemed to look on it as something much lighter than it was, to consider that it might be left to Chance, and that if Chance turned out unfavourable, there would still be a way out. To him there would be no way out. He looked up at the sky, as if for inspiration. It was such a beautiful day, and so bitter to hurt his child, even for her good! What would her mother have advised? Surely Agnes had felt at least as deeply as himself the utter solemnity of marriage! And, sitting there in the sunlight, he painfully hardened his heart. He must do what he thought right, no matter what the consequences. So he went in and wrote that he could not agree, and wished Noel to come back home at once.

# V

## 1

But on the same afternoon, just about that hour, Noel was sitting on the river-bank with her arms folded tight across her chest, and by her side Cyril Morland, with despair in his face, was twisting a telegram "Rejoin tonight. Regiment leaves to-morrow."

What consolation that a million such telegrams had been read and sorrowed over these last two years! What comfort that the sun was daily blotted dim for hundreds of bright eyes; the joy of life poured out and sopped up by the sands of desolation!

"How long have we got, Cyril?"

"I've engaged a car from the Inn, so I needn't leave till midnight. I've packed already, to have more time."

"Let's have it to ourselves, then. Let's go off somewhere. I've got some chocolate."

Morland answered miserably:

"I can send the car up here for my things, and have it pick me up at the Inn, if you'll say goodbye to them for me, afterwards. We'll walk down the line, then we shan't meet anyone."

And in the bright sunlight they walked hand in hand on each side of a shining rail. About six they reached the Abbey.

"Let's get a boat," said Noel. "We can come back here when it's moonlight. I know a way of getting in, after the gate's shut."

They hired a boat, rowed over to the far bank, and sat on the stern seat, side by side under the trees where the water was stained deep green by the high woods. If they talked, it was but a word of love now and then, or to draw each other's attention to a fish, a bird, a dragon-fly. What use making plans – for lovers the chief theme? Longing paralysed their brains. They could do nothing but press close to each other, their hands enlaced, their lips meeting now and then. On Noel's face was a strange fixed stillness, as if she were waiting – expecting! They ate their chocolates. The sun set, dew began to fall; the river changed, and grew whiter; the sky paled to the colour of an amethyst; shadows lengthened, dissolved slowly. It was past nine already; a water-rat came out, a white owl flew over the river, towards the Abbey. The moon had come up, but shed no light as yet. They saw no beauty in all this – too young, too passionate, too unhappy.

Noel said: "When she's over those trees, Cyril, let's go. It'll be half dark."

They waited, watching the moon, which crept with infinite slowness up and up, brightening ever so little every minute.

"Now!" said Noel. And Morland rowed across.

They left the boat, and she led the way past an empty cottage, to a shed with a roof sloping up to the Abbey's low outer wall.

"We can get over here," she whispered.

They clambered up, and over, to a piece of grassy courtyard, and passed on to an inner court, under the black shadow of the high walls.

"What's the time?" said Noel.

"Half-past ten."

"Already! Let's sit here in the dark, and watch for the moon."

They sat down close together. Noel's face still had on it that strange look of waiting; and Morland sat obedient, with his hand on her heart, and his own heart beating almost to suffocation. They sat, still as mice, and the moon crept up. It laid a first vague greyness on the high wall, which spread slowly down, and brightened till the lichen and the grasses up there were visible; then crept on,

silvering the dark above their heads. Noel pulled his sleeve, and whispered: “See!” There came the white owl, soft as a snowflake, drifting across in that unearthly light, as if flying to the moon. And just then the top of the moon itself looked over the wall, a shaving of silvery gold. It grew, became a bright spread fan, then balanced there, full and round, the colour of pale honey.

“Ours!” Noel whispered.

## 2

From the side of the road Noel listened till the sound of the car was lost in the folds of the valley. She did not cry, but passed her hands over her face, and began to walk home, keeping to the shadow of the trees. How many years had been added to her age in those six hours since the telegram came! Several times in that mile and a half she stepped into a patch of brighter moonlight, to take out and kiss a little photograph, then slip it back next her heart, heedless that so warm a place must destroy any effigy. She felt not the faintest compunction for the recklessness of her love – it was her only comfort against the crushing loneliness of the night. It kept her up, made her walk on with a sort of pride, as if she had got the best of Fate. He was hers for ever now, in spite of anything that could be done. She did not even think what she would say when she got in. She came to the avenue, and passed up it still in a sort of dream. Her uncle was standing before the porch; she could hear his mutterings. She moved out of the shadow of the trees, went straight up to him, and, looking in his perturbed face, said calmly:

“Cyril asked me to say good-bye to you all, Uncle. Good night!”

“But, I say, Nollie look here you!”

She had passed on. She went up to her room. There, by the door, her aunt was standing, and would have kissed her. She drew back:

“No, Auntie. Not to-night!” And, slipping by, she locked her door.

Bob and Thirza Pierson, meeting in their own room, looked at each other askance. Relief at their niece’s safe return was confused by other emotions. Bob Pierson expressed his first:

“Phew! I was beginning to think we should w have to drag the river. What girls are coming to!”

“It’s the war, Bob.”

“I didn’t like her face, old girl. I don’t know what it was, but I didn’t like her face.”

Neither did Thirza, but she would not admit it, and encourage Bob to take it to heart. He took things so hardly, and with such a noise!

She only said: “Poor young things! I suppose it will be a relief to Edward!”

“I love Nollie!” said Bob Pierson suddenly. “She’s an affectionate creature. D-nit, I’m sorry about this. It’s not so bad for young Morland; he’s got the excitement – though I shouldn’t like to be leaving Nollie, if I were young again. Thank God, neither of our boys is engaged. By George! when I think of them out there, and myself here, I feel as if the top of my head would come off. And those politician chaps spouting away in every country – how they can have the cheek!”

Thirza looked at him anxiously.

“And no dinner!” he said suddenly. “What d’you think they’ve been doing with themselves?”

“Holding each other’s hands, poor dears! D’you know what time it is, Bob? Nearly one o’clock.”

“Well, all I can say is, I’ve had a wretched evening. Get to bed, old girl. You’ll be fit for nothing.”

He was soon asleep, but Thirza lay awake, not exactly worrying, for that was not her nature, but seeing Noel’s face, pale, languid, passionate, possessed by memory.

# VI

## 1

Noel reached her father's house next day late in the afternoon. There was a letter in the hall for her. She tore it open, and read:

"MY DARLING LOVE,

"I got back all right, and am posting this at once to tell you we shall pass through London, and go from Charing Cross, I expect about nine o'clock to-night. I shall look out for you, there, in case you are up in time. Every minute I think of you, and of last night. Oh! Noel!

"Your devoted lover,

"C."

