

ALF'S BUTTON

W.A.DARLINGTON

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BY
W. A. DARLINGTON



NEW YORK
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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FOREWORD

It is a curious fact that since the death of the late lamented Aladdin, nothing seems to have been heard of his wonderful Lamp. Mr. Arthur Collins and other students of ancient lore have been able, after patient research, to reconstruct for us the man Aladdin in his habit as he lived and to place before our eyes a faithful picture of his times. Alike in literature and on the stage the Lamp plays an all-important part; and this makes it all the more strange that its subsequent history should have been so entirely lost.

I myself incline to the theory that Aladdin allowed the secret of his talisman to die with him, and that his widow disposed of an object whose presence in her husband's collection of articles of "bigotry and virtue" she had always resented, for what it would fetch. Its tradition once broken, we cannot suppose that an old battered lamp bearing on one portion of its surface a half-effaced inscription in forgotten characters would attract much attention as an *objet d'art*. In fact, it would be without value or interest except to a scholar learned enough to interpret the inscription aforesaid—which may be rendered in our tongue "Rub Lightly."

All this, however, is mere conjecture. It is based on my knowledge, accidentally gained, that a lamp of this description formed part of a job lot of "assorted curios" acquired by the Government with a view to subsequent reissue in the form of buttons for soldiers' tunics. This fact, taken in conjunction with the unusual events I am about to relate, does lend a certain color to the theory which I support; but of solid proof I can of course offer nothing.

Some of Alf Higgins' adventures have previously appeared in *The Passing Show*. The Editor of that paper, by the interest he showed in Alf, has incurred the grave responsibility of encouraging me to write this book about him.



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ALF'S BUTTON

CHAPTER I

ALF HIGGINS, RUNNER

"Very well, sergeant-major, I think that's the lot. As far as we know, we'll take over the front line from the 4th Battalion in two days' time. I want you to warn all the men who aren't coming up with us that they are to go to the Transport lines to-morrow."

Captain Richards, commanding "C" Company of the 5th Battalion, Middlesex Fusiliers, rose to his feet, snapped shut his company roll-book and stretched himself. Sergeant-Major French, slipping a similar though less immaculate roll-book into his breast pocket, also rose to his feet (nearly bumping his tin-hatted head against the roof of the dug-out as he did so) and saluted.

"Very good, sir. Good night."

"Good night, French. Oh—one moment. I'd forgotten. I want one extra runner for Company Headquarters. Can you give me an intelligent man?"

The C.S.M. considered.

"There's only 'Iggins, sir," he said, in rather a dubious tone. "You know the man, sir—in Mr. Allen's platoon."

Captain Richards laughed.

"You can't call him intelligent, can you?"

"No, sir. But nearly every man in the company's fixed with a job, sir. 'Iggins ain't very bright, an' 'e won't do no more than you tell 'im. But 'e won't do no less, neither. 'E's a good soldier, and what 'e's told to do, 'e does. I don't think we can spare anybody better, sir."

"All right. Send him down to see me."

Richards was left to his thoughts, though he was not alone. From somewhere in the dim recesses of the dug-out came the sound of deep regular breathing, showing where Lieutenant Donaldson was making the most of an opportunity for rest. The remaining two officers of "C" Company had been out all day reconnoitering the piece of front line in which they were to relieve the 4th Battalion, and had not yet returned. Richards found himself wishing that they would appear. For one thing, he wanted his dinner; and for another, he was just a shade anxious, though he would not for worlds have admitted it. Of course, reconnoitering was always a long job, and there had not been much shelling going on during the day. Besides, Denis Allen—senior subaltern of the battalion and next on the list for command of a company—was far too old a hand to run into unnecessary danger. On the other hand, little Shaw had only just come out from England; this was his first time in the line, and he was just the type of keen young thing to do something foolish out of ignorance or bravado.

Richards himself, with Donaldson and the sergeant-major, had been over the trenches the day before. It is not usual for all the officers of a relieving company to see the ground for themselves; but this was a piece of line quite new to the Home Counties' Territorial Division, of which the Middlesex Fusiliers' Brigade

formed part. The authorities therefore had deemed it advisable to use even more care than usual.

It was bitterly cold. The Great Frost of January and February, 1917—the coldest spring that France had known for a period of years variously estimated at twenty-one, a hundred and eight, and intermediately—was still in being. Richards turned up the collar of his British warm and longed for soup. He was just considering the advisability of shouting to the servants to serve his dinner at once, when there came a trampling on the stairs, a metallic clang, and some picturesque cursing. A moment later, Denis Allen emerged from the gloom, followed by little Shaw.

"Thank God for my tin hat," said Denis piously. "That's about the only thing it's good for. I'd have brained myself long ago on these stairs without it."

He divested himself of the article in question, as also of his equipment, glasses and trench coat; these he piled upon the recumbent form of Donaldson, bringing that warrior to a sudden and profane wakefulness.

"Here," said Allen to Shaw, "we have the company commander sitting at home in luxurious idleness, while we poor blighters do his work for him outside in the cold. If you've drunk all the whisky, Dickie, there's going to be a mutiny. I'm simply perishing. Where's the dinner?"

"Here, sir," said Private Corder, the senior servant, entering with the soup.

"Bless you, Corder. May your shadow never grow less."

"No, sir. Please, sir, Private 'Iggins wants to see you, sir."

"Me?" said Richards. "Oh, yes, of course. Send him down in a minute, but give me time to finish the soup first."

He warmed his fingers round the steaming mug.

"Well, Denis," he went on. "How did you like the front trenches?"

"Fine. Best lot I've seen. Top-hole duck-boards, good dug-outs, quiet bit of line. Couldn't be better, except for the cold. Shaw here was most impressed, and said he'd like to have shown his mother round them."

Second-Lieutenant Shaw grinned.

"Well, she gets the wind up rather, you see," he explained. "I think she imagines the front line with a perpetual barrage playing on it like a garden hose. I must say I didn't expect to see it *quite* so peaceful myself. Or so clean and tidy."

"Ah, that's the frost. I tell you, we've been grouching enough lately about being here for the hardest frost within memory, but you've got to remember that it does keep the water frozen up in the trench walls. Let's pray the frost doesn't break while we're in the line."

Allen looked suddenly grave.

"I did notice a trickle of water here and there to-day," he said. "Dickie, I'm afraid we're in for a thaw. We shall be wading up in gum-boots in two days, you'll see. Here comes Higgins."

A nondescript private, with a straggling mustache and a pair of round, childish blue eyes, came into the light and saluted.

"Oh, Higgins," said Captain Richards, "you're to join Company Headquarters as a runner. D'you know the job?"

"Yes, sir. Carryin' messages."

"Yes. Well, now, I was only told to-day that I'd to have an extra one, otherwise you'd have been sent up with the rest to look round. However, you'd better take my trench map away with you and study the lie of the land from it. You can read a map, I suppose?"

"No, sir."

"Not at all?"

"No, sir."

"Good Heavens, I asked for an intell—however, there's nobody else. That will do, then, Higgins. Report to me before we move off, and do your best."

"Yes, sir."

Private Alfred Higgins departed, marveling at the strange chance that had elevated him to this responsible post. He was not sure whether he was pleased or otherwise. A runner's is a business admitting of startling variations. In a quiet sector of the line there may be no messages to take, or at least no shells to dodge in the process; but in a lively part of the front the runner's job is the most consistently perilous of all. Besides this, Alf Higgins had always considered it the wisest plan to steer carefully clear of those in authority. As a runner, he would be in constant personal touch with his officer.

He returned to his mates with mixed feelings, and confided his news to his bosom pal, Bill Grant, who deeply offended him by roaring with laughter at the mere idea.

As for Sergeant Lees, Lieutenant Allen's second in command of No. 9 Platoon, he seemed to regard Higgins' latest employment as marking the beginning of the end.

"If 'Iggins is a bright, intelligent man for a runner," he remarked bitterly, "I may be a blinkin' brigadier yet."

Lieutenant Allen's gloomy weather predictions duly came to pass. When the battalion moved up the thaw had begun in earnest. The water so long imprisoned streamed out of the walls of the trenches, and the disgusted men found themselves committed to wading five miles through communication trenches already a foot deep in water. This water grew visibly deeper as they went forward, till progress became difficult and most exhausting. Richards, plugging along doggedly in front of his company with the guide from the 4th Battalion, looked at his watch when they had covered half the distance and found that they were already an hour overdue. He hated being late with a relief, but greater speed was impossible. As the flow of water increased, the sides of the trenches began to fall in; the earth thus mixed with the water thickened it to a consistency which might be likened to very rich soup, and the pace grew slower still.

Now and then a dark cavern would yawn suddenly beside them, and a ghostly glimmer in the bowels of the earth would show an inhabited dug-out; and as the relieving party squelched slowly past, the water in the trench would be forced above the level of the dug-out entrance, and would flow thundering down the staircase like a miniature Niagara. Terrible objurgations from beneath would express the inmost thoughts of some weary warrior rudely awakened from sleep by the impact of a cold wave of muddy water against

the back of his neck. Sympathetic, but powerless to avoid continuous repetition of the offense, the company plodded on.

At last, four hours behind the time fixed, a husky voice out of the darkness informed Richards that he had reached his destination.

Some time elapsed before everything had been satisfactorily handed over and explained to the incoming company, but at last the 4th men splashed thankfully off—to cause another series of Niagaras to descend upon the indignant warrior aforesaid—leaving Captain Richards entirely responsible for several hundred yards of the British front.

It was at this point, when the Company Headquarters went off to their comparatively dry dug-out, leaving the rest of the company to their miserable vigil on the surface, that Private Higgins realized that the runner's lot can be a very happy one.

This opinion grew more and more pronounced as time went on. Officers relieved each other in the front line, coming off duty covered with wet clay nearly to the waist and scraping their breeches clean with their knives before lying down to snatch a little rest; while he—Higgins—lay warm and dry, with nothing to do but eat and sleep.

All was quiet up above; both armies were far too much occupied with their own discomforts to think about adding to those of their adversaries. Possibly, thought Higgins in a flash of foolish optimism, his whole four days might be spent in a dry dug-out, eating and sleeping. But he must have omitted to touch wood, for at this point he heard his name called.

Captain Richards was holding in his hand a paper which the signaler had just handed to him.

"Higgins," he ordered. "Take this up to Mr. Donaldson in the front line at once, and bring back an answer. It's a report on the condition of the front line dug-outs. Understand?"

"Yessir!"

"Are your gum-boots all right?"

"Yessir!"

"Right! Carry on!"

Higgins clambered up the steps to the surface. Before he stepped over the dam which had been constructed round the dug-out entrance, he glanced round. The complicated canal system, which had been the trenches, looked even more forbidding by day than it had the previous night, and the water looked horribly cold. But there was nothing to be gained by waiting, and he waded off up a communication trench. Very soon he found himself in difficulties. The trench walls had continued to fall in, with the consequence that in places the thick soup had become glue. Once or twice he felt his foot sticking in the viscous stuff that had collected over the duck-boards, and had to struggle hard before he could release himself. Suddenly, without warning, he struck an even worse patch. Both feet were seized and held as in a vise. He fought hard, but only sank deeper. At last, quite exhausted, he felt his feet reach the duck-boards; and, thankful that at least he could sink no lower, he settled down with stoical resignation to wait till some one should come.

But an hour went by, and nothing happened; Higgins began to be hungry. Possibly, he thought, this

particular trench had been found impassable, and traffic directed through other channels, in which case he might never be found. Appalled by this idea, he lifted up his voice.

"Hi!" he yelled. "'Elp!"

For sole answer, a German "fish-tail" whirred overhead and burst with great violence not far away. His own side remained as quiet as the grave.

Higgins began to lose his head.

"'Elp! 'Elp!" he bawled, a note of panic in his voice.

"There now, duckie!" came in soothing accents from round the corner in front of him. "Mummie's comin'! What the 'ell's the matter?"

A gum-booted, leather-jerkined private came slowly into view.

"Why," he exclaimed, "it's old Alf! Thought you was on G.H.Q. staff, 'elpin' 'Aig, Alf. What's all the row about?"

"Bringin' a message up to the orficer, an' I got stuck. Been 'ere hours, I 'ave."

"Stuck in the 'Glue-Pot,' that's what you 'ave, ole son," said Private Bill Grant cheerfully. "You must 'ave been a mug to use this way. Every one's usin' number One-Eight-Oh now; it's deeper, but not so sticky. The officer brought that message up 'isself when 'e came on dooty. They was sayin' some nice things about you, I don't think. You're in for it, you are, when you gets out o' that."

Higgins was past caring.

"'Ere, Bill, can't you pull me out?" he pleaded.

"Not if I knows it. That's the Glue-Pot you're in. If I started pullin' you out, I'd get stuck there meself, that's all. You'll 'ave to stop till arter dark, an' we'll come along over the top and 'ave yer out with a rope. So long."

The unfeeling Bill kissed his not over-clean hand and disappeared round the corner. Silence—broken occasionally by the sharp crack of a rifle bullet or the explosion of a casual shell—settled down once more. Higgins sank into a kind of stupor....

* * * * *

"Hist!" said a slightly dramatic voice above him, and he woke to a consciousness that darkness had fallen, and that the rescue party was at hand.

"That you, sergeant?" he asked joyfully.

"Not so loud, you blinkin' fool!" whispered Sergeant Lees fervently. "It ain't daylight now. The Boche 'as the wind up proper, an' if 'e 'ears you there'll be 'ell on. Catch 'old o' this rope. Now then, lads, ready? 'Eave!"