She looked at the wrist-watch which, like every other little patriot, she possessed. Past seven! If she waited, Gratian or her father would seize on her.

"Take my things up, Dinah. I've got a headache from travelling; I'm going to walk it off. Perhaps I shan't be in till past nine or so. Give my love to them all."

"Oh, Miss Noel, you can't, – "

But Noel was gone. She walked towards Charing Cross; and, to kill time, went into a restaurant and had that simple repast, coffee and a bun, which those in love would always take if Society did not forcibly feed them on other things. Food was ridiculous to her. She sat there in the midst of a perfect hive of creatures eating hideously. The place was shaped like a modern prison, having tiers of gallery round an open space, and in the air was the smell of viands and the clatter of plates and the music of a band. Men in khaki everywhere, and Noel glanced from form to form to see if by chance one might be that which represented, for her, Life and the British Army. At half-past eight she went out and made her way: through the crowd, still mechanically searching "khaki" for what she wanted; and it was perhaps fortunate that there was about her face and walk something which touched people. At the station she went up to an old porter, and, putting a shilling into his astonished hand, asked him to find out for her whence Morland's regiment would start. He came back presently, and said:

"Come with me, miss."

Noel went. He was rather lame, had grey whiskers, and a ghostly thin resemblance to her uncle Bob, which perhaps had been the reason why she had chosen him. 64

"Brother goin' out, miss?"

Noel nodded.

"Ah! It's a crool war. I shan't be sorry when it's over. Goin' out and comin' in, we see some sad sights 'ere. Wonderful spirit they've got, too. I never look at the clock now but what I think: 'There you go, slow-coach! I'd like to set you on to the day the boys come back!' When I puts a bag in: 'Another for 'ell' I thinks. And so it is, miss, from all I can 'ear. I've got a son out there meself. It's 'ere they'll come along. You stand quiet and keep a lookout, and you'll get a few minutes with him when he's done with 'is men. I wouldn't move, if I were you; he'll come to you, all right – can't miss you, there.' And, looking at her face, he thought: 'Astonishin' what a lot o' brothers go. Wot oh! Poor little missy! A little lady, too. Wonderful collected she is. It's 'ard!'.rdquo; And trying to find something consoling to say, he mumbled out: "You couldn't be in a better place for seen'im off. Good night, miss; anything else I can do for you?"

"No, thank you; you're very kind."

He looked back once or twice at her blue-clad figure standing very still. He had left her against a little oasis of piled-up empty milk-cans, far down the platform where a few civilians in similar case were scattered. The trainway was empty as yet. In the grey immensity of the station and the turmoil

of its noise, she felt neither lonely nor conscious of others waiting; too absorbed in the one thought of seeing him and touching him again. The empty train began backing in, stopped, and telescoped with a series of little clattering bangs, backed on again, and subsided to rest. Noel turned her eyes towards the station arch ways. Already she felt tremulous, as though the regiment were sending before it the vibration of its march.

She had not as yet seen a troop-train start, and vague images of brave array, of a flag fluttering, and the stir of drums, beset her. Suddenly she saw a brown swirling mass down there at the very edge, out of which a thin brown trickle emerged towards her; no sound of music, no waved flag. She had a longing to rush down to the barrier, but remembering the words of the porter, stayed where she was, with her hands tightly squeezed together. The trickle became a stream, a flood, the head of which began to reach her. With a turbulence of voices, sunburnt men, burdened up to the nose, passed, with rifles jutting at all angles; she strained her eyes, staring into that stream as one might into a walking wood, to isolate a single tree. Her head reeled with the strain of it, and the effort to catch his voice among the hubbub of all those cheery, common, happy-go-lucky sounds. Some who saw her clucked their tongues, some went by silent, others seemed to scan her as though she might be what they were looking for. And ever the stream and the hubbub melted into the train, and yet came pouring on. And still she waited motionless, with an awful fear. How could he ever find her, or she him? Then she saw that others of those waiting had found their men. And the longing to rush up and down the platform almost overcame her; but still she waited. And suddenly she saw him with two other officer boys, close to the carriages, coming slowly down towards her. She stood with her eyes fixed on his face; they passed, and she nearly cried out. Then he turned, broke away from the other two, and came straight to her. He had seen her before she had seen him. He was very flushed, had a little fixed frown between his blue eyes and a set jaw. They stood looking at each other, their hands hard gripped; all the emotion of last night welling up within them, so that to speak would have been to break down. The milk-cans formed a kind of shelter, and they stood so close together that none could see their faces. Noel was the first to master her power of speech; her words came out, dainty as ever, through trembling lips:

“Write to me as much as ever you can, Cyril. I’m going to be a nurse at once. And the first leave you get, I shall come to you – don’t forget.”

“Forget! Move a little back, darling; they can’t see us here. Kiss me!” She moved back, thrust her face forward so that he need not stoop, and put her lips up to his. Then, feeling that she might swoon and fall over among the cans, she withdrew her mouth, leaving her forehead against his lips. He murmured:

“Was it all right when you got in last night?”

“Yes; I said good-bye for you.”

“Oh! Noel – I’ve been afraid – I oughtn’t – I oughtn’t – ”

“Yes, yes; nothing can take you from me now.”

“You have got pluck. More than!”

Along whistle sounded. Morland grasped her hands convulsively:

“Good-bye, my little wife! Don’t fret. Goodbye! I must go. God bless you, Noel!”

“I love you.”

They looked at each other, just another moment, then she took her hands from his and stood back in the shadow of the milk-cans, rigid, following him with her eyes till he was lost in the train.

Every carriage window was full of those brown figures and red-brown faces, hands were waving vaguely, voices calling vaguely, here and there one cheered; someone leaning far out started to sing: “If auld acquaintance – ” But Noel stood quite still in the shadow of the milk-cans, her lips drawn in, her hands hard clenched in front of her; and young Morland at his window gazed back at her.

## 2

How she came to be sitting in Trafalgar Square she did not know. Tears had formed a mist between her and all that seething, summer-evening crowd. Her eyes mechanically followed the wandering search-lights, those new milky ways, quartering the heavens and leading nowhere. All was wonderfully beautiful, the sky a deep dark blue, the moonlight whitening the spire of St. Martin's, and everywhere endowing the great blacked-out buildings with dream-life. Even the lions had come to life, and stared out over this moonlit desert of little human figures too small to be worth the stretching out of a paw. She sat there, aching dreadfully, as if the longing of every bereaved heart in all the town had settled in her. She felt it tonight a thousand times worse; for last night she had been drugged on the new sensation of love triumphantly fulfilled. Now she felt as if life had placed her in the corner of a huge silent room, blown out the flame of joy, and locked the door. A little dry sob came from her. The hay-fields and Cyril, with shirt unbuttoned at the neck, pitching hay and gazing at her while she dabbled her fork in the thin leavings. The bright river, and their boat grounded on the shallows, and the swallows flitting over them. And that long dance, with the feel of his hand between her shoulder-blades! Memories so sweet and sharp that she almost cried out. She saw again their dark grassy courtyard in the Abbey, and the white owl flying over them. The white owl! Flying there again to-night, with no lovers on the grass below! She could only picture Cyril now as a brown atom in that swirling brown flood of men, flowing to a huge brown sea. Those cruel minutes on the platform, when she had searched and searched the walking wood for her, one tree, seemed to have burned themselves into her eyes. Cyril was lost, she could not single him out, all blurred among those thousand other shapes. And suddenly she thought: 'And I – I'm lost to him; he's never seen me at home, never seen me in London; he won't be able to imagine me. It's all in the past, only the past – for both of us. Is there anybody so unhappy?' And the town's voices-wheels, and passing feet, whistles, talk, laughter – seemed to answer callously: 'Not one.' She looked at her wrist-watch; like his, it had luminous hands: 'Half-past ten' was greenishly imprinted there. She got up in dismay. They would think she was lost, or run over, or something silly! She could not find an empty taxi, and began to walk, uncertain of her way at night. At last she stopped a policeman, and said:

"Which is the way towards Bloomsbury, please? I can't find a taxi." The man looked at her, and took time to think it over; then he said:

"They're linin' up for the theatres," and looked at her again. Something seemed to move in his mechanism:

"I'm goin' that way, miss. If you like, you can step along with me." Noel stepped along.

"The streets aren't what they ought to be," the policeman said. "What with the darkness, and the war turning the girls heads – you'd be surprised the number of them that comes out. It's the soldiers, of course."

Noel felt her cheeks burning.

"I daresay you wouldn't have noticed it," the policeman went on: "but this war's a funny thing. The streets are gayer and more crowded at night than I've ever seen them; it's a fair picnic all the time. What we're goin' to settle down to when peace comes, I don't know. I suppose you find it quiet enough up your way, miss?"

"Yes," said Noel; "quite quiet."

"No soldiers up in Bloomsbury. You got anyone in the Army, miss?"

Noel nodded.

"Ah! It's anxious times for ladies. What with the Zeps, and their brothers and all in France, it's 'arassin'. I've lost a brother meself, and I've got a boy out there in the Garden of Eden; his mother carries on dreadful about him. What we shall think of it when it's all over, I can't tell. These Huns are a wicked tough lot!"

Noel looked at him; a tall man, regular and orderly, with one of those perfectly decent faces so often seen in the London police.

"I'm sorry you've lost someone," she said. "I haven't lost anyone very near, yet."

"Well, let's 'ope you won't, miss. These times make you feel for others, an' that's something. I've noticed a great change in folks you'd never think would feel for anyone. And yet I've seen some wicked things too; we do, in the police. Some of these English wives of aliens, and 'armless little German bakers, an' Austrians, and what-not: they get a crool time. It's their misfortune, not their fault, that's what I think; and the way they get served – well, it makes you ashamed o' bein' English sometimes – it does straight: And the women are the worst. I said to my wife only last night, I said: 'They call themselves Christians,' I said, 'but for all the charity that's in 'em they might as well be Huns.' She couldn't see it-not she!' Well, why do they drop bombs?' she says. 'What!' I said, 'those English wives and bakers drop bombs? Don't be silly,' I said. 'They're as innocent as we.' It's the innocent that gets punished for the guilty. 'But they're all spies,' she says. 'Oh!' I said, 'old lady! Now really! At your time of life!' But there it is; you can't get a woman to see reason. It's readin' the papers. I often think they must be written by women – beggin' your pardon, miss – but reely, the 'ysterics and the 'atred – they're a fair knockout. D'you find much hatred in your household, miss?"

Noel shook her head. "No; my father's a clergyman, you see."

"Ah!" said the policeman. And in the glance he bestowed on her could be seen an added respect.

"Of course," he went on, "you're bound to have a sense of justice against these Huns; some of their ways of goin' on have been above the limit. But what I always think is – of course I don't say these things – no use to make yourself unpopular – but to meself I often think: Take 'em man for man, and you'd find 'em much the same as we are, I daresay. It's the vicious way they're brought up, of actin' in the mass, that's made 'em such a crool lot. I see a good bit of crowds in my profession, and I've a very low opinion of them. Crowds are the most blunderin' blighted things that ever was. They're like an angry woman with a bandage over her eyes, an' you can't have anything more dangerous than that. These Germans, it seems, are always in a crowd. They get a state o' mind read out to them by Bill Kaser and all that bloody-minded lot, an' they never stop to think for themselves."

"I suppose they'd be shot if they did," said Noel.

"Well, there is that," said the policeman reflectively. "They've brought discipline to an 'igh pitch, no doubt. An' if you ask me," – he lowered his voice till it was almost lost in his chin-strap, "we'll be runnin' 'em a good second 'ere, before long. The things we 'ave to protect now are gettin' beyond a joke. There's the City against lights, there's the streets against darkness, there's the aliens, there's the aliens' shops, there's the Belgians, there's the British wives, there's the soldiers against the women, there's the women against the soldiers, there's the Peace Party, there's 'orses against croolty, there's a Cabinet Minister every now an' then; and now we've got these Conchies. And, mind you, they haven't raised our pay; no war wages in the police. So far as I can see, there's only one good result of the war – the burglaries are off. But there again, you wait a bit and see if we don't have a prize crop of 'm, or my name's not 'Arris."

"You must have an awfully exciting life!" said Noel.

The policeman looked down at her sideways, without lowering his face, as only a policeman can, and said indulgently:

"We're used to it, you see; there's no excitement in what you're used to. They find that in the trenches, I'm told. Take our seamen – there's lots of 'em been blown up over and over again, and there they go and sign on again next day. That's where the Germans make their mistake! England in war-time! I think a lot, you know, on my go; you can't 'elp it – the mind will work – an' the more I think, the more I see the fightin' spirit in the people. We don't make a fuss about it like Bill Kaser. But you watch a little shopman, one o' those fellows who's had his house bombed; you watch the way he looks at the mess – sort of disgusted. You watch his face, and you see he's got his teeth into it. You watch one of our Tommies on 'is crutches, with the sweat pourin' off his forehead an' 'is eyes

all strainy, stumpin' along – that gives you an idea! I pity these Peace fellows, reely I pity them; they don't know what they're up against. I expect there's times when you wish you was a man, don't you, miss? I'm sure there's times when I feel I'd like to go in the trenches. That's the worst o' my job; you can't be a human bein' – not in the full sense of the word. You mustn't let your passions rise, you mustn't drink, you mustn't talk; it's a narrow walk o' life. Well, here you are, miss; your Square's the next turnin' to the right. Good night and thank you for your conversation."