Higgins felt the rope tighten. Then came an almost intolerable strain on his body as the six panting figures up above opposed their joint strength to the passive resistance of his firmly-embedded gum-boots. Something had to give somewhere. That something turned out to be Higgins' old pair of braces, which had

been forced to undertake the support of the said boots in addition to their usual responsibility. They snapped suddenly. The tug-of-war party collapsed in a heap, and Alf shot into the air like a cork from a champagne-bottle (leaving his trousers behind him) and fell again into the trench beside his tenantless and immovable boots.

He owed it to the quick wit of Sergeant Lees that he did not become bogged once more. His legs were already sinking in the ooze of the Glue-Pot when the sergeant leaned over, seized him by the coat collar and dragged him up by main force, just as his jacket split along its whole length with a rending sound. A Boche machine-gunner, much alarmed at the highly unusual sounds proceeding from the British lines, began to enquire into the matter. The shell-hole into which Alf rolled for safety happened to be full of filthy water, icy cold.

CHAPTER II

ALF CLEANS HIS BUTTONS

When the battalion moved out of the line the appearance of Private Higgins could not be described as smart. The only person who attempted to describe it at all was the company sergeant-major; he did it rather well.

Higgins did not spend the remainder of his tour of duty in the condition of indecorous discomfort in which he was hauled from the Glue-Pot. On crawling out of his shell-hole, he first rescued his trousers with some difficulty from inside his derelict thigh-boots, and then made his way to the dressing-station—a large dug-out—where he was dried and his torn jacket was roughly repaired. For the rest of his time he wore the felt-lined leather jerkin which he had forgotten to take with him on his former adventure; but as luck would have it he was not required on any further errand.

The battalion left its trenches—handed over thankfully to the North Surreys—about midnight, eight days after it had moved in. Its numbers, in spite of the mildness of Fritz, had been sadly depleted. All precautions notwithstanding, a large number of men had succumbed to trench feet, and the remainder could scarcely do more than crawl. They made their way painfully as far as the reserve trenches, and next day they reached a village some miles behind the line, where they found themselves in quite comfortable billets—the men in huts, the officers in farms and cottages. The hut allotted to "C" Company contained a complicated erection in wood and wire-netting, which provided two tiers of bedsteads down almost the entire length of each side. There was, however, a small space at one end, screened off with waterproof sheets; this was appropriated to the joint use of the C.S.M. and the C.Q.M.S.

As soon as the battalion was settled in, the usual business began of repairing the ravages of the trenches and transforming a crew of ragged, bearded scaramouches back into self-respecting members of a smart regiment.

Captain Richards paraded his company in front of its billet, and surveyed it more in sorrow than in anger. He himself and his officers had managed, in some wonderful way, to turn themselves out as spotless as if they had just strolled in from Piccadilly. But they had the advantage over the men of carrying spare suits of clothes in their valises, and of possessing servants.

"Well, 'C' Company," remarked its Commander. "The quartermaster is going to take you in hand this afternoon, and I don't envy him his job. You'll hand in your tin hats and your jerkins, and you'll draw service caps, badges and shoulder-titles. Those of you who need new things must take the opportunity of getting them. Private Higgins, for instance, needs a new tunic."

There was a roar of laughter, for Higgins' misadventure in the communication trench was the company's latest family joke.

"I see," continued Richards, grinning, "that he's mended his old one with a piece of rope. Well, that won't do for me after to-day. To-morrow I expect to see the company something like itself. March 'em off, Sergeant-Major French; I'll be coming along shortly."

Clothing parade was a lengthy business. Most of the battalion seemed to need clothes, and the

quartermaster's overworked staff appeared to regard each new application as a personal insult. At last Higgins obtained his new tunic, and started back to his billet with this and his other issues. On the way he passed a small cottage marked "Estaminet"; he entered and indulged in a miniature orgy of very light French beer.

It was getting late when he reached the billet, and in order to make the most of the fading light he sat down outside the hut to bring the buttons of his new jacket to a condition fit to be inspected by C.S.M. French on the following morning.

He made an excellent job of the top button and then, recharging his tooth-brush (presented to him for quite another purpose by a paternal government) with polish, he prepared to tackle the second. But the instant he touched it there was a sudden roaring sound, and a strange hot wind sprang up, tossing into the air a swirling column of dust which half choked Alf and wholly blinded him. He dropped tooth-brush, polish and tunic to the ground and clapped his hands to his agonized eyes.

The wind died down again as suddenly as it had come, and the swirling dust settled; and there came to Alf, still struggling to empty his streaming eyes of pieces of grit, an eerie sense that he was not alone. Some presence was beside him—something that he must clear his eyes and look at, yet dreaded to see.

Suddenly a sepulchral voice spoke.

"What wouldst thou have?" it said.

Alf felt that he must *see*, or go mad. With his two hands he opened an inflamed eye—and with great difficulty restrained himself from uttering a loud yell of terror. He was confronted by a huge and hideous being of a type he had believed to exist only in the disordered imaginations of story-tellers. The being, seeing that he had Alf's undivided—even petrified—attention, bowed impressively.

"What wouldst thou have?" he repeated in a deep, booming voice. "I am ready to obey thee as thy slave, and the slave of any who have that Button in their possession; I, and the other slaves of the Button."

"Gawd!" exclaimed Alf, in horror. "Strike me pink!"

The strange being looked surprised, but bowed yet lower.

"To be stricken pink? Verily my Lord's request is strange! Nevertheless, his wish is my command."

He disappeared.

Alf stared open-mouthed at the spot where the apparition had stood. Then in a sudden panic at what he took to be the effect of French beer after the enforced abstemiousness of the trenches, he rushed into the hut and rolled himself up in his blanket. He felt at once aggrieved and frightened; for he was not drunk nor even exhilarated, and yet he had got to the far more advanced stage of "seeing things." He gave no answer to any enquiries after his health nor any other sign of life until the orderly sergeant came round at *réveillé* next morning.

"Now then, 'Iggins, show a leg," said the N.C.O.

Higgins had been awake for some time. He felt all right, and had already assured himself by a cautious glance round that he was no longer seeing demons. He sat up, and flung his blankets cheerfully from him.

"Right-o, sergeant," he said.

The sergeant's eyes bulged. All that could be seen of Higgins—his face, hands and the part of his neck and chest not covered by his shirt—was one glorious shade of salmon-pink, shining and glossy as if from the application of a coat of Mr. Aspinall's best enamel.

"Come out o' that, quick!" said Sergeant Anderson, retreating hastily. "Corporal Spink, take this man along to the M.O. at once—don't wait for sick parade. It's measles and scarlet fever and smallpox and nettlerash all mixed up, you've got, me lad. 'Ere, keep yer distance."

The regimental M.O., nonplused and frightened, at once got into touch with the Field Ambulance and had Higgins—now in the last stage of panic and convinced that his end was near—removed to a Casualty Clearing Station. Then he descended on "C" Company's billet with some pungent form of chemical disinfectant, and rendered that erstwhile happy home utterly uninhabitable. The company, spluttering and swearing, tumbled out and ate its breakfast shivering in the open. If threats and curses could kill, Alf would have been a dead man fifty times over.

On his arrival at the C.C.S. his clothes were taken from him, and he was isolated for observation in a small ward; and a keen young medical practitioner named Browne—temporary captain in the R.A.M.C.—undertook his extraordinary case.

On finding that he did not immediately die, Alf recovered his normal spirits, and for a week he thoroughly enjoyed himself. He was a public character—all the medical officers within reach came and shook their heads over him. He felt perfectly well; his pulse and temperature were from the first normal; but his hue remained undimmed. An old doctor who chanced to arrive when Higgins was having his midday meal, got out his notebook and entered "Abnormally voracious appetite" as a salient symptom of the new disease; but this was a mistake. In fact, no further symptoms of any kind developed; and in the end Captain Browne, in despair, determined to give up the case and to send Alf to see a noted skin-specialist at the Base.

Accordingly Higgins' clothes (smelling strongly of some distressing fumigatory) were brought to him, and he was told to get ready for his journey. Observing with displeasure that the effect of fumigation had been to turn his brasswork nearly black, he produced cleaning materials and got to work to remedy this.

At the first touch he gave to his second button, once more that awful apparition arose before him, and the same sepulchral voice was heard.

"What wouldst thou have? I am ready to serve thee as thy slave, and the slave of any who have that Button in their possession; I, and the other slaves of the Button."

Alf's mind was whirling. He had by now half forgotten his previous sight of this supernatural visitor, or rather had accounted for it satisfactorily in his mind. But no theory of intoxication could hold good on this occasion, for Alf's only drink for the past week had been tea. The emotion uppermost in his mind, however, was fear that the doctor might come in and find the being there. He therefore sat up in bed and gasped out:

"Op it!"

With a puzzled expression on his hideous countenance, the being began slowly and with obvious reluctance to disappear. He seemed to be doubting the evidence of his ears.

"'Ere, I say," called out Alf suddenly, as an idea struck him. "Arf a mo'!"

The being, who was still just visible as a faint murkiness in the atmosphere, took shape again with alacrity.

"What wouldst thou have?" he began once more. "I am ready to obey thee as thy slave and the slave...."

"Yes," interrupted Alf, who was in terror of the possible advent of the doctor. "You said all that before. What I want to know is, was it you that turned me this ruddy color?"

"Verily, O Master, the color is not the color of blood; and indeed, with thine own lips thou didst command me to strike thee pink!"

"Lumme!" said Alf, light breaking in upon him at last. "Well, if that's your idea of a joke, it ain't mine, that's all. You can just blinkin' well think again, if you want to make *me* laugh. See?"

"Thy wish," said the Spirit, to whom Alf's idiomatic speech was just so much gibberish, "is my command. What wouldst thou have? I am ready to obey...."

"Stop it," said Alf in acute apprehension, his eye on the door. "Didn't you 'ear what I said? Put me right, for the Lord's sake, and then 'op it, quick. I can 'ear the doc. comin'."

Captain Browne entered. He was in a very despondent frame of mind. He was a keen and ambitious young man, and his failure to make any impression on Higgins' condition had been a great blow to his pride. Sorely against his will he was now about to own himself defeated.

He closed the door behind him.

There was an instant's pause. Then the officer, without a change of countenance, spoke quietly.

"Ah!" he said. "Then my last treatment *has* had the effect I hoped for. It's a cure. You needn't go to the Base, after all."

The cure of Higgins' malady brought to Captain Browne much honor and renown. He became the first and sole authority on what came to be known as "Browne's Disease"; several thoughtful essays from his pen appeared in the foremost medical journals, detailing the course of the disease, the method of its cure, and the mental processes which had led to the evolution of that cure. He was asked to contribute an article on the same subject to a medical encyclopædia. Finally, he was mentioned in dispatches.

An order from the distant heights of the surgeon-general's staff was circulated to all medical officers, ordering them to forward weekly a return of the number of men under their care suffering from Browne's Disease. But neither they nor the distinguished inventor himself could find any. This was the more unfortunate because, if only he had been able to find another authentic case of the malady, he might have looked forward to Harley Street and a fashionable practice after the war. But in any case, his name, if not his fortune, was made.

As for Alf, he returned at once to his battalion, where he gave unsatisfactory answers to all questions. He was a man of little imagination, but it seemed that he was now in his own case beginning to link up cause with effect. At all events he refrained for as long as possible from cleaning his second tunic-button, and might have been seen now and again regarding it with awe not unmixed with alarm.

CHAPTER III

THE MIRACLE OF THE PLANES

When Alf reached the 5th Battalion once more, he found it transformed. All signs of trench life had disappeared, and the men were recovering their swing and swagger. True, they looked a little harassed, but that was only natural seeing that they were in the middle of one of the periods of strenuous activity humorously known to those in authority as "rest."

His mates accepted Alf's reappearance among them without surprise—almost without comment. The fact that he had been in hospital suffering from a hitherto unknown disease did not excite them at all. Such men as did mention the matter took it for granted that he had had some new form of "trench fever." (Every malady developed at the front which is not immediately recognizable is disposed of by popular rumor under this convenient heading.)

This particular "rest" was expected to last still another fortnight when Higgins reported. The first week was to be devoted to a stiff training program, while the second was to embrace an equally energetic period of athletic competitions and games. Within an hour of his arrival the disgusted private found himself swooped upon by various enthusiasts and engaged to go into strict training at once, with a view to representing the platoon at football and the company in a cross-country race the following week. Practice games and trial runs were arranged to dovetail into each other with devilish ingenuity, until Alf began to consider the advisability of rubbing this mysterious button of his and obtaining a relapse.

He was unimaginative, and the vast possibilities latent in the magic button had not even begun to unfold themselves before his mind. One of his chief characteristics was a reluctance to mix himself up in matters he did not understand. He felt that in meddling twice already with supernatural and probably diabolical powers he had been very lucky to get off scot free; and the mere idea of ever encountering that fearsome being again filled him with apprehension. He avoided touching the mysterious button at all, either for cleaning or any other purpose.

But this state of things could not last. Lieutenant Allen was no martinet, but it was not many days before he stopped before Alf on parade and surveyed him with disfavor.

"This won't do, Higgins," he said. "Your brasswork is a disgrace. Look at that button! You will clean that up the moment you get off parade this morning, and I'll have a look at it this afternoon. See?"

"Yessir!" said Higgins dutifully. But he did not see in the least what was to be done. He could not leave his button untouched after what the officer had said, and he did not dare to clean it. In his efforts to solve this problem, he went through his drill movements with an air of preoccupation which excited Sergeant Lees to the verge of apoplexy. But he had his reward in an idea of—for him—surpassing brilliance.