Noel held out her hand. "Good night!" she said.

The policeman took her hand with a queer, flattered embarrassment.

"Good night, miss," he said again. "I see you've got a trouble; and I'm sure I hope it'll turn out for the best."

Noel gave his huge hand a squeeze; her eyes had filled with tears, and she turned quickly up towards the Square, where a dark figure was coming towards her, in whom she recognised her father. His face was worn and harassed; he walked irresolutely, like a man who has lost something.

"Nollie!" he said. "Thank God!" In his voice was an infinite relief. "My child, where have you been?"

"It's all right, Daddy. Cyril has just gone to the front. I've been seeing him off from Charing Cross."

Pierson slipped his arm round her. They entered the house without speaking…

## 3

By the rail of his transport, as far – about two feet – as he could get from anyone, Cyril Morland stood watching Calais, a dream city, brighten out of the heat and grow solid. He could hear the guns already, the voice of his new life-talking in the distance. It came with its strange excitement into a being held by soft and marvellous memories, by one long vision of Noel and the moonlit grass, under the dark Abbey wall. This moment of passage from wonder to wonder was quite too much for a boy unused to introspection, and he stood staring stupidly at Calais, while the thunder of his new life came rolling in on that passionate moonlit dream.

# VII

After the emotions of those last three days Pierson woke with the feeling a ship must have when it makes landfall. Such reliefs are natural, and as a rule delusive; for events are as much the parents of the future as they were the children of the past. To be at home with both his girls, and resting – for his holiday would not be over for ten days – was like old times. Now George was going on so well Gratian would be herself again; now Cyril Morland was gone Noel would lose that sudden youthful love fever. Perhaps in two or three days if George continued to progress, one might go off with Noel somewhere for one's last week. In the meantime the old house, wherein was gathered so much remembrance of happiness and pain, was just as restful as anywhere else, and the companionship of his girls would be as sweet as on any of their past rambling holidays in Wales or Ireland. And that first morning of perfect idleness – for no one knew he was back in London – pottering, and playing the piano in the homely drawing-room where nothing to speak of was changed since his wife's day, was very pleasant. He had not yet seen the girls, for Noel did not come down to breakfast, and Gratian was with George.

Discovery that there was still a barrier between him and them came but slowly in the next two days. He would not acknowledge it, yet it was there, in their voices, in their movements – rather an absence of something old than the presence of something new. It was as if each had said to him: "We love you, but you are not in our secrets – and you must not be, for you would try to destroy them." They showed no fear of him, but seemed to be pushing him unconsciously away, lest he should restrain or alter what was very dear to them. They were both fond of him, but their natures had set foot on definitely diverging paths. The closer the affection, the more watchful they were against interference by that affection. Noel had a look on her face, half dazed, half proud, which touched, yet vexed him. What had he done to forfeit her confidence – surely she must see how natural and right his opposition had been! He made one great effort to show the real sympathy he felt for her. But she only said: "I can't talk of Cyril, Daddy; I simply can't!" And he, who easily shrank into his shell, could not but acquiesce in her reserve.

With Gratian it was different. He knew that an encounter was before him; a struggle between him and her husband – for characteristically he set the change in her, the defection of her faith, down to George, not to spontaneous thought and feeling in herself. He dreaded and yet looked forward to this encounter. It came on the third day, when Laird was up, lying on that very sofa where Pierson had sat listening to Gratian's confession of disbelief. Except for putting in his head to say good morning, he had not yet seen his son-in-law: The young doctor could not look fragile, the build of his face, with that law and those heavy cheekbones was too much against it, but there was about him enough of the look of having come through a hard fight to give Pierson's heart a squeeze.

"Well, George," he said, "you gave us a dreadful fright! I thank God's mercy." With that half-mechanical phrase he had flung an unconscious challenge. Laird looked up whimsically.

"So you really think God merciful, sir?"

"Don't let us argue, George; you're not strong enough."

"Oh! I'm pining for something to bite on."

Pierson looked at Gratian, and said softly:

"God's mercy is infinite, and you know it is."

Laird also looked at Gratian, before he answered:

"God's mercy is surely the amount of mercy man has succeeded in arriving at. How much that is, this war tells you, sir."

Pierson flushed. "I don't follow you," he said painfully. "How can you say such things, when you yourself are only just – No; I refuse to argue, George; I refuse."

Laird stretched out his hand to his wife, who came to him, and stood clasping it with her own. "Well, I'm going to argue," he said; "I'm simply bursting with it. I challenge you, sir, to show me

where there's any sign of altruistic pity, except in man. Mother love doesn't count – mother and child are too much one."

The curious smile had come already, on both their faces.

"My dear George, is not man the highest work of God, and mercy the highest quality in man?"

"Not a bit. If geological time be taken as twenty-four hours, man's existence on earth so far equals just two seconds of it; after a few more seconds, when man has been frozen off the earth, geological time will stretch for as long again, before the earth bumps into something, and becomes nebula once more. God's hands haven't been particularly full, sir, have they – two seconds out of twenty-four hours – if man is His pet concern? And as to mercy being the highest quality in, man, that's only a modern fashion of talking. Man's highest quality is the sense of proportion, for that's what keeps him alive; and mercy, logically pursued, would kill him off. It's a sort of a luxury or by-product."

"George! You can have no music in your soul! Science is such a little thing, if you could only see."

"Show me a bigger, sir."

"Faith."

"In what?"

"In what has been revealed to us."

"Ah! There it is again! By whom – how?

"By God Himself – through our Lord."

A faint flush rose in Laird's yellow face, and his eyes brightened.

"Christ," he said; "if He existed, which some people, as you know, doubt, was a very beautiful character; there have been others. But to ask us to believe in His supernaturalness or divinity at this time of day is to ask us to walk through the world blindfold. And that's what you do, don't you?"

Again Pierson looked at his daughter's face. She was standing quite still, with her eyes fixed on her husband. Somehow he was aware that all these words of the sick man's were for her benefit. Anger, and a sort of despair rose within him, and he said painfully:

"I cannot explain. There are things that I can't make clear, because you are wilfully blind to all that I believe in. For what do you imagine we are fighting this great war, if it is not to reestablish the belief in love as the guiding principle of life?"

Laird shook his head. "We are fighting to redress a balance, which was in danger of being lost."

"The balance of power?"

"Heavens! – no! The balance of philosophy."

Pierson smiled. "That sounds very clever, George; but again, I don't follow you."

"The balance between the sayings: 'Might is Right,' and 'Right is Might.' They're both half-truth, but the first was beating the other out of the field. All the rest of it is cant, you know. And by the way, sir, your Church is solid for punishment of the evildoer. Where's mercy there? Either its God is not merciful, or else it doesn't believe in its God."

"Just punishment does not preclude mercy, George."

"It does in Nature."

"Ah! Nature, George – always Nature. God transcends Nature."

"Then why does He give it a free rein? A man too fond of drink, or women – how much mercy does he get from Nature? His overindulgence brings its exact equivalent of penalty; let him pray to God as much as he likes – unless he alters his ways he gets no mercy. If he does alter his ways, he gets no mercy either; he just gets Nature's due reward. We English who have neglected brain and education – how much mercy are we getting in this war? Mercy's a man-made ornament, disease, or luxury – call it what you will. Except that, I've nothing to say against it. On the contrary, I am all for it."

Once more Pierson looked at his daughter. Something in her face hurt him – the silent intensity with which she was hanging on her husband's words, the eager search of her eyes. And he turned to the door, saying:

"This is bad for you, George."

He saw Gratian put her hand on her husband's forehead, and thought – jealously: 'How can I save my poor girl from this infidelity? Are my twenty years of care to go for nothing, against this modern spirit?'

Down in his study, the words went through his mind: "Holy, holy, holy, Merciful and Mighty!" And going to the little piano in the corner, he opened it, and began playing the hymn. He played it softly on the shabby keys of this thirty-year old friend, which had been with him since College days; and sang it softly in his worn voice.

A sound made him look up. Gratian had come in. She put her hand on his shoulder, and said:

"I know it hurts you, Dad. But we've got to find out for ourselves, haven't we? All the time you and George were talking, I felt that you didn't see that it's I who've changed. It's not what he thinks, but what I've come to think of my own accord. I wish you'd understand that I've got a mind of my own, Dad."

Pierson looked up with amazement.

"Of course you have a mind."

Gratian shook her head. "No, you thought my mind was yours; and now you think it's George's. But it's my own. When you were my age weren't you trying hard to find the truth yourself, and differing from your father?"

Pierson did not answer. He could not remember. It was like stirring a stick amongst a drift of last year's leaves, to awaken but a dry rustling, a vague sense of unsubstantiality. Searched? No doubt he had searched, but the process had brought him nothing. Knowledge was all smoke! Emotional faith alone was truth – reality!

"Ah, Gracie!" he said, "search if you must, but where will you find bottom? The well is too deep for us. You will come back to God, my child, when you're tired out; the only rest is there."

"I don't want to rest. Some people search all their lives, and die searching. Why shouldn't I.

"You will be most unhappy, my child."

"If I'm unhappy, Dad, it'll be because the world's unhappy. I don't believe it ought to be; I think it only is, because it shuts its eyes."

Pierson got up. "You think I shut my eyes?"

Gratian nodded.

"If I do, it is because there is no other way to happiness."

"Are you happy; Dad?"

"As happy as my nature will let me be. I miss your mother. If I lose you and Noel – "

"Oh, but we won't let you!"

Pierson smiled. "My dear," he said, "I think I have!"

# VIII

## 1

Some wag, with a bit of chalk, had written the word “Peace” on three successive doors of a little street opposite Buckingham Palace.

It caught the eye of Jimmy Fort, limping home to his rooms from a very late discussion at his Club, and twisted his lean shaven lips into a sort of smile. He was one of those rolling-stone Englishmen, whose early lives are spent in all parts of the world, and in all kinds of physical conflict – a man like a hickory stick, tall, thin, bolt-upright, knotty, hard as nails, with a curved fighting back to his head and a straight fighting front to his brown face. His was the type which becomes, in a generation or so, typically Colonial or American; but no one could possibly have taken Jimmy Fort for anything but an Englishman. Though he was nearly forty, there was still something of the boy in his face, something frank and curly-headed, gallant and full of steam, and his small steady grey eyes looked out on life with a sort of combative humour. He was still in uniform, though they had given him up as a bad job after keeping him nine months trying to mend a wounded leg which would never be sound again; and he was now in the War Office in connection with horses, about which he knew. He did not like it, having lived too long with all sorts and conditions of men who were neither English nor official, a combination which he found trying. His life indeed, just now, bored him to distraction, and he would ten times rather have been back in France. This was why he found the word “Peace” so exceptionally tantalising.

Reaching his rooms, he threw off his tunic, to whose stiff regularity he still had a rooted aversion; and, pulling out a pipe, filled it and sat down at his window.

Moonshine could not cool the hot town, and it seemed sleeping badly – the seven million sleepers in their million homes. Sound lingered on, never quite ceased; the stale odours clung in the narrow street below, though a little wind was creeping about to sweeten the air. ‘Curse the war!’ he thought. ‘What wouldn’t I give to be sleeping out, instead of in this damned city!’ They who slept in the open, neglecting morality, would certainly have the best of it tonight, for no more dew was falling than fell into Jimmy Fort’s heart to cool the fret of that ceaseless thought: ‘The war! The cursed war!’ In the unending rows of little grey houses, in huge caravanserais, and the mansions of the great, in villas, and high slum tenements; in the government offices, and factories, and railway stations where they worked all night; in the long hospitals where they lay in rows; in the camp prisons of the interned; in bar racks, work-houses, palaces – no head, sleeping or waking, would be free of that thought: ‘The cursed war!’ A spire caught his eye, rising ghostly over the roofs. Ah! churches alone, void of the human soul, would be unconscious! But for the rest, even sleep would not free them! Here a mother would be whispering the name of her boy; there a merchant would snore and dream he was drowning, weighted with gold; and a wife would be turning to stretch out her arms to-no one; and a wounded soldier wake out of a dream trench with sweat on his brow; and a newsvendor in his garret mutter hoarsely. By thousands the bereaved would be tossing, stifling their moans; by thousands the ruined would be gazing into the dark future; and housewives struggling with sums; and soldiers sleeping like logs – for to morrow they died; and children dreaming of them; and prostitutes lying in stale wonder at the busyness of their lives; and journalists sleeping the sleep of the just. And over them all, in the moonlight that thought ‘The cursed war!’ flapped its black wings, like an old crow! “If Christ were real,” he mused, “He’d reach that moon down, and go chalking ‘Peace’ with it on every door of every house, all over Europe. But Christ’s not real, and Hindenburg and Harmsworth are!” As real they were as two great bulls he had once seen in South Africa, fighting. He seemed to hear again the stamp

and snort and crash of those thick skulls, to see the beasts recoiling and driving at each other, and the little red eyes of them. And pulling a letter out of his pocket, he read it again by the light of the moon:

"15, Camelot Mansions,

"St. John's Wood.