Army custom decrees that when a soldier in uniform goes into mourning, he shall proclaim the fact to the world by covering the second button of his tunic with crepe, or some other black material. Obviously, then, Higgins' easiest way out of his dilemma was to kill some non-existent relative. His difficulty thus settled, he began to apply his mind to the business in hand just in time to save the sergeant's sanity.

The parade finished, Higgins set out to find C.Q.M.S. Piper. That important personage was conferring

deeply with the company commander on some subject connected with the issue of rum, and Higgins had to wait; as bad luck would have it, by the time the conference was ended Sergeant-Major French had come up and was standing within easy earshot. Alf tried to pitch his voice so that the sergeant-major should not overhear him, and only succeeded in defeating his own end by becoming completely inaudible.

"Quarters," he said, "can you give me a ee oh ack uff?"

"Now then, my lad!" roared Piper, in a voice which commanded the instant attention of everybody in the hut, "don't whisper sweet nothings to me. Spit it out! What d'yer want? Piece o' what?"

Amid general interest the defeated strategist repeated his request.

"Bit of black stuff, Quarters."

"Bit o' black stuff? What for?"

"To go into mourning. My uncle's dead."

"Ho!" intervened C.S.M. French, suddenly waking to the full significance of Higgins' request. "Yer uncle's dead, is 'e? 'Ow d'yer know that?"

"I 'ad a letter this mornin', major."

"Ho! Well now, that's funny; because there 'asn't been no bloomin' mail in since Friday. An' as for mournin', your bloomin' button's gone into mournin' already, without needin' no black stuff. I never saw nothing like it! Now, look 'ere, 'Iggin's, I 'eard Mr. Allen tickin' you off about it, this mornin', and it looks to me as if you're tryin' on a bit of a game. Yer uncle may be dead or 'e may not, but before the quartermaster gives yer a bit o' black, you've gotter show me that button so bright that I can see me blinkin' face in it. Now, get a move on!"

There was no help for it. The button had to be cleaned, this once at any rate. Afterwards Higgins could mourn his uncle without ceasing, and spirits from the vasty deep need no longer form an essential part of his matutinal preparations for parade.

As soon as dinners had been dished out, Higgins put on his kit, took his rifle, and slipped away to a quiet spot where a small mound screened him from observation from the camp, though it did not prevent him from keeping a look-out. There was still a full hour before parade. He sat down, and after a moment or two spent in summoning his courage he produced his button-stick and began to polish his button. He did not even look up when a sepulchral voice gave evidence that the dreaded Being had appeared.

"What wouldst thou have? I am ready to serve thee as thy slave, and the slave of any that have that Button in their possession; I, and the other slaves of the Button."

Alf continued polishing for dear life. After a moment's pause the voice spoke again.

"Great Master," it said. "Behold, thy slave is present."

But the great Master, perspiring freely with terror, averted his head and polished on. He had some wild hope that the spirit might realize that the summons he had obeyed was involuntary and, so to speak, unofficial, and would go away. The spirit, on the other hand, apparently took his master's behavior as being simply an exhibition of despotism; this was quite according to Oriental tradition, and greatly impressed him, so that when he spoke a third time his voice was humble and servile to a degree.

"O Master, Lord of Power," he said, "since thou dost not deign to acknowledge the presence of thy slave, but dost continue the summons whereby thy slave came hither, is it thy will that the other slaves of the Button, who are seven thousand in number, should be brought before thee?"

It is doubtful whether Higgins fully comprehended this rather involved sentence; but he understood enough to realize that unless he made up his mind to talk with this being he was threatened with the appearance of seven thousand other devils, quite possibly worse than the first. He dropped his button-stick hastily. "No," he said anxiously; "you'll do."

He turned and faced his slave and was astonished to find that his fear had passed. The mysterious being was much more terrible in anticipation than in reality; and the servility of his speech and bearing had unmistakably shown that he regarded Alf with respect almost amounting to reverence. Alf, his breast swelling with a new and very pleasant sense of self-importance, decided to take this opportunity of coming to some kind of understanding with his new follower.

"Look 'ere, chum," he said affably, "you an' me's got to 'ave a little talk. Now, just tell me, 'ow do I come to be your master?"

"Lord, I am chief of the slaves of the Button that was aforetime the Lamp. Whosoever may be Lord of the Button, him do I serve and perform all his will; I, and the other slaves of the Button."

"Lumme!" commented Alf, much impressed. "An' where was yer last place?"

"Master?" said the spirit, uncomprehending.

"Oo didst you—thou—serve before you come to me?" interpreted the Master.

"The great prince Aladdin."

"Don't know 'im. Prince 'oo?"

"Aladdin."

"What—the pantomime feller? Lor', you must be gettin' on in years! Well, now, did this chap give yer a reference?"

The spirit looked puzzled, and Alf decided that in Aladdin's time servants could not have had characters. He continued his catechism.

"An' what's yer name, mate?"

"Abdulkindeelilajeeb was I aforetime, O Master, but now I am called Abdulzirrilajeeb."

"Gorblimey," said Alf blankly. "You don't expect me to do that when I speaks to yer, I 'ope!" Then after a pause he added, "I shall call yer Eustace."

The djinn looked pleased.

"In truth, O possessor of wisdom, it is a lordly name."

"'Tis well," replied the possessor of wisdom with a melodramatic wave of the hand. "Now, tell me. Yer always poppin' up an' askin' for orders—what is it you want to do? What's yer partickler line?"

"My Lord hath but to command," said the newly-christened Eustace with superb simplicity.

"Garn, what a whopper!" Alf snorted incredulously. He had an ingrained dislike of "swank" in any form; and he looked about him at once, seeking some impossible task with which he might upset this complacent creature's vanity.

His imagination failed utterly to respond to the sudden strain placed upon it. His eye wandered round the unedifying landscape and found no source of inspiration. In despair he glanced up at the skies, and there he found the idea he sought.

High in the air above the British lines—so high that they were only just visible—were two aeroplanes. That they were Boche and Briton, engaged in a duel, was plain; but which was which it was impossible to make out. No doubt an expert would have known at once by a dozen signs; but Alf's data for distinguishing friend from foe in the air began and ended with the official markings—the tricolor rings of the Allies or the German black cross painted on the wings of the machines. When these signs were not visible he worked, as did most of his mates, on the rough principle that if an aeroplane dropped bombs on you it was certainly a Boche, while if it refrained it was probably British.

He directed the djinn's attention aloft.

"Now then," he said in triumphant tones. "See them two airyplanes up there? Well, if yer so bloomin' clever, 'op up and bring down the Boche one to me 'ere."

Eustace disappeared immediately, and Alf, incredulous though he was that anything out of the ordinary was going to happen, gazed up at the two tiny machines, still diving and circling in their attempts to out-manuever one another.

The duel was, however, nearing an end. As Alf gazed, one of the two suddenly turned tail and fled. The other gave chase, and seemed on the very point of victory, when suddenly the pursuing plane seemed to check in mid-air and began to descend.

Even to Alf's untutored eye there was something uncanny in that descent. The machine neither nosedived nor came down in the usual graceful spirals. Instead it sank slowly and very steadily straight downwards, in defiance of all known laws of aeronautics, directly towards the spot where Alf was standing.

Alf, petrified with astonishment, stood staring at the machine as it grew larger and more distinct. It was all true, then! The djinn had, it seemed, all the powers that he claimed. In a few moments Private Higgins would be in sole possession of a complete German aeroplane. For the first time in his career, military glory was in his grasp. He had had no thought, when he had given his command to Eustace, of anything but the difficulty of the task; but now he had a sudden joyous vision of the kudos he would gain when he should march the crew of his approaching captive into the company lines at the point of his bayonet.

He unslung his rifle, loaded it and fixed the bayonet. Then, assuming the "On Guard" position, he looked up once more at the machine, now only a few hundred feet above him; and he gave a gasp of horror.

On the underside of the wings, now plain to the view, were painted the familiar rings of red, white and blue. Eustace, even less skilled than his master, had brought down the wrong machine. Instead of saving a British airman from destruction Alf had only deprived him of a well-earned victory at the moment of triumph. The German, rejoicing at his incredible escape and marveling, no doubt, at his opponent's inexplicable collapse, was now out of sight and in safety above his own lines; while the Briton was just dropping ignominiously to earth, helpless in the grip of a muddle-headed spirit out of an Oriental fairy

tale.

Higgins stood rooted to the spot as the 'plane came to earth beside him; out of it climbed two R.F.C. officers, both puzzled and exceedingly angry. They subjected their machine to an exhaustive examination and then stared at each other blankly.

"Not a thing wrong, Tony. It's uncanny!"

"Uncanny!" The young pilot was almost weeping with mortification. "To have that chap von Hoffmeister in my hands—the chap who's been the thorn in our flesh this last month—and then be done in by—by a bally miracle. It's damnable!"

Alf's knees trembled beneath him. He came guiltily to attention, wondering if the airmen could suspect his complicity in the affair.

The pilot's feelings suddenly boiled over again.

"My God!" he said thickly, "I'd like to kill somebody for this!"

Unconsciously he fixed Alf with a baleful glare.

"I'm—I'm sorry, sir," quavered Private Higgins, losing his head completely.

The observer laughed mirthlessly.

"Well," he said to Alf. "It wasn't *your* fault, anyway. Come on, Tony, let's see if we can't find a mess somewhere. You'll feel better after a whisky. Not ..." he concluded, exploding in his turn, "that I don't think it's the rottenest bit of luck that ever happened."

"All right," said the pilot. "Here, you'll stand by the machine, will you? I'll tell 'em in the camp that I ordered you to."

"Yessir!" said Alf, saluting; and he thankfully watched them go towards the camp.

As soon as they were out of sight, Alf rubbed his button. The djinn appeared, wearing a self-satisfied smirk at the striking proof of his powers his new master had just received.

"What wouldst thou have? I am ready to obey thee as thy...."

"Cut out the song an' dance, yer blinkin' fool," said Alf fiercely. "See what you gone an' bin an' done. This 'ere's a British plane—savvy? I told yer to bring a Boche one—them what 'as the black crosses. I b'lieve yer a bally spy, I do. 'Ere, git out o' me sight!"

The djinn vanished in silence. The instant he was gone Alf began to regret the lengths to which his tongue had led him. How had he dared to speak so to a creature possessing unlimited powers? He began to feel cold with apprehension. What would happen next?

At this point he saw a tremendous commotion in the camp. Men poured out of the huts and stared skywards, gesticulating and shouting. Alf looked upwards and saw the cause of their excitement. Fully a dozen German aeroplanes were converging on Alf from different quarters of the sky, each one helpless in the grip of the same power that had brought the British machine to earth.

It was Eustace's wholesale Oriental method of making reparation. One by one the machines came to earth,

until all twelve were arranged in a neat row beside the original victim. The dazed German crews scrambled out, looking for somebody to whom to surrender; but first, as was their duty, they set fire to their machines. There was nobody to prevent them, for though several hundred British soldiers were on the way at the double, not one was on the spot.

Alf had fled in panic; he skulked in retirement until the excitement had died down; his one desire was not to be connected in anybody's mind with the extraordinary and inexplicable events of that afternoon.

When the German prisoners had been cleared away, and the normal routine had been restored, he returned to camp and displayed his button to C.S.M. French. Having received a grudging assent from that worthy, he drew his "bit o' black" from the quartermaster-sergeant, and draped it over his talisman. As he put the last stitch in place he made a mental resolve that it would be long before he would meddle again with a magic productive of such uncomfortable adventures.



CHAPTER IV

THE MISGUIDED ZEAL OF EUSTACE

The word "rest" as used at the front has been described as being purely a technical term, bearing no relation whatever to the other word of the same name. Certainly during the last fortnight of this particular period Alf Higgins and Bill Grant found cause to realize the truth of this description.

A new brigadier had just been appointed to command the Middlesex Fusiliers Brigade. He was an upstanding young giant of thirty, and the main tenets of his creed were fitness and efficiency. In pursuit of the latter he organized strenuous sham fights over miles of country, and he urged upon his colonels that only by encouraging athletic contests on a hitherto unheard of scale could they hope to attain the former.

Alf and Bill were no athletes, but they continued to play football with more vigor than skill until their platoon was knocked out of the battalion competition. They bore their defeat with stoicism, hoping that they would now be allowed to assume the much more accustomed and congenial rôle of spectators. Instead of this they found themselves (to their inexpressible indignation) called upon to sustain the battalion's honor in cross-country runs under the eye of that speechless but efficient officer Lieutenant Donaldson.

In the evenings, however, they were free to extract what amusement they could out of life. The pierrot troupe, without which no division at the front considered itself complete, played to packed houses every other night in the Y.M.C.A.; while a cinematograph show had been rigged up in a barn. Each day, also, a limited number of passes to Amiens entitled such as were favored of Fortune to a blissful day's taste of civilization.

To the officers, however, it seemed sometimes incredible that any of the men could patronize these delights at all.

"I believe," said Richards to Allen one evening, "that every man in this company must write to every relation, friend, acquaintance or business connection he has in Blighty seven times in the week, just to spite us!"

The company letters had just come in to be censored. Donaldson had gone to a Sports Committee meeting, and Shaw, as mess president, was in Amiens restocking the larder.

"Lord, what a pile!" said Allen, sitting down at the table and beginning his task. "It's lucky I've no letters of my own to write—or only a note."

He gave a sigh; the man at the front who has nobody in England to write to is not to be envied.

"I have, though," said Captain Richards. "My wife'll be thinking I'm dead if I don't write her a proper letter soon."

He also took a handful of letters and set to work.

"May I come in?" said a voice at the door. "Or are you too busy?"

"Come in, of course, major."

The second-in-command entered, glanced round and took in the situation.

"Don't let me interrupt you," he said politely. "I haven't come to see *you* at all, so don't flatter yourselves. I wanted to see Denis's *Sketch* and *Tatler*, that's all."

"On my bed, sir," said Allen.

"Thanks."

There was unbroken silence for some minutes. Then the major cast *The Tatler* from him with an exclamation of disgust.

"I wish," he said, "that that grinning little idiot would stop advertising herself for a bit. You can't pick up a picture-paper without seeing her selling things or dressing up or generally pushing herself into the limelight. She wants smacking."

Both men at the table looked up.

"Who's the grinning idiot in question, major?"

"Isobel FitzPeter. Here you are—a whole page of her and her bally bulldog, labeled 'A famous Beauty—and Friend.' Same photograph in *The Sketch*, called 'Beauty and the Beast'! It makes me sick!"

Allen suddenly got up and went out of the room without a word, very red in the face. Richards and Major Parker stared after him, the former very embarrassed, the latter simply surprised.

"What's the matter?" asked the major blankly.

"I expect poor old Denis felt he might have used language unbecoming your rank if he'd stayed. You see—don't let on to a soul, mind—he's most frightfully gone on the FitzPeter girl."

"Good God, Dickie, what have I said? D'you mean they're engaged or anything?"

"Oh, no. I don't believe she knows him at all. He used to play cricket at her father's place, and they were rather pals then, I believe. But since she's grown up, they've never met. But you know how it is out here. If I hadn't had my wife to think about, I'd have gone mad long ago. Denis doesn't seem to have many feminine belongings of his own, so he's simply installed this girl as a kind of goddess. He seems to live for the illustrated papers—simply devours them, and cuts out her picture. This is all rather confidential, major."

"Of course. Poor old chap. You know, Dickie, I do happen to know the lady. In peace time she was as nice a kid as you could want to meet. If Denis hasn't met her since then, I don't wonder at him, because she's really frightfully pretty. But her head has been utterly turned. She acts as parlor-maid once a fortnight in a hospital my sister runs in Kensington, and she's more hindrance than help, because she never arrives in time, and she's always got some footling reason for wanting to go early. But her photograph in V.A.D. uniform gets published about once a fortnight, usually headed 'Nursing the Wounded,' or, 'An Indefatigable War Worker'! The worst of it is she's got brains if she'd use them; only she won't. A spoilt, thoughtless little idiot, and as pretty as they make 'em. Poor old Denis."

At this point Allen returned and resumed his work without a word. The major fell silent. Richards cast about for some subject to cover the awkward break in the conversation.

"D'you know when we go back to the line, sir?" he asked at last.

"Not settled. End of the week, I think. Look here, I've interrupted you fellows quite enough. Give me some of those letters."

"Thanks awfully, sir. You're a sportsman."

By dinner time the pile was finished, and Allen had time to write his note.

"DEAR PEGGY," he wrote,—

"Just a line to tell you I'm still alive, and hoping to remain so. You might write to me when you've time. In great haste,

"Your affectionate cousin,
"DENIS.

"P.S. If you happen to see Miss FitzPeter, please give her my kind regards."

This missive he addressed to Lady Margaret Clowes, at an address in Mayfair. She was only a very distant cousin of Allen's, and there was, on the face of it, no particular reason why he should have written to her at all. The regularity with which he had recently done so, therefore, coupled with the unfailing manner in which the postscript contained a polite message to Isobel FitzPeter, had given away to Margaret the true state of affairs; and because she liked and admired her shy cousin, she had contrived to keep his name not too insistently, and yet quite firmly, before Isobel's mind. She had determined, also, that when next Allen should come home on leave, she would engineer a meeting between them.

If he had known this it would have filled him with joy, tempered with apprehension, for he was not blind to the fact that the Isobel he had known had developed into a new and rather formidable creature. She was now a public character, the last word in smartness, and sometimes rather a loud word at that. He felt that she was removed now to a sphere beyond his reach, for he was a very humble-minded person. Altogether, one way and another, he contrived to be acutely miserable when he had time to think about anything but his work, and he rather welcomed than otherwise the prospect of going back into the line.

In due course an operation order came through from Battalion Headquarters, setting forth in minutest detail the times at which officers' valises would be packed and sent to the transport, mess-boxes made ready, blankets tied into bundles and delivered to the quartermaster, billets cleaned and platoons ready to move. When the time came there was the usual air of hopeless confusion, the accustomed mutual recriminations between conflicting or overlapping authorities; and in the end—also as usual—the battalion marched out at the appointed hour, leaving behind it very little to show that it had ever been there.

The brigade was to take over the same part of the line it had last occupied; but in the three weeks' interval that had elapsed since they had been relieved, Hindenburg had carried out his famous "retirement according to plan," and our friends found themselves only just entering the shelled area about the point where, in the days of the Big Thaw, their front line had been.

The 5th Battalion this time moved straight up into the front line, where they were comparatively comfortable. The weather was still cold, but fine; the trenches—originally German property—had turned renegade and were now serving the British very efficiently against their old masters. The sector was still very quiet: to all appearance the enemy had gone away and left no address. Altogether things were very much pleasanter than last time up.

Alf, after his former fiasco, was no longer a "runner"; but his chum, Bill Grant, had been selected for this work, so that the two were no better off than last time, so far as being together was concerned. Alf felt lonely. None of the other men in his platoon took much interest in him. He wanted Bill's companionship—his contemptuous patronage of and his real affection for his slower-witted companion.

His loneliness increased daily, until it became acute; and at last one day, being on sentry-go in a bay all by himself, he bethought himself of his Button. His mates were snoring in a dug-out close by; no sign had been seen from the German trenches all day. He had strained his eyes across No-Man's-Land until he had begun to feel intolerably drowsy himself. If something did not happen soon, there was a danger that the officer or N.C.O. on duty might find him asleep at his post.

Eustace seemed to be his only chance.

He rubbed the Button.

"What wouldst thou have? I am ready...."

"Op it, quick!" was Alf's startling rejoinder.

Eustace, looking upset, complied. He was beginning to wonder whether he was being victimized. This new Master of his who gave incomprehensible orders and then seemed far from pleased when the orders were carried out, also seemed to have a taste for summoning him merely for the pleasure of seeing him vanish.

But Alf had a better reason than this. He had heard voices further along the trench. A moment after Eustace had disappeared, Lieutenant Shaw came round the traverse with the N.C.O. on duty, in the course of his tour of inspection along the "C" Company front.

"Alone, Higgins?" asked the officer, with a hint of surprise in his voice.

"Yessir."

"I thought I heard voices."

"Only me 'ummin', sir."

"I see. All quiet?"

"Yessir! Nothin' doin' at all!"

"Well"—Second-Lieutenant Shaw had not yet shed his youthful pride at being in the thick of things, and puffed himself out a little and became most impressive—"you want to keep an extra sharp look-out from now until we stand-to at dusk. We've an idea that something's going to happen. Probably Fritz will try a raid. This quiet is very suspicious."

He passed on with the sergeant. As soon as he was well out of earshot, Alf recalled the spirit, who looked so hurt that his Master felt that an apology was due to him.

"Sorry, Eustace, but if the orficer 'ad seen you talkin' to me, there'd 'ave been trouble. Civilians ain't allowed in the trenches, 'cept with a special pass; so when anybody comes, you must 'op it without waitin' for orders. See?"

Eustace bowed gravely.

"Now, look 'ere," continued Alf, gazing earnestly over the parapet as he spoke, "I just bin thinkin' about yer. If you could only get out o' this 'abit o' practical jokin' an' so on, you might be quite a useful sort o' feller. Now, tell me fair, what can you do? I don't mean larkin' with airyplanes, but serious things."

"My Lord hath but to command."

"Yes, it's easy enough to say that, but I can't think o' things.... Now, s'posin' ... that is.... Look 'ere, what I really want is something to keep me safe if the blighted Boche comes over. Now, what can you show me?"

"Master, I comprehend not thy speech."

"Lumme, I speak plain enough English, I 'ope. I say, what I want is something to keep me safe if the Boche comes over. The Boche, you know! Fritz! The 'Un! The fellers across there, you blinkin' image! The Germans!"

"My Lord desires protection from his enemies."

"That's better, Eustace. Think it out, and you'll get there in time."

"It shall be so. Behold!"

An object appeared in the Spirit's hand.

"Behold, O Lord of Might, the helmet of invisibility. Clad in this thou canst be seen of no mortal eye. So mayest thou move among the hosts of the enemy, seeing all, yet seen of none."

"By gum!" commented Alf, much impressed, "that's a bit of all right. Shouldn't mind doing daylight patrols with that on. Knocks a tin 'at all to blazes."

He pondered a moment and began to see the disadvantages of the idea.

"The trouble is," he explained, "the orficer seems to think the 'osts of the enemy is goin' to move about *us* just now. Where should I be then? They'd all think I'd 'ad the wind up and 'opped it. An' then, 'ow about shell-fire? Just bein' invisible won't stop no Perishin' Percies. What I want is something—well, you know what I mean. Can't you get me something to keep off the bullets?"

"Verily that can I," said Eustace, with an air suggesting that Alf was simply wasting his time with niggling details. "Just such a thing as thou desirest was aforetime in the treasury of the great King Uz; my spirits shall procure it for thee. Whoso weareth this can come to no hurt through weapons forged by man."

"That's the ticket, if Mr. What's-'is-name won't be wanting it for 'isself. 'E's probably 'elpin' with this 'ere War somewhere or other."

"Uz hath been dead these many cycles—upon him be peace!" returned Eustace. He raised his hand, and, with an awesome clang, a cumbrous suit of armor, complete in every detail, fell into the trench. The djinn wore an expression of mild triumph. This time, he seemed to think, even this strange new master of his must be satisfied. He was not in the least prepared for Alf's reception of his performance.

"Take it away," shrieked Private Higgins, in an agony at the idea of having to explain away such a phenomenon to his superiors. "Take it away, you blinkin' fool, and 'op it yerself. What the blazes d'you think yer doin'? 'Ere, get out of it, quick. Somebody's comin'."

Somebody was.

The whole of Number Nine Platoon, awakened from its slumbers, came tumbling out of its dug-outs, adjusting its gas masks as it came. A horrible ghoul, dimly recognizable through the windows of its respirator as Sergeant Lees, came and gibbered at Alf.

"What's up, sergeant?" asked Alf in amazement.

"Gas!" replied the sergeant, removing his mouthpiece for a moment in order to speak more clearly. "Why the 'ell ain't you got yer mask on? Didn't you 'ear the gong?"

Higgins realized with horror what had happened. The clang of the armor had been mistaken for a gas-gong by a sentry in the next bay, who had promptly given the alarm. He tried feebly to straighten matters out; but it was too late now. The word had spread; the Boche, seeing the commotion in our lines, had sprung to arms; and both armies stood tense, each convinced that the other was going to make a surprise attack. A heavy fusillade with rifles and machine guns, rifle grenades and trench mortars began, and in its turn

spread along the lines with great swiftness. Then somebody put up an S.O.S. flare, and the guns, which had only been waiting for this invitation, joined in. For the next few minutes the Messina earthquake or an eruption of Vesuvius would have been welcomed as quiet interludes by Richards, Allen & Co.

Further back, astonished Staff-Officers were springing to the telephone to demand by what right this intense but unauthorized warfare was taking place, and what it was all about, anyway. Further back still, troops in rest billets looked up from their magazines or their letters home and thanked Heaven that they were not in the shoes of the poor blighters in the line.

Then both sides seemed to discover that nothing much was happening after all, and the whole thing died away as suddenly as it had begun. But that night the sentries were doubled, and as Higgins sulkily performed his extra hours of duty, his feelings towards his well-meaning but tactless familiar were such that he nearly brought his adventures to an untimely close by cutting off the Button and flinging it over the parapet.



CHAPTER V

EUSTACE FETCHES BEER

After this sudden burst of excitement had died away, a watchful calm descended on the front line. "C" Company were relieved next day by "B" Company, and went into close support. Here they were in a zone more subjected to shell-fire than in the front line itself; but this worried them very little, as for the most part they spent their four days snugly in dug-outs, listening to the occasional dull thud caused by an explosion up above, and waiting in readiness to turn out at any moment in the event of a raid. One or two parties were called out to carry rations up to "B" Company, but the only casualty was a man who was hit in the arm by a shell-splinter, and departed for "Blighty" openly exulting in his good fortune.

On the fourth day the battalion was relieved and went back into Brigade Reserve. Here they were to stay for eight days while the battalion in the line completed its duty. What might happen after that was a matter for speculation, known only to Providence—and possibly (though not very probably) the Staff. Anyhow, the events of so dim and distant a future were a matter of supreme indifference to the rank and file. It was enough for them that for a week or so at any rate they would have deep, warm dug-outs, well back from the line.

As soon as the company settled in, Bill Grant returned to the platoon, his services as extra runner being no longer required. Alf would have welcomed him under any circumstances; but on this occasion he was specially glad to have his pal back again. He was worried and needed advice. He had, in fact, decided to take Bill into his confidence on the subject of Eustace, and was now simply waiting for an opportunity of a private and uninterrupted conversation with him. A *tête-à-tête*, especially if it entails a practical demonstration of oriental magic, is not the easiest thing on earth for two Tommies in the forward area to arrange.