"DEAR MR. FORT, "I came across your Club address to-night, looking at some old letters. Did you know that I was in London? I left Steenbok when my husband died, five years ago. I've had a simply terrific time since. While the German South West campaign was on I was nursing out there, but came back about a year ago to lend a hand here. It would be awfully nice to meet you again, if by any chance you are in England. I'm working in a V. A. D. hospital in these parts, but my evenings are usually free. Do you remember that moonlit night at grape harvest? The nights here aren't scented quite like that. Listerine! Oh! This war! "With all good remembrances,

"LEILA LYNCH."

A terrific time! If he did not mistake, Leila Lynch had always had a terrific time. And he smiled, seeing again the stoep of an old Dutch house at High Constantia, and a woman sitting there under the white flowers of a sweet-scented creeper – a pretty woman, with eyes which could put a spell on you, a woman he would have got entangled with if he had not cut and run for it! Ten years ago, and here she was again, refreshing him out of the past. He sniffed the fragrance of the little letter. How everybody always managed to work into a letter what they were doing in the war! If he answered her he would be sure to say: "Since I got lamed, I've been at the War Office, working on remounts, and a dull job it is!" Leila Lynch! Women didn't get younger, and he suspected her of being older than himself. But he remembered agreeably her white shoulders and that turn of her neck when she looked at you with those big grey eyes of hers. Only a five-day acquaintanceship, but they had crowded much into it as one did in a strange land. The episode had been a green and dangerous spot, like one of those bright mossy bits of bog when you were snipe-shooting, to set foot on which was to let you down up to the neck, at least. Well, there was none of that danger now, for her husband was dead-poor chap! It would be nice, in these dismal days, when nobody spent any time whatever except in the service of the country, to improve his powers of service by a few hours' recreation in her society. 'What humbugs we are!' he thought: 'To read the newspapers and the speeches you'd believe everybody thought of nothing but how to get killed for the sake of the future. Drunk on verbiage! What heads and mouths we shall all have when we wake up some fine morning with Peace shining in at the window! Ah! If only we could; and enjoy ourselves again!' And he gazed at the moon. She was dipping already, reeling away into the dawn. Water carts and street sweepers had come out into the glimmer; sparrows twittered in the eaves. The city was raising a strange unknown face to the grey light, shuttered and deserted as Babylon. Jimmy Fort tapped out his pipe, sighed, and got into bed.

## 2

Coming off duty at that very moment, Leila Lynch decided to have her hour's walk before she went home. She was in charge of two wards, and as a rule took the day watches; but some slight upset had given her this extra spell. She was, therefore, at her worst, or perhaps at her best, after eighteen hours in hospital. Her cheeks were pale, and about her eyes were little lines, normally in hiding. There was in this face a puzzling blend of the soft and hard, for the eyes, the rather full lips, and pale cheeks, were naturally soft; but they were hardened by the self-containment which grows on women who have to face life for themselves, and, conscious of beauty, intend to keep it, in spite of age. Her figure was contradictory, also; its soft modelling a little too rigidified by stays. In this desert of the dawn she let her long blue overcoat flap loose, and swung her hat on a finger, so that her light-brown, touched-up hair took the morning breeze with fluffy freedom. Though she could not see herself, she appreciated her appearance, swaying along like that, past lonely trees and houses. A

pity there was no one to see her in that round of Regent's Park, which took her the best part of an hour, walking in meditation, enjoying the colour coming back into the world, as if especially for her.

There was character in Leila Lynch, and she had lived an interesting life from a certain point of view. In her girlhood she had fluttered the hearts of many besides Cousin Edward Pierson, and at eighteen had made a passionate love match with a good-looking young Indian civilian, named Fane. They had loved each other to a standstill in twelve months. Then had begun five years of petulance, boredom, and growing cynicism, with increasing spells of Simla, and voyages home for her health which was really harmed by the heat. All had culminated, of course, in another passion for a rifleman called Lynch. Divorce had followed, remarriage, and then the Boer War, in which he had been badly wounded. She had gone out and nursed him back to half his robust health, and, at twenty-eight, taken up life with him on an up-country farm in Cape Colony. This middle period had lasted ten years, between the lonely farm and an old Dutch house at High Constantia. Lynch was not a bad fellow, but, like most soldiers of the old Army, had been quite carefully divested of an aesthetic sense. And it was Leila's misfortune to have moments when aesthetic sense seemed necessary. She had struggled to overcome this weakness, and that other weakness of hers – a liking for men's admiration; but there had certainly been intervals when she had not properly succeeded. Her acquaintance with Jimmy Fort had occurred during one of these intervals, and when he went back to England so abruptly, she had been feeling very tenderly towards him. She still remembered him with a certain pleasure. Before Lynch died, these "intervals" had been interrupted by a spell of returning warmth for the invalided man to whom she had joined her life under the romantic conditions of divorce. He had failed, of course, as a farmer, and his death left her with nothing but her own settled income of a hundred and fifty pounds a year. Faced by the prospect of having almost to make her living, at thirty-eight, she felt but momentary dismay – for she had real pluck. Like many who have played with amateur theatricals, she fancied herself as an actress; but, after much effort, found that only her voice and the perfect preservation of her legs were appreciated by the discerning managers and public of South Africa; and for three chequered years she made face against fortune with the help of them, under an assumed name. What she did – keeping a certain bloom of refinement, was far better than the achievements of many more respectable ladies in her shoes. At least she never bemoaned her "reduced circumstances," and if her life was irregular and had at least three episodes, it was very human. She bravely took the rough with the smooth, never lost the power of enjoying herself, and grew in sympathy with the hardships of others. But she became deadly tired. When the war broke out, remembering that she was a good nurse, she took her real name again and a change of occupation. For one who liked to please men, and to be pleased by them, there was a certain attraction about that life in war-time; and after two years of it she could still appreciate the way her Tommies turned their heads to look at her when she passed their beds. But in a hard school she had learned perfect self-control; and though the sour and puritanical perceived her attraction, they knew her to be forty-three. Besides, the soldiers liked her; and there was little trouble in her wards. The war moved her in simple ways; for she was patriotic in the direct fashion of her class. Her father had been a sailor, her husbands an official and a soldier; the issue for her was uncomplicated by any abstract meditation. The Country before everything! And though she had tended during those two years so many young wrecked bodies, she had taken it as all in the a day's work, lavishing her sympathy on the individual, without much general sense of pity and waste. Yes, she had worked really hard, had "done her bit"; but of late she had felt rising within her the old vague craving for "life," for pleasure, for something more than the mere negative admiration bestowed on her by her "Tommies." Those old letters – to look them through them had been a sure sign of this vague craving – had sharpened to poignancy the feeling that life was slipping away from her while she was still comely. She had been long out of England, and so hard-worked since she came back that there were not many threads she could pick up suddenly. Two letters out of that little budget of the past, with a far cry between them, had awakened within her certain sentimental longings.