A kindly Fate assisted them, however. The particular system of trenches they were inhabiting, like all systems constructed by that industrious mole, the Boche, was honeycombed with deep dug-outs—far more than the 5th Battalion could possibly use. It occurred to the two warriors that it would be an excellent plan to find a disused and secluded specimen for their own private use. In such a haven Alf could unfold his portentous secret without fear of interruption, while Bill, who objected on principle to being put on working parties and fatigues, felt that the best safeguard against inclusion in these treats was an alibi. After a search they discovered a snug retreat in which they intended to spend as much of their spare time as possible, returning to their mates only at meal-times and other occasions when their absence might be noticed.

The afternoon was pleasantly mild, and for the first time the air seemed to contain a hint of Spring. Instead of retiring underground they sat in the entrance of their new home quietly smoking. As soon as their pipes were well alight, Alf broached the subject which was weighing so heavily on his mind.

"Bill," he asked. "D'yer believe in spirits?"

"Prefer beer."

"Not them sort o' spirits, I don't mean. I mean spooks. D'yer believe in spooks, Bill?"

"People what sees spooks," said Bill dogmatically, "is liars, or boozed."

Grant's attitude was unpromising, but Alf was determined to persevere.

"What would yer say if I told yer I'd seen a spook, Bill?" he demanded.

"I'd say you'd 'ad a drop too much," was the uncompromising reply.

"An' if I saw it when I 'adn't 'ad a drop at all?"

Bill turned and regarded him.

"Look 'ere, Alf 'Iggins," he remarked acidly. "Yer worse'n a bloomin' kid f'r asking yer blighted silly questions. If you got anything to say, for 'Eaven's sake spit it out an' 'ave done with it."

Thus adjured, Alf plunged into his story, omitting only his adventure with the aeroplanes, which he considered would be safer hidden even from Bill.

That gentleman heard him to the end without comment.

"I b'lieve it's up to me to take yer to the M.O.," he said at last seriously.

Alf was annoyed.

"Don't be a idjit. This is a *real* spook, I tell yer!"

"Garn! You bin sleepin' on yer back an' dreamt it all. Why, this 'ere Aladdin you talk about—there never was no sich feller. 'E's just a bloke in a fairy story."

"Dreamt it!" repeated Alf indignantly. "Dream be blowed. I couldn't dream meself pink all over, could I?"

"No, but you could catch scarlet fever an' 'ave delirious trimmings on top of it," said Bill caustically. "But you can't make me see this blessed spook o' yours, any'ow."

This was a direct challenge, and Alf rubbed his Button. Bill's tin hat fell off.

"Lor'!" he said, sitting up straight.

"What wouldst thou have?" enquired Eustace. "I am ready to obey thee as thy slave...."

"Op it," replied Alf feebly. He had forgotten to think out any excuse for summoning the djinn, and could think of nothing else to say. Eustace, his opinion of Alf obviously lower than ever, disappeared.

"Lumme!" said Bill. He smoked in silence for some minutes, deep in thought.

"Where the 'ell does 'e come from, and what does 'e do?" he asked at length.

"Oo?"

"That spook, o' course."

"I dunno. I rubs me Button, an' 'e bounces in an' asks for orders. 'Alf the time I don't want 'im at all. An' if I do tell 'im to do things, 'e gets 'em all wrong. 'E don't seem to lave no common sense, some'ow."

Bill was following out some train of thought.

"Look 'ere, Alf," he said. "What can you remember about this feller Aladdin? What 'appened to 'im in the panto?"

Alf considered.

"There was a bloke sang something about a rose growin' in a garden. Pathetic it was," he announced after deep thought.

"Blighted fool!" commented Bill with pardonable heat. "I don't mean *that*. What 'appened to this chap, Aladdin, 'isself?"

"Oh, 'im! A bloomin' girl, 'e was, in the pantomime. I didn't take much notice what 'appened to 'im—married some one, I think."

"Yes, but 'oo?" asked Bill, with an air of playing his trump card.

"I dunno. Princess Something."

"That's what I remember. An' they 'ad palaces, an' jools, an' money, an' everything. An' 'ow did they get 'em, eh?"

"I dunno."

Alf was really being very dense. Bill tapped him impressively on the arm.

"Your spook brought 'em," he said.

"Eustace?"

"That what you call 'im? Yes, 'im."

They gazed at each other, Bill in triumph. Alf in astonishment; at last the latter found his voice.

"I never thought o' that kind o' thing!" he said.

"No, you're a proper thick-'ed," retorted Grant unkindly. "Now, you send for 'im an' make 'im do something useful for a change."

"What shall it be?"

"Mine," replied Bill, without hesitation, "is beer. Always was. An' mind, none o' that Govermint muck neither. Something with a bit o' body in it."

"Send '*im* for *beer*?" whispered Alf in horror. He could not have looked more shocked if Bill had suggested sending the sergeant-major to buy him a paper. He had an instinctive feeling that Eustace was one to do things on a grand scale, and would resent being employed as a mere potman. He rubbed his Button nervously, and avoided Eustace's eye.

"Is it my Lord's desire that his servant should hop it?" asked the spirit, abandoning his usual formula. He was, he felt, just beginning to settle down to his new master's ways.

"No," said Alf, fixing his eyes on vacancy. "Bring me two beers, please, Eustace."

"Two biers, O possessor of wisdom?" repeated the djinn, wondering if his startled ears could have heard

aright.

"Yes. Two beers, I said. And 'urry up."

Eustace bowed low, muttered "Thy wish is my command," and vanished. Almost immediately afterwards, with a dull thud apiece, two cumbersome and curiously carved stone sarcophagi fell side by side into the trench, which they blocked completely. Alf and Bill gazed open-mouthed first at the two sepulchers and then at one another.

"What the 'ell's this mean?" asked Bill at last.

Alf, mortified beyond measure at the failure of his attempt to impress his pal, gave a resigned gesture.

"What did I tell yer?" he asked. "That's the kind o' thing 'e's always doin'! No common sense."

"Well, p'raps 'e misunderstood yer. P'raps 'e thought you wanted...."

"Thought I wanted! Didn't I speak plain English? Ain't 'beer' plain enough for 'im? 'Ow can 'e 'ave misunderstood 'beer'?"

"Well, p'raps these 'ere things are called 'beer' in 'is language."

Alf snorted.

"I ask yer, do they look like it? No, it's just 'is fat-'eaded way."

He rubbed his Button fiercely.

"Take these blinkin' egg-boxes away, Eustace," he said. "An' pull yerself together. I asked yer for beer—stuff what you drinks, savvy?"

He made a gesture of drinking. The djinn, with a sudden light of comprehension in his face, bowed and vanished with the sarcophagi, to reappear a moment later with an enormous tray on his head. From this he proceeded to deal out a great number of covered metal plates, exactly as a conjurer produces strange objects from a top hat. He set them down in the trench, and with a final flourish brought forth an enormous silver flagon and two heavily chased goblets. These he placed with the other things, and disappeared.

"Ah!" said Bill, smacking his lips in anticipation. "This looks more like it. Bit 'olesale in 'is ways, ain't 'e? Seems to take us for the Lord Mayor's Banquet."

He lifted the cover from one of the plates and smelt the contents.

"Fish o' some kind," he said dubiously. "Smells funny. Never could stand them foreign messes."

Alf did likewise to another dish.

"Muck," he said succinctly. "Give me good ole roast beef an' mutton every time. I likes to know what I'm eatin', I do. Pour the drink out, Bill."

Thus adjured, Bill filled the goblets and passed one to Alf.

"Good 'ealth!"

"Good 'ealth!" chorused both warriors. Their heads went back in unison; also in unison, they gave a

tremendous splutter of disgust.

"My Gawd!" said Alf thickly, "I'm poisoned! What the 'ell is it?"

"Tastes like a mixture of 'oney an' ink, with a dash o' chlorate o' lime," said Bill, apparently trying to shake the remains of the nauseous mixture from the roof of his mouth. "'Ere, 'ave that blinkin' spook o' yours back again an' tell 'im orf."

Once more Alf rubbed the button and summoned his familiar.

"What wouldst thou have," said Eustace, appearing promptly, but with a trace of resentment in his face, "I am ready...."

"Stow it!" said Alf. "You're a lot *too* ready, seems to me. Why d'yer want to bring us all this bloomin' lay-out? I didn't order no food, an' if I 'ad I wouldn't 'ave meant un'oly messes like that. You're too blinkin' 'olesale in yer ways. Take it all away. An' as for drink, you've 'arf poisoned us with the muck you've brought."

"Lord of might," said Eustace. "These are of the choicest of the meats and the wines of Arabia."

"Gawd 'elp Arabia, then. An' I asked for beer, B-E-A-R, beer. D'yer mean to say they don't 'ave it in Arabia?"

Eustace shook his head.

"Poor blighters!" put in Bill. "No wonder they're 'eathens."

"Now, look 'ere, Eustace," said Alf instructively. "Beer is—er—beer is—well, it's.... I say, Bill, 'ow the 'ell can yer explain beer to any one as doesn't know what it is?"

"Well," said Bill. "It's brown stuff, made from 'ops an' malt an' such, an' you get it in Blighty—that's England, you savvy—in barrels. Just you 'op over there, an' you'll see. Or any one'll tell you."

This lucid explanation sufficed Eustace, for this time he disappeared with the scorned banquet, and returned in a twinkling with two foaming tankards.

Alf and Bill smelt the contents with grave suspicion, which changed at once to a happy foaming smile apiece.

"That's the goods!" said Alf.

"Ah!" said Bill, smacking his lips with deep satisfaction. "Ole Aladdin knew a thing or two, 'e did. Let's 'ave another o' the same an' drink 'is 'ealth."

"No, Bill. It'll 'urt ole Eustace' feelings. If you was a spook what could build palaces an' sich in 'arf a tick, would *you* like to 'ave to go all the way to 'ell for two bloomin' pints? Besides we've kept 'im on the go pretty fair as it is."

"Make it 'ogs'eds, then."

But Alf was adamant.

"Very well, don't then," said Grant with sudden asperity. "But if yer won't oblige a pal in a little thing like

that, w'y don't yer get on with it an' *do* something? Fat lot o' good you done so far with yer pet devil! W'y, yer mighter stopped the 'ole war by now."

"Might I? 'Ow?"

"Easy enough. All you gotter do is to send ole Eustace over to fetch the Kaiser 'ere, an' there yer are! Can't yer see it in all the papers—'Private Alf 'Iggins, V.C.—The 'ero as captured the Kaiser'?"

"Yes, I see meself gettin' it in the neck. I 'ope I knows my place better'n to go monkeyin' with kings.... Look out, the orficers!"

It was too late for them to gain the sanctuary of their dug-out, and they rose awkwardly to their feet as Shaw and Donaldson came along the trench. They had been out on an exploring expedition. Bill and Alf, seeing that neither Richards nor Allen was present, had hopes that they would not attract attention; but Donaldson, for all his sleepy appearance, was quick of eye.

"What's that in your hand, Grant?" he asked.

Bill, cursing inwardly the prying spirit to which he considered the commissioned ranks much too prone, reluctantly drew from behind him the tankard from which he had been drinking. Higgins did likewise, and the officers took one each.

"How awfully interesting," said Shaw. "Where did you find these, Grant?"

"In one of these 'ere dug-outs, sir."

"By Jove, Don!" Shaw turned to his companion. "Fritz does love to do himself well!"

He broke off in surprise. Donaldson had suddenly thrown off his air of boredom and was examining his tankard with an alert eye.

"Must be looted stuff," he said. "I'm a bit of an expert in these things. That's ancient oriental work, worth quite a bit."

"Excuse me, sir," put in Bill suavely. "But if this 'ere is any good to you as a souvenir, I don't set no partickler store by it."

"Nor me, sir," agreed Alf.

"Want to sell?"

"If you like, sir."

"Can't afford it. I'm not going to do you in. These mugs are probably worth a good bit."

"That's all right, sir. We'd much rather 'ave ten francs apiece now, sir. We didn't neither of us get much last time we 'ad a pay."

"Whose fault was that?" asked Shaw.

"I'll give you," Donaldson said, "twenty francs each—all I can manage."

"Thank you, sir."

"And mind, I expect to see some of this sent home when I censor the letters. I wouldn't give you so much all at once if we were in a place where we could get beer——"

"Aren't we, though," put in Shaw, pointing to a drop of amber liquid in the tankard he held. "Smell that!"

Donaldson sniffed.

"Beer, and good beer at that," he pronounced. He looked enquiringly at the two Tommies. Alf gave himself up for lost, but not so Bill.

"Yes, sir," he said easily. "I noticed that meself."

"I dare say," answered Donaldson grimly. "The point is, can you explain it?"

Bill's face grew preternaturally innocent.

"I expect, sir, Fritz left the mugs behind 'im in the Big Frost, sir, an' the drops got froze in. Prob'ly thawed again with the warmth of our 'ands."

Donaldson eyed the propounder of this ingenious theory gravely.

"Probably," he agreed. And relapsing into his customary taciturnity, he strode off down the trench with his two mugs, little Shaw trotting behind, still lost in wonder at the sudden discovery of an artistic side in old Don.

"'E don't believe yer," said Alf apprehensively.

"'Course not. 'E's no fool, isn't Don, for all 'e looks 'arf asleep. But 'e's a sport, an' 'e likes a good lie. You'll see, 'e'll say no more about it. Let's 'ave another."

Alf, whose throat was parched with all he had been through, this time let no consideration for the feelings of Eustace deter him.



CHAPTER VI

ISOBEL'S "DREAM"

For the next day or two Alf found life very hard. Bill's appetite for beer increased by geometrical progression; and Eustace's possible indignation at being constantly summoned merely to supply Private Grant with large bitters filled Alf with the liveliest apprehension. He felt that Bill—who, under the influence of unlimited liquor, was losing his moral sense—was not playing the game. He even descended to the level of intimidating Higgins, when he declared himself unprepared to risk the djinn's displeasure any longer, by the use of threats.

"Stop me beer, will yer?" said Grant. "Very well, then. We'll just see what the R.S.M. 'as to say about yer goin's on. 'E won't 'arf tell yer orf, I don't think!"

The regimental sergeant-major is *ex officio* the most terrible individual of a battalion from the point of view of the private soldier. True, the colonel is greater than he, in that from that officer the R.S.M. takes his orders; but the colonel—so far as Higgins and his peers were concerned—was a mere abstraction. The R.S.M. overshadowed him much as, in the eyes of unimaginative heathens, the priest overshadows the deity whose minister he is.

The R.S.M. of the 5th Middlesex Fusiliers, too, was a martinet of the most approved Regular Army type. His horizon was bounded on the one side by King's Regulations and on the other by the Manual of Military Law; and if he should become aware that a private of his battalion was so lost to the meaning of military discipline as to keep an unauthorized familiar spirit, the only possible result would be an explosion of wrath too terrible even to contemplate. Of this threat, therefore, Bill Grant made shameless use; and day by day he became more bibulous, Eustace more displeased, and Alf more miserable.

Alf racked his rather inadequate brains in the hope that Necessity would acknowledge her reputed offspring, Invention, and find him a way out of his troubles. But in the end Bill brought about his own undoing. He had a lively and, in his cups, a lurid imagination; and by giving it too free rein, he suggested to Alf a counter-threat.

"Ow'd it be, ole f'ler," said Bill thickly, on the second day, after having kept Eustace almost continuously employed for several hours, "to 'ave old Eustish up again 'n tell 'im to turn the R.Esh.M. into a rhinosherush?"

To Alf this remark seemed not so much humorous as blasphemous; but it was also most illuminating. It opened his eyes to an aspect of his new powers which, left to himself, he would never have thought of.

"Look 'ere, Bill Grant!" he said, in suddenly confident tones. "That'll be about enough from you, see? Not another drop o' beer do you get till I says so. 'E's *my* spook, Eustace is; an' if I 'as any more o' yer nonsense I'll take an' tell 'im to change *you* into something. 'Ow'd yer like to be a—a transport mule, eh?"

Bill, suddenly smitten into something approaching sobriety, had no word to say. Alf, following up his advantage, continued his harangue.

"Not one drop more do yer get," he reiterated. "Eustace 'as been gettin' that fed up, I've been expectin' 'im to give me a month's notice any minute. An' nice we'd look if 'e started playin' monkey tricks on 'is own.

All this beer business, you know; it ain't what 'e's been brought up to."

"'E can't do nothin', not without you tells 'im," said Bill, with a certainty he was far from feeling.

"Ah, an' 'ow do we know that? 'E might break loose an' then where'd we be? I've fair got the wind up, I tell yer. What we wanted to do is to 'umor the blighter."

"'Ow?"

"I dunno. 'Ow'd it be to give 'im something to do as 'e'd really enjoy—a decent job just to put 'im in a good temper again?"

"Buildin' palaces was 'is old line," mused Bill.

"Aye, but buildin' palaces 'ere would be just a blighted waste o' time," replied Alf, with strong common sense. "Can't you think o' nothin' else?"

Bill pondered deeply.

"Tell 'im," he suggested at last, "to bring us a girl. I'm fair sick for the sight of a pretty face."

"Dunno if that's much good. 'E mayn't care for females."

"Well, it is part of 'is peace-time job, anyway. Don't I tell yer 'e brought Aladdin a princess?"

"I'll try it. Any'ow, it'll be a change for 'im arter all that beer."

Eustace, it was obvious, approved of the idea. This new command was completely in accord with his ancient tradition.

"A maid fair as the dawn, great Master! It shall be so!" he said.

"Yes, and"—Alf suddenly remembered a recent abortive attempt to dally with a pretty French girl in an estaminet, and determined to run no further risks—"a English one."

"'Ere," put in Bill. "Make it two."

But the djinn had vanished.

"All right, Bill," Higgins said soothingly. "We'll send 'im back for one for you. Wonder what 'e'll bring for me—one of the 'Ippodrome chorus, I 'ope."

* * * * *

Lady Margaret Clowes and Isobel FitzPeter were walking together along the edge of the Row in Hyde Park. Margaret was wearing the workman-like, if unbeautiful, Red Cross uniform, for she was a hard-working V.A.D. at a private hospital. Isobel was a dainty vision, rivaling the lilies of the field.

"Did I tell you I'd had another letter from my cousin at the front?" asked Margaret.

"Which one?"

"Denis. Denis Allen. He sent you his kind regards. He's a nice boy. Do you remember him?"

"Hardly at all. He played cricket at Dunwater once or twice when I was a child. Really, Peggy, I'm getting

fed up with men. Since those ridiculous papers took to publishing my photograph, every silly boy I've ever spoken to seems to want me to write to him."

"Why do you let them do it?" asked Margaret.

"I can't stop them writing to me, if they know my address."

"The papers, I mean. It's all very well calling them ridiculous, but you know that you give them every assistance."

"Rubbish!" Isobel's voice sounded scornful, but a sudden blush gave her away. Margaret, who had just come off duty after an unusually exacting spell, was rather out of patience with field-lilies. She returned to the attack.

"It isn't rubbish. And I don't think you ought to talk about the boys who write to you as you do. You make me very angry. After all, they are risking their lives, which is more than you can say."

"Well, how can I? I've often told you I'd love to go to the front," Isobel protested.

"Yes—in a spirit of vulgar curiosity, I suppose, just to have a look round. Iso, I could shake you, you're so self-satisfied, and so futile."

"Well, I think you're horribly rude. If you can't be more amusing, I'm going home. I've my part to learn for...."

"Oh—look! there's a horse bolting!" interrupted Margaret. She ran to the railings and watched breathlessly, while the mounted policeman on duty, who seemed to regard the whole affair as being in the day's work, caught the runaway and averted what might have been a very nasty accident. When she turned to speak to her companion, Isobel was no longer there.

"Temper!" thought Margaret to herself. "I suppose I was rather cross—but really Isobel's enough to try a saint sometimes. She must have gone off pretty quickly, too. However...."

Margaret was quite undisturbed—even a little amused at her friend's departure. She and Isobel often had fierce little quarrels, but these never had any lasting effect on their friendship. She would see Isobel tomorrow, and the whole thing would be forgotten. For the present, she continued her walk alone.

An old gentleman sitting on a seat near by, who had chanced to be looking at Isobel at the moment when Eustace (having awarded her the prize in his private beauty competition) swooped down and carried her off, was the only actual spectator of her disappearance. Doubting the evidence of his senses, he waited anxiously until Margaret should find out what had happened; he looked for her to scream or faint, or show her horror by some emotional upheaval; when she simply walked on as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, he was smitten with panic. He dashed home and went straight to bed.

* * * * *

Isobel's surprise and alarm when she found herself unexpectedly face to face with two tin-hatted and unwashed Tommies in a subterranean cavern, lit only by a feeble gleam of daylight from the roof, was obvious; but she was too well bred to allow her emotions to master her. For a moment, conscious thought seemed to be suspended in her. Then, as the objects about her took shape, she decided that she must be dreaming.

At once all sense of fear left her. If it was only a dream, she argued to herself, it could not matter what happened to her. She waited with a kind of amused expectancy to see what turn events would take.

Alf and Bill, on the other hand, were not a little disturbed. They had realized at once that Eustace, in his ignorance, had committed an awful social solecism. Even the resourceful Bill's imagination boggled at the idea of explaining to this dainty vision how she came to be in her present surroundings. They stood before her, embarrassed and tongue-tied. Alf thought of recalling the djinn and telling him to take her straight back; but his very real and increasing fear of offending his familiar forbade. Besides, his visitor was very lovely, and filled his jaded masculine eye with a lively sense of satisfaction.

After a while the silence became oppressive and Isobel spoke.

"Where am I?" she asked. "Who are you?"

Bill, who had been making a surreptitious and feline toilet in the gloomy recesses of the dug-out, stepped forward and saluted.

"Don't be frightened, miss," he said soothingly, "but this 'ere's a dug-out in France, on the Western Front."

"That proves it," said Isobel to herself, with a certain satisfaction. "It *is* just a vivid dream. Perhaps it's telepathy or levitation or something. Anyway, the great point to remember is that I'm not really here at all."

The two men watched her anxiously. Both had expected her to be terrified at the news. Her air of unruffled serenity alarmed them, because neither could understand it.

"Now let me see," she continued her train of thought—"a few minutes ago, I was in the Park with Peggy—but perhaps I dreamt that, too. In fact I must have.... I don't remember going to bed, though.... Oh, well, it's no good worrying, it'll be all right when I wake up. A dug-out?" She echoed Bill's words uncertainly.

"Yes, miss. I'm very sorry, miss. If you please, it's all a mistake. We didn't mean no 'arm. If you'll just wait a minute, we'll send you back again to London quite all...."

But Isobel's usual spirit returned to her at this point. Whether this was dream or miracle, she determined to see it through.

"Send me back?" she said. "No, indeed you shan't! I've always longed to see the front. They won't let me in real life, and now you're trying to spoil it in a dream. If you only knew how I've tried to get leave to come over! It's too absolutely divine for anything—I wouldn't miss it for worlds. And I'm sure you'll be very kind and show me round, Mr...."

"'Iggins—Private Alfred 'Iggins, 5th Middlesex Fusiliers. An' this is me pal, Private Grant."

"Pleasetermeacher!" mumbled Bill, saluting.

"Well, you will, won't you?" Isobel smiled at them suddenly and beseechingly. Alf capitulated.

"'Appy to, miss," replied the infatuated youth. "What is it you wants to see?"

"Everything. I want to see just how you live and what you do. I want to see a shell burst, and—oh, everything."

"Better not bother with shells, miss," said Bill grimly; "one might 'it you."

"Oh, but that doesn't matter in a dream! Is this the way up?"

She climbed up the steep and difficult staircase, gallantly assisted by Alf. Bill followed gloomily, his mind busy with wondering first what would happen if a stray long-distance shell did injure Isobel, and second what Sergeant Lees or any of his superiors would say if he saw them.

The same thought struck Alf as they reached the trench above.

"Company 'Edquarters is up there," he said, with a jerk of the thumb. "We'd best go the other way."

Isobel, making shameless play with her eyes, laid a hand for one moment on Alf's arm.

"What is a Company Headquarters?" she asked. "I want to see it."

A subtle, faint perfume reached Alf's nostrils and thrilled him all through. Now that she was in the full light of day, he could take in her exquisite quality. Her clothes, though obviously expensive, were too plain to suit Bill's untutored eye, but Alf, possessing by some queer freak of nature an unexpectedly true taste, saw in her the apotheosis of all that was most admirable in women. By all the laws of probability his tastes should have been for bright colors and nodding feathers, but such decorations left him cold, while this girl struck him dumb. She was simply the embodiment of his ideal.

"Now I'm here," she went on, "I want to see for myself just what you poor men have to put up with. How awful it must be to live in a trench like this. And can't you show me a German?"

She smiled up into Alf's face.

That smile galvanized him as before, into a display of rash gallantry.

"So you shall, miss," he said. "Just step along the trench 'ere, and we'll show you all we can."

Isobel surveyed the trench doubtfully and then looked down at her delicately shod feet.

"Couldn't we walk along the top?" she asked. "It all seems so quiet and peaceful—surely there'd be no danger. We must be a long way from the Germans, aren't we?"

"It's not Fritz, miss," interposed Bill earnestly. "It's our sergeant. 'E mustn't see us with you. A fair terror, 'e is."

"Oh," said Isobel easily, feeling that she could deal with these dream-people of hers as she pleased. "I'll see you don't get into trouble. This is *such* an opportunity—I mustn't waste it ... here's a flight of steps, if you'll give me your hand again and...."

She reached the top and her voice ceased as suddenly and uncannily as a voice ceases when it is cut off in the middle of a word on the telephone. She stood staring dumbly across the old No-Man's-Land, making in her dainty furs the strangest picture that battle-scarred strip of land had seen. Alf and Bill, one on each side of her, gazed, too.

"There ain't much to see 'ere, I'm afraid, miss," said the latter apologetically. According to his lights, Bill spoke the truth. To his accustomed eyes there was nothing to be seen worthy of special mention; but to Isobel—pitch-forked straight from her sheltered, mindless life into the very heart of the battle area—it was far otherwise.

Her first feeling was that her dream had suddenly turned to horrible nightmare. Surely nothing but

distorted fancy could have produced the scene before her eyes! It was as though the earth had been some stricken monster, which had stiffened into death in the very midst of the maddened writhings of its last agony. For the most part it was a land without landmarks—a land featureless, but torn and tortured, poisoned and pulverized, where the eye could find no certain resting-place and the mind no relief. On every side lay the same desolate waste, pockmarked with shell-holes, each of which was half filled with stagnant and stinking water, on the surface of which was an oozing and fetid scum. Here and there the ragged remains of a barbed-wire entanglement stood out above the general welter; here and there—but very rarely—a few scattered stones indicated where once had stood a cottage; here and there fluttered decayed rags of blue or khaki or field-gray.... Cartridge-cases, bits of equipment, bully-beef tins—all kinds of abandoned rubbish were scattered about.