"DEAR LADY OF THE STARRY FLOWERS,

"Exiturus (sic) to saluto! The tender carries you this message of good-bye. Simply speaking, I hate leaving South Africa. And of all my memories, the last will live the longest. Grape harvest at Constantia, and you singing: 'If I could be the falling dew: If ever you and your husband come to England, do let me know, that I may try and repay a little the happiest five days I've spent out here.

"Your very faithful servant,

"TIMMY FORT."

She remembered a very brown face, a tall slim figure, and something gallant about the whole of him. What was he like after ten years? Grizzled, married, with a large family? An odious thing – Time! And Cousin Edward's little yellow letter.

Good heavens! Twenty-six years ago – before he was a parson, or married or anything! Such a good partner, really musical; a queer, dear fellow, devoted, absentminded, easily shocked, yet with flame burning in him somewhere.

'DEAR LEILA,

"After our last dance I went straight off' – I couldn't go in. I went down to the river, and walked along the bank; it was beautiful, all grey and hazy, and the trees whispered, and the cows looked holy; and I walked along and thought of you. And a farmer took me for a lunatic, in my dress clothes. Dear Leila, you were so pretty last night, and I did love our dances. I hope you are not tired, and that I shall see you soon again:

"Your affectionate cousin,

"EDWARD PIERSON."

And then he had gone and become a parson, and married, and been a widower fifteen years. She remembered the death of his wife, just before she left for South Africa, at that period of disgrace when she had so shocked her family by her divorce. Poor Edward – quite the nicest of her cousins! The only one she would care to see again. He would be very old and terribly good and proper, by now.

Her wheel of Regent's Park was coming full circle, and the sun was up behind the houses, but still no sound of traffic stirred. She stopped before a flower-bed where was some heliotrope, and took a long, luxurious sniff: She could not resist plucking a sprig, too, and holding it to her nose. A sudden want of love had run through every nerve and fibre of her; she shivered, standing there with her eyes half closed, above the pale violet blossom. Then, noting by her wrist-watch that it was four o'clock, she hurried on, to get to her bed, for she would have to be on duty again at noon. Oh! the war! She was tired! If only it were over, and one could live!..

Somewhere by Twickenham the moon had floated down; somewhere up from Kentish Town the sun came soaring; wheels rolled again, and the seven million sleepers in their million houses woke from morning sleep to that same thought…

# IX

Edward Pierson, dreaming over an egg at breakfast, opened a letter in a handwriting which he did not recognise.

"V. A. D. Hospital,

"Mulberry Road, St. John's Wood N. W.

"DEAR COUSIN EDWARD,

"Do you remember me, or have I gone too far into the shades of night? I was Leila Pierson once upon a time, and I often think of you and wonder what you are like now, and what your girls are like. I have been here nearly a year, working for our wounded, and for a year before that was nursing in South Africa. My husband died five years ago out there. Though we haven't met for I dare not think how long, I should awfully like to see you again. Would you care to come some day and look over my hospital? I have two wards under me; our men are rather dears.

"Your forgotten but still affectionate cousin

"LEILA LYNCH."

"P. S. I came across a little letter you once wrote me; it brought back old days."

No! He had not forgotten. There was a reminder in the house. And he looked up at Noel sitting opposite. How like the eyes were! And he thought: 'I wonder what Leila has become. One mustn't be uncharitable. That man is dead; she has been nursing two years. She must be greatly changed; I should certainly like to see her. I will go!' Again he looked at Noel. Only yesterday she had renewed her request to be allowed to begin her training as a nurse.

"I'm going to see a hospital to-day, Nollie," he said; "if you like, I'll make enquiries. I'm afraid it'll mean you have to begin by washing up."

"I know; anything, so long as I do begin."

"Very well; I'll see about it." And he went back to his egg.

Noel's voice roused him. "Do you feel the war much, Daddy? Does it hurt you here?" She had put her hand on her heart. "Perhaps it doesn't, because you live half in the next world, don't you?"

The words: "God forbid," sprang to Pierson's lips; he did not speak them, but put his egg-spoon down, hurt and bewildered. What did the child mean? Not feel the war! He smiled.

"I hope I'm able to help people sometimes, Nollie," and was conscious that he had answered his own thoughts, not her words. He finished his breakfast quickly, and very soon went out. He crossed the Square, and passed East, down two crowded streets to his church. In the traffic of those streets, all slipshod and confused, his black-clothed figure and grave face, with its Vandyk beard, had a curious remote appearance, like a moving remnant of a past civilisation. He went in by the side door. Only five days he had been away, but they had been so full of emotion that the empty familiar building seemed almost strange to him. He had come there unconsciously, groping for anchorage and guidance in this sudden change of relationship between him and his daughters. He stood by the pale brazen eagle, staring into the chancel. The choir were wanting new hymn-books – he must not forget to order them! His eyes sought the stained-glass window he had put in to the memory of his wife. The sun, too high to slant, was burnishing its base, till it glowed of a deep sherry colour. "In the next world!" What strange words of Noel's! His eyes caught the glimmer of the organ-pipes; and, mounting to the loft, he began to play soft chords wandering into each other. He finished, and stood gazing down. This space within high walls, under high vaulted roof, where light was toned to a perpetual twilight, broken here and there by a little glow of colour from glass and flowers, metal, and dark wood, was his home, his charge, his refuge. Nothing moved down there, and yet – was not emptiness mysteriously living, the closed-in air imprinted in strange sort, as though the drone of music and voices in prayer and praise clung there still? Had not sanctity a presence? Outside, a barrel-organ drove its tune along; a wagon staggered on the paved street, and the driver shouted to his horses; some distant guns boomed

out in practice, and the rolling of wheels on wheels formed a net of sound. But those invading noises were transmuted to a mere murmuring in here; only the silence and the twilight were real to Pierson, standing there, a little black figure in a great empty space.

When he left the church, it was still rather early to go to Leila's hospital; and, having ordered the new hymn-books, he called in at the house of a parishioner whose son had been killed in France. He found her in her kitchen; an oldish woman who lived by charing. She wiped a seat for the Vicar.

"I was just makin' meself a cup o' tea, sir."

"Ah! What a comfort tea is, Mrs. Soles!" And he sat down, so that she should feel "at home."

"Yes; it gives me 'eart-burn; I take eight or ten cups a day, now. I take 'em strong, too. I don't seem able to get on without it. I 'ope the young ladies are well, sir?"