On the right ran the main road—the one feature of the whole pitiful panorama which still retained some individuality. Once it had been famous for its avenue of tall trees. Those trees still flanked the roadway, but now the tallest of them was a ravaged stump standing a bare four feet above the ground, and the same gun-fire that had smitten them down had smashed the road itself into a sickly yellow pulp.

Once, no doubt, the road had run between fields green with grass or young corn; but now it seemed to Isobel beyond imagining that life could ever again come near to it. Even the vilest weed might shudder to grow on earth's dead body, mangled and corrupted and shamefully exposed....

Alf's voice broke the silence.

"It's a bit dull 'ere, miss," he said, with cheerful bathos. "There ain't much to show yer. But see yon mound over there on the left? That was a church once, that was. But you can 'unt all day and never find nothing of the buildin', all except the church bell;—on'y it's too far to walk in them boots. One of our C.T.'s—communication trenches, I should say—runs right underneath it."

Isobel gave no answer, unless a sound something between a gulp and a sob can be so described. Depths seemed to be stirring in her nature that she had not hitherto been conscious of possessing. She felt mean and small and bitterly humbled. She had desired to see the front out of mere heedless curiosity, as a child might wish to visit a slaughter-house. She had had her desire, and her eyes had seen unimaginable horrors—horrors which had become so much a commonplace to the men who passed their lives in this shambles that they apologized for its lack of greater horrors. Compared with what they had seen, there was "nothing much" here for her curious eye. Only a strip of ground fought over a month before—its dead buried, its wounded carried away to a smiling land where such as she were flattered and praised in the public press because out of their useless lives they deigned to devote an occasional hour to those same wounded.

A sudden horror came over her lest she should see a dead man. She covered her eyes with her hands and gave a convulsive shudder.

"Don't—don't take me over there!" she said, and climbed down the steps again into the trench.

Bill and Alf, much concerned to understand what could possibly have upset their visitor, were on the point of following, when there was a sound of squelching mud, and a figure appeared round the angle of the trench.

"Lumme!" said Bill's voice in an appalled whisper. "The orficer!" With one accord the two Tommies turned and fled as their platoon commander approached.

Lieutenant Allen had been tramping about all the afternoon, reconnoitering the approaches to the front line

in case of trouble. Muddy and hungry and dog-tired, he was now plodding mechanically back to his hole in the ground, while his thoughts wandered vaguely and wistfully to home and his people—and Isobel. At the sound of Bill's whisper he looked up and stopped dead. Clearly his nerves must be beginning to give way, for he seemed to see the subject of his thoughts standing before him in the trench.

"My God!" he exclaimed—"Isobel!"

She stared at the muddy figure before her for a long moment. Then recognition dawned slowly in her eyes.

"You!" she said at last, and her voice seemed to Allen to hold in it all that he most longed for in the world.

"Isobel! am I mad or dreaming?"

"Oh," she cried, with a sob—"it's a dream. It must be a dream. If it isn't, I can't bear it. It's too awful."

The sight of a face she knew had added to the scene the last touch of horror for her. She stood there, the tears glistening in her eyes, passionately pitiful, passionately lovely. The pretty fool of *The Tatler* pictures had ceased to be, and this glorious woman had risen like the phoenix from her ashes. Denis held his breath for fear his vision would fade....

Meanwhile, the two Tommies had regained the shelter of their dug-out with more speed than grace.

"Quick!" said Bill, in a trembling voice. "'Urry up, or she'll give us away, for sure. What a mug you was to tell 'er our names."

With a feverish hand, Alf rubbed the Button....

Denis Allen started and rubbed his eyes.

"Isobel!" he said once more. But she was gone.

* * * * *

Denis leaned against the side of the trench for support. His heart was thumping against his ribs, and his throat had a strained, parched feeling. He was very badly scared.

Strange things do happen to men at the front; small hallucinations, induced by the ceaseless strain on the nerves and senses, are of common occurrence. The eyes play queer tricks sometimes on sentry-go, so that a tuft of grass becomes a lurking sniper. Allen himself could remember one occasion when he had actually seen German infantry advancing stealthily to the attack, and had given the alarm; only to be severely told off by an irate Company Commander for having interrupted his evening meal for nothing.

But this was different. This way madness lay. He had not known that his nerves had reached this state; he must pull himself together, get back at once to his dug-out and sleep. If he climbed out of the trench and went across the open, he would cut off a big corner; accordingly he did so. Just at this moment a German battery saw fit to drop a long-range shell at a venture into the British rear lines. It exploded only a few yards from Denis. He felt a tremendous thump in the chest, and rolled over, coughing and fighting for breath. Then a black curtain seemed to shut down over his eyes, and for a few moments he lost consciousness. Then he was hazily aware of voices, and a hand loosening his collar, fiddling about with his shirt and finally applying a field-dressing to a wound high up in his chest. He moved convulsively.

"Lie still, sir," said a voice. "It's Private 'Iggins, sir. Private Grant's gone for stretcher-bearers. You'll be

all right, sir—it's only a little 'ole. Just lie still."

By the time the stretcher arrived he had more or less come to himself. He could see once more, and he was conscious only of two things, namely, that his feet were horribly, cruelly cold, and that he was done with the front for a time. Slowly and gently he was carried across the rough ground to the battalion aid-post, where the Battalion M.O. received him.

"Hullo, Sniggles!" said Denis weakly.

"Well, young man," answered Sniggles, enthusiastically cutting all Denis's expensive clothing to pieces with a large pair of shears. "Let's see what they've done to you. Ah!"

He removed the bandage. Denis listened for his verdict, in dread lest his wound should be serious enough to be fatal, or not serious enough to give him his heart's desire.

"Shall I be all right?" he asked at last.

"Think so, old man."

"Good. Is it a Blighty one all right?"

"Sniggles" smiled at the eagerness in his tone.

"A Blighty one? I should think it is. A long holiday from the Army for you, my lad."

Denis gave one grin of pure happiness, and then the haziness came over him again. He lay for some time waiting for the ambulance. Occasionally a dim form bent over him; once he heard the colonel's voice speaking his name. For a second or two his brain cleared, and he understood a word or two.

"... sorry to lose him, but he's earned a rest...."

Next, he felt himself lifted and placed, still on his stretcher, in a motor-ambulance. Most of the officers seemed to be standing about, to see him off. There was a chorus of "Good-by, old man—and good luck!" He gave a feeble smile in return, and then his journey began.

CHAPTER VII

EUSTACE ORDERS A BATH

All next day Bill Grant was conscious that Alf was not his usual self. He seemed strangely preoccupied and absent-minded; and when even dinner-time failed to arouse him, Bill became seriously alarmed.

As soon as the midday meal was done the two men sought their private retreat. They lit their pipes and smoked for some time in a silence, broken at last by a heavy sigh from Alf.

"What's up with yer?" demanded Bill suddenly. "Is it yer stummick?"

"I'm all right," answered Alf in a voice of hopeless dejection.

There was another long silence, once more terminating in a sigh.

"Look 'ere," said Bill, getting up in disgust, "if you feel as bad as all that, for 'eving's sake 'ave a good cry and get it over, an' let's 'ave the old 'ome 'appy once again. What the 'ell's up?"

Alf did not answer this question, except by asking another.

"Bill," he asked with a forced lightness of tone which quite failed to conceal the earnestness it covered. "What did yer think of Eustace's taste in females?"

Bill turned and looked at him with a suddenly comprehending eye. Alf wriggled uneasily under his gaze.

"So that's it, is it?" commented Bill. "Poor old Alf!" He gave a long whistle.

"What'd you think of—of 'er, Bill?"

"Well," was the honest reply, "that kind o' fine lady ain't my style at all. I like a girl as can back-answer yer a bit. But she was a reg'lar daisy for looks."

Alf heaved another tremendous sigh.

"Gawd!" he exclaimed. "I can't 'elp thinkin' 'ow awful it'd 'ave been if that shell as 'it Mr. Allen 'ad come over a bit sooner an' done 'er in!"

He fell silent, lost in contemplation of this terrible idea. Bill was thinking deeply. He fixed a far-away gaze on Alf, reducing that warrior, very self-conscious in the unaccustomed rôle of love-sick swain, to the last pitch of embarrassment. When at last Bill came back to earth his words were startling in the extreme.

"Well," he said casually. "If that's 'ow you feel, why don't you marry the girl?"

"What?... Me?... Marry 'oo?"

"Eustace's female, whatever 'er name is."

"You're barmy! Might as well tell me to marry a royal princess straight orf."

"Well, an' why not, if you want to?" Bill was quite unmoved. "Eustace fixed it up for Aladdin—why not

for Alf 'Iggins?"

"Yes, but—Aladdin, 'e was a prince 'isself."

"Not to start with 'e wasn't, an' if you married a princess you'd be a prince, too. Prince 'Iggins—it'd look fine on a brass plate. Now look 'ere, Alf, my lad, yer just wastin' yer time. You don't seem to 'ave no idea what a lot you could do with Eustace. If *I* 'ad a pet spook I'd use 'im a sight better'n what you do. Why don't you stop the blinkin' war? Get Kaiser Bill over 'ere, and...."

"Once an' for all," interposed Alf with firmness, "I ain't goin' to mix meself up in nothing o' that sort. I knows enough to keep clear o' what's too 'igh for me. I'm a plain man, I am. Besides, Eustace ain't to be trusted. 'E'd be sure to make a muck of it an' get me into trouble some'ow."

Bill abandoned this topic for the time being with reluctance; the idea of kidnaping the Kaiser was the cherished child of his brain. But he knew that Alf when obstinate was quite impervious to argument; he therefore returned to the original question.

"Any'ow," he said. "If you want to marry that girl, Eustace'll manage it for yer. It was 'is job in peace-time—'e'll thank yer for a chance to get back to it. As I says, Aladdin married a princess, an' 'e wasn't no great specimen of a man any more'n what you are. I remember 'is mother was a washerwoman by the name o' Twankey, in the pantomime."

"Really?" asked Alf with sudden interest. "Why, my good ole mother takes in washin', too."

He seemed much cheered by this striking similarity between himself and his prototype. For the first time he seemed to realize that Bill's suggestion might be something more than idle verbiage.

"S'posin' you was me, then," he asked. "'Ow'd you set about the business? I ain't got no idea of this 'ere game."

"Well, I ain't exactly thought it out meself, but the first thing to do's to get back to Blighty."

"That does me in for a start," said Alf hopelessly.

"Not a bit. What about our month's re-engagement leave? It's five years next month since you an' me joined the Terriers, an' the Captain says 'e's applied for it, an' we'll get it in time. May be a month or two late, but we'll get it all right. Tell yer what I'll do, though. There's a ole lady in Blighty what sends me books an' papers an' things. I'll get 'er to send me the book about Aladdin, an' we'll see 'ow 'e worked the trick. P'raps we'll pick up a 'int or two that way. But you trust to Eustace an' me. We'll put it all right for you, as soon as we get our leave."

Accordingly a letter to the old lady in Blighty was composed and dispatched that same afternoon.

The glittering prospect before him filled Alf with as much apprehension as elation. The passion inspired in him by Isobel was a desire of the moth for the star—a distant worship of a goddess who had vouchsafed him one brief vision of her beauty and had then vanished beyond his ken forever. But Bill's practical common sense had changed all that. Alf found himself called upon to readjust his mental horizon, and to gaze upon a new prospect in which his goddess appeared suddenly changed to mortal form and proportions.

He could not accustom himself all at once to the new conditions. He felt sure that there must be "a catch" in the idea somewhere.

"Look 'ere," he said, after profound cogitation. "D'you mean to tell me as anything that Eustace can do'll make 'er walk out with *me*?"

"Course I do," said Bill confidently. "Look 'ere, now; s'pose you go to 'er an' say, 'I'm a millionaire, an' I've got palaces an' jools, an' 'orses, an'—oh, everything I want'—d'yer think any female's goin' to refuse all that, if you was as ugly as sin? Not on yer life. She'll eat out of yer 'and, you'll see."

But Bill Grant's cynicism failed to convince Alf, who shook his head despondently. Then, with characteristic philosophy, since none of these strange and wonderful things could begin to happen to him until his month's leave (itself only a happy possibility) came through, he dismissed the whole affair from his mind for the time being.

The battalion finished its turn in the trenches without further casualties, and once more prepared to move back to rest billets. The future was uncertain; but it did not seem likely that this respite would be of long duration. The battle of Arras had begun, and all along the line there was work to be done. At any moment the division might be called upon to trek to the Arras district, or to fill some unexpected gap elsewhere; so Colonel Enderby, on the day before the 5th Battalion marched out, sent a certain Sergeant Oliver before them with orders to make arrangements whereby his battalion on leaving the line might lose no time in making itself clean and tidy once more. To put it more simply, he told him to rig up some baths.

In "C" Company Lieutenant Allen's disappearance had caused few actual changes, although Captain Richards missed his cheery help and sound judgment at every turn. No officer had appeared from England as yet to fill his place, and No. 9 Platoon was now under the sole charge of Sergeant Lees, who ruled it with a rod of iron.

On the morning of the move the autocrat was in high good humor.

"Pack yer traps up, boys," he said. "It's good-by to the line to-day. Please 'Eaven, you'll all get a 'ot bath to-morrow."

"'Ear that, Bill?" asked Alf in delight. "I'm just about fed up with the line. Think o' gettin' into a billet again!"