"Very well, thank you. Miss Noel is going to begin nursing, too."

"Deary-me! She's very young; but all the young gells are doin' something these days. I've got a niece in munitions-makin' a pretty penny she is. I've been meanin' to tell you – I don't come to church now; since my son was killed, I don't seem to 'ave the 'eart to go anywhere – 'aven't been to a picture-palace these three months. Any excitement starts me cryin'."

"I know; but you'd find rest in church."

Mrs. Soles shook her head, and the small twisted bob of her discoloured hair wobbled vaguely.

"I can't take any recreation," she said. "I'd rather sit 'ere, or be at work. My son was a real son to me. This tea's the only thing that does me any good. I can make you a fresh cup in a minute."

"Thank you, Mrs. Soles, but I must be getting on. We must all look forward to meeting our beloved again, in God's mercy. And one of these days soon I shall be seeing you in church, shan't I."

Mrs. Soles shifted her weight from one slippered foot to the other.

"Well! let's 'ope so," she said. "But I dunno when I shall 'ave the spirit. Good day, sir, and thank you kindly for calling, I'm sure."

Pierson walked away with a very faint smile. Poor queer old soul! – she was no older than himself, but he thought of her as ancient – cut off from her son, like so many – so many; and how good and patient! The melody of an anthem began running in his head. His fingers moved on the air beside him, and he stood still, waiting for an omnibus to take him to St. John's Wood. A thousand people went by while he was waiting, but he did not notice them, thinking of that anthem, of his daughters, and the mercy of God; and on the top of his 'bus, when it came along, he looked lonely and apart, though the man beside him was so fat that there was hardly any seat left to sit on. Getting down at Lord's Cricket-ground, he asked his way of a lady in a nurse's dress.

"If you'll come with me," she said, "I'm just going there."

"Oh! Do you happen to know a Mrs. Lynch who nurses"

"I am Mrs. Lynch. Why, you're Edward Pierson!"

He looked into her face, which he had not yet observed.

"Leila!" he said.

"Yes, Leila! How awfully nice of you to come, Edward!"

They continued to stand, searching each for the other's youth, till she murmured:

"In spite of your beard, I should have known you anywhere!" But she thought: 'Poor Edward! He is old, and monk-like!'

And Pierson, in answer, murmured:

"You're very little changed, Leila! We haven't, seen each other since my youngest girl was born. She's just a little like you." But he thought: 'My Nollie! So much more dewy; poor Leila!'

They walked on, talking of his daughters, till they reached the hospital.

"If you'll wait here a minute, I'll take you over my wards."

She had left him in a bare hall, holding his hat in one hand and touching his gold cross with the other; but she soon came hack, and a little warmth crept about his heart. How works of mercy

suited women! She looked so different, so much softer, beneath the white coif, with a white apron over the bluish frock.

At the change in his face, a little warmth crept about Leila, too, just where the bib of her apron stopped; and her eyes slid round at him while they went towards what had once been a billiard-room.

"My men are dears," she said; "they love to be talked to."

Under a skylight six beds jutted out from a green distempered wall, opposite to six beds jutting out from another green distempered wall, and from each bed a face was turned towards them young faces, with but little expression in them. A nurse, at the far end, looked round, and went on with her work. The sight of the ward was no more new to Pierson than to anyone else in these days. It was so familiar, indeed, that it had practically no significance. He stood by the first bed, and Leila stood alongside. The man smiled up when she spoke, and did not smile when he spoke, and that again was familiar to him. They passed from bed to bed, with exactly the same result, till she was called away, and he sat down by a young soldier with a long, very narrow head and face, and a heavily bandaged shoulder. Touching the bandage reverently, Pierson said:

"Well, my dear fellow-still bad?"

"Ah!" replied the soldier. "Shrapnel wound: It's cut the flesh properly."

"But not the spirit, I can see!"

The young soldier gave him a quaint look, as much as to say: "Not 'arf bad!" and a gramophone close to the last bed began to play: "God bless Daddy at the war!"

"Are you fond of music?"

"I like it well enough. Passes the time."

"I'm afraid the time hangs heavy in hospital."

"Yes; it hangs a bit 'eavy; it's just 'orspital life. I've been wounded before, you see. It's better than bein' out there. I expect I'll lose the proper use o' this arm. I don't worry; I'll get my discharge."

"You've got some good nurses here."

"Yes; I like Mrs. Lynch; she's the lady I like."

"My cousin."

"I see you come in together. I see everything 'ere. I think a lot, too. Passes the time."

"Do they let you smoke?"

"Oh, yes! They let us smoke."

"Have one of mine?"

The young soldier smiled for the first time. "Thank you; I've got plenty."

The nurse came by, and smiled at Pierson.

"He's one of our blase ones; been in before, haven't you, Simson?"

Pierson looked at the young man, whose long, narrow face; where one sandy-lashed eyelid drooped just a little, seemed armoured with a sort of limited omniscience. The gramophone had whirred and grunted into "Sidi Brahim." The nurse passed on.

"'Seedy Abram,'.rdquo; said the young soldier. "The Frenchies sing it; they takes it up one after the other, ye know."

"Ah!" murmured Pierson; "it's pretty." And his fingers drummed on the counterpane, for the tune was new to him. Something seemed to move in the young man's face, as if a blind had been drawn up a little.

"I don't mind France," he said abruptly; "I don't mind the shells and that; but I can't stick the mud. There's a lot o' wounded die in the mud; can't get up – smothered." His unwounded arm made a restless movement. "I was nearly smothered myself. Just managed to keep me nose up."

Pierson shuddered. "Thank God you did!"

"Yes; I didn't like that. I told Mrs. Lynch about that one day when I had the fever. She's a nice lady; she's seen a lot of us boys: That mud's not right, you know." And again his unwounded arm

made that restless movement; while the gramophone struck up: “The boys in brown.” The movement of the arm affected Pierson horribly; he rose and, touching the bandaged shoulder, said:

“Good-bye; I hope you’ll soon be quite recovered.”

The young soldier’s lips twisted in the semblance of a smile; his drooped eyelid seemed to try and raise itself.

“Good day, sir,” he said; “and thank you.”

Pierson went back to the hall. The sunlight fell in a pool just inside the open door, and an uncontrollable impulse made him move into it, so that it warmed him up to the waist. The mud! How ugly life was! Life and Death! Both ugly! Poor boys! Poor boys!

A voice behind him said:

“Oh! There you are, Edward! Would you like to see the other ward, or shall I show you our kitchen?”

Pierson took her hand impulsively. “You’re doing a noble work, Leila. I wanted to ask you: Could you arrange for Noel to come and get trained here? She wants to begin at once. The fact is, a boy she is attracted to has just gone out to the Front.”

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.