"Umph," said Bill. "We won't be any better orf in a billet than in our dug-out, anyway. On'y thing *I* want'er get back for is to 'ave something to drink, since you're so mean with Eustace. If *I* 'ad a pet spook I wouldn't be that way, I can tell yer."

"I can't 'elp it," said Alf, resenting the imputation of meanness, but adamant in his determination not to risk Eustace's displeasure again.

"Huh!" said Bill. There was a world of meaning in this monosyllable, and none of it was complimentary to Alf.

The 5th Battalion was far enough back from the front line to be safely relieved by daylight. In consequence, the relieving battalion arrived up to time, and Alf and Bill were well on their way by eleven o'clock. So long as it was in the shelled area, the battalion marched by platoons, with a space of about a hundred yards between each body and the next. Once the danger limit was passed, however, it was closed up again for economy of road space.

At about four-thirty in the afternoon, worn and weary, the men approached a pleasant village and sighed contentedly to see a little group of four khaki figures awaiting them. These were the company

quartermaster-sergeants, whose job is to look after the feeding of their companies at all times and their housing when out of the line. "Quarters" is by training an autocrat and by hereditary reputation a scoundrel, but when he is seen waiting to show his men into its happy but temporary homes at the end of a long march, he is the most popular man in the company.

As Captain Richards rode in at the head of his cohort, C.Q.M.S. Piper came up and explained to him what splendid billets he had secured, what enormous trouble he had had to secure any billets at all, and how well his own compared with those of the other companies. Along the road, the other C.Q.M.S.'s might have been seen, each giving his own company commander precisely similar information. Each platoon was then settled into its particular mud barn by its own officer, while little Shaw, as subaltern of the day (otherwise known as Orderly Dog), bustled round to the traveling cooks to ascertain from the sergeant cook how soon a hot meal would be forthcoming.

When this repast was over Alf and Bill found themselves told off as units in a blanket-carrying party, after which they turned in and slept the sleep of the thoroughly unjust for about twelve hours.

Next morning, after breakfast, Captain Richards paraded his company, and as usual after coming out of the line, lectured them on their appearance.

"However," he concluded, "you'll have no excuse if you turn up to-morrow dirty. Sergeant Oliver has got some baths going in the back yard of the 'Rayon d'Or' in Aberfeldy Street; and you'll go down there by sections, beginning at ten o'clock. And I'll hold a dam' strict inspection at half-past three—so look out!"

In due course, Corporal Greenstock paraded his section, containing Privates Higgins and Grant, and marched it down Dunoon Street, through Piccadilly Circus into Aberfeldy Street. There in a cloud of steam they found Sergeant Oliver, whose military career at the front was divided between improvising baths for the battalion when it came out of the line, and supplying facilities for the drying of socks when in it. The bath on this occasion was an enormous wooden tub, capable of holding four men at a time. The sergeant and his satellites were busy keeping a veritable furnace going beneath a boiler which several gloomy defaulters constantly refilled from a well nearby. One clean fill of water was the allowance for each section, and by the time the water was emptied out it had become only less thick than the mud of the trenches they had just left.

The whole arrangement reflected the greatest credit on Sergeant Oliver, considering that when he had arrived at the "Rayon d'Or" neither tub nor boiler had been there. Whence and by whose permission they had been procured were questions which the colonel had carefully refrained from asking. But the sybaritic soul of Bill Grant clamored for something better still. He drew Alf on one side and whispered. Alf shook his head. Bill became more earnest; Higgins hesitated—and was lost. Both men slipped quietly out of the bath-house while Corporal Greenstock, taking the best of the water by right of seniority, was performing his ablutions.

It was a very quiet village, sparsely inhabited. Alf and Bill soon found a large farmyard in which, remote from public view, stood a dilapidated barn.

"This'll do fine!" said Bill. "There's nobody living in the 'ouse—we'll be as safe as the Pay Corps 'ere."

"I don't know," objected Alf. "What about that 'aystack in the loft? That must belong to some one."

"Well, 'ooever it belongs to, they don't live 'ere, an' we can keep a look-out in case any one comes. Go on, ring up ole Eustace. You won't find a better place."

Alf rubbed his Button.

"See that barn, Eustace?" he asked, before the djinn had time to begin his usual formula. "Well, put us a real nice bath inside it."

"O Master, behold, it is done!"

Eustace vanished, looking pleased. "Real nice baths" were entirely in accordance with the Aladdin tradition.

The two Tommies turned towards the barn, and stood lost in amazement. The building was outwardly as dilapidated as before, but inside it was all light and color and perfumed magnificence. Marble pillars veiled by silken hangings stood just inside the broken mud walls, and through the hangings could be seen just so much as to hint at further splendors beyond.

"Lumme!" said Alf, as soon as he could speak. "Why is 'e always so blinkin' 'olesale? 'E'll be givin' the 'ole show away, one o' these days. What's to be done now, Bill? 'Ave 'im come back again an' make 'im clear away the 'ole caboodle, I s'pose?"

"I s'pose so," said Bill reluctantly. "I s'pose so. Seems a pity, but ... 'ullo!"

He broke off.

The silken hangings had been suddenly drawn back by two enormous negroes, clad in sumptuous and glittering uniforms; a spacious hall was thus revealed, in which a crowd of beautiful female slaves in marvelous though rather scanty oriental draperies was waiting.

"'Goo' Lord! The 'Ippodrome Chorus!" said Grant in an awed voice, his protests forgotten. The most beautiful of the slaves came forward, and paused just inside the pillared entrance, a smile of invitation upon her lips.

"'Ere," said Bill. "This is goin' to be a bit of all right. We mustn't miss this. One of us'll 'ave to keep guard while the other 'as 'is bath. Toss for 'oo goes first, see?—You call!"

"'Eads," said Alf.

"Tails it is," replied Bill with great satisfaction. "I'm goin' to bath first. 'Arf an hour each, see?"

He entered the building, and the slaves clustered about him. Then the negroes drew the curtains, and Alf saw him no more.

Bill, highly gratified by his reception, was led through the entrance hall into another lofty chamber, wonderfully built of different-colored marbles. From one end of this chamber came the pleasant sound of running water, where a little fountain flowed into a bath sunk into the floor, and entered by a flight of marble steps. By some invisible device sufficient water was allowed to flow out to keep the bath always full to a uniform depth. From it arose a faint cloud of steam, fragrant and scented.

The leader of the slaves led Bill to a divan and bowed profoundly.

"Thank you, my dear," said Bill. "This'll do me a treat. Now, if you'll just take yer friends away and wait outside, I'll be with yer in 'arf a tick."

But the lady seemed neither to understand him nor to have any intention of going. She signed to two of her

following, who came forward and unlaced Grant's boots. She herself began daintily to unbutton his tunic.

This was too much for the scandalized Bill.

"'Ere," he said, leaping suddenly to his feet. "This 'as gone far enough. None of yer disrespectable foreign ways for me! Why, I've never been washed by a female since my old mother used to give me a bath when I was a nipper! 'Ere, 'op it—skedaddle!"

Bill's remarks were not understood, but his gesture of dismissal was unmistakable. The slaves made each a low obeisance and retired; the face of the leader wore so obvious an air of pained astonishment that Bill felt he owed her some kind of reparation.

"It's all right, Alice," he called. "Wait outside for me, an' I'll let yer brush me 'air arterwards."

Left alone, Bill undressed; he examined with profound suspicion the silver bowls of rich unguents which stood at one end of the bath; and then, extracting from his tunic-pocket a weary-looking cake of soap, he plunged into the water and prepared to give himself up to the enjoyment of the most luxurious moment that life had yet afforded him.

Meanwhile Alf, keeping watch outside, had begun to find time hang heavy on his hands. The farmyard was utterly deserted—only in the building into which he had seen Bill disappear was there any sign of life. He lounged into the road, cursing the fate which had given Bill the first choice, and wondering whether after all the chance of discovery was great enough to make his lonely vigil worth while. He debated this point for some time, and had almost made up his mind to chance it and join Bill forthwith, when he heard his name called.

"'Ere! 'Iggins!"

He looked up the road apprehensively. Two men of his own section had turned a corner and were bearing down upon him. Panic-stricken, he dashed into the farmyard and shouted for Bill. There was no response. Feverishly he felt for his Button and rubbed it.

"Eustace," he said in a trembling voice, "cart all that away—quick! An' then 'op it yerself. Look slippery!"

Bill Grant had just felt the warm, soft water close over his body—had just begun to realize a delicious sense of lightness and rest which pervaded his whole frame—when everything about him seemed to fade into smoke and disappear. The marble bath, the stately hall, the water, the silken hangings, all vanished in a flash, and he found himself, naked and cold, lying on the cobbled floor of an exceedingly well-ventilated French barn. Worst of all, his clothes had disappeared with the rest.

Outside in the yard he could see Alf signing to him in the greatest agitation; he made a dash for the haystack in the loft, and had just reached its sanctuary when he heard voices below him. Peeping through a crack in the loft floor he could see Denham and Walls, the two privates whose untimely appearance had upset Alf so completely.

"Corp'ril sent us for yer, Alf," explained Walls. "Says we got to bring yer back under escort for bilkin' yer bath."

"He also wished us to secure Grant," added Private Denham, a youth who was cultivating a refined accent with a view to subsequent application for a commission.

"Well, 'e ain't 'ere, me lord," answered Alf shortly. "I'll come right away. I was just comin', any'ow."

Unaware of the tragic loss of Bill's clothes, Alf was only anxious to get his captors away from the spot and to give his pal a chance of appearing clothed again and in his right mind as soon as might be.

Bill heard their voices die away, and despairingly reviewed his position. The hay, with which he was obliged to cover himself for warmth, tickled his bare body cruelly. He was too far from his billet to think of trying to return there in his present condition, even if modesty had allowed. His clothes were irretrievably lost until Alf should come back that way, bringing the Button. Until Higgins realized that something was wrong and came in search of him, Bill must remain an outcast, naked and ashamed. He made himself a nest in the softest part of the hay and settled himself down to wait.

After a time he dozed off; he was recalled to himself by the sound of a footstep below. It paused at the bottom of the ladder leading to the loft.

"Alf!" said Bill in a stage whisper.

"*Qui va la?*" answered a strange voice—an old, quavery voice, apparently female. Bill curled himself into his nest of hay and lay perfectly still. The owner of the voice, having listened for some time, apparently decided that Bill's greeting had been a delusion of the senses and began painfully and wheezily to climb the ladder. Through a layer of hay, Bill's eye commanded the loft door. His visitor was an elderly Frenchwoman with a pitch-fork, evidently the owner of the hay.

She began to fork the hay down with surprising vigor for one so frail. Bill lay close as a maggot in a nut; but unfortunately, at her sixth prod, the old lady dug her weapon into one of the tenderest parts of his undraped anatomy, and Bill sprang up with an eldritch scream. Naked as he was, and festooned and bristling with hay, he was a startling apparition. The old Frenchwoman gave forth a yell as if all the devils in hell were after her, and clambered down the ladder with the speed of a cat. By some miracle she preserved her footing till she was halfway down the ladder; but then her feet slipped and she shot ignominiously on to her own hay. Bill thought for a moment that she had hurt herself; but a second later he heard her wooden shoes on the cobbles outside as she took to her heels and ran for her life.

Bill, shivering, returned gloomily to his hay. The fat was in the fire now, without a doubt. Even if she did not inform the colonel, the old lady was sure to alarm the villagers; and what they might do to him Bill hardly dared imagine. He lay shivering with cold and fright. After a time he seemed to hear stealthy footsteps. He determined that his only chance was to give himself up and throw himself on the mercy of his captors. He stood up, and shook himself free of the hay.

A voice below spoke—Alf's voice.

"Bill!" it said.

* * * * *

Half an hour later Bill stood before Sergeant Lees.

"Ho," said that autocrat. "'Ere you are. Bilked yer bath, you 'ave, so I 'ear, an' missed the Captain's inspection; an' the British soldier's first dooty is to be clean."

"I got a better bath in the village, sergeant. Didn't think you'd mind," said Bill desperately.

"Ho, did yer? Don't seem to 'ave done yer much good. 'Ave yer seen yerself?"

The sergeant handed him a shaving-mirror. Grant studied his features in silence. His adventures in the hay had completely destroyed the effects of his bath. His face was streaked and mottled with black dust till he looked like a dissipated nigger.

"No, my lad," said the sergeant grimly. "That yarn's like you—it don't wash. You'll report to Sergeant Oliver to-morrer an' act as bath-orderly for the rest o' the week."

CHAPTER VIII

BLIGHTY FOR TWO

Grant's appointment to the menial position of bath-orderly plunged him into a state of savage gloom. His duties were arduous and his hours long; and as he spent even his free time in morose silence, he soon made Alf as miserable as himself. Gradually the week wore away until at last the sentence was served, and Bill was once more a free man.

But his punishment seemed to have soured his whole outlook on life; even now he continued sullenly aloof till at last even the easy-going Alf felt himself constrained to remonstrate.

"Look 'ere, Bill," he said. "What's up?"

"Fed up!" growled Bill.

"Fed up? Well, o' course you're fed up. Ain't we all fed up? But that ain't no reason for goin' on like this. You might be a lot worse off. 'Ere we are, back from the line an' in billets in a nice little village with shops an' estaminets an' ... an' baths."

"If you wants one in the 'ear-'ole," said Bill, rising wrathfully, "you've on'y got to say 'bath' to me again. An' look 'ere, I never 'ad no use for sermons any'ow. Get on to the 'ymn."

Alf regarded him helplessly. Bill simply stared straight before him with a queer glint in his eyes.

"Look 'ere," said Higgins at last, deciding to stretch a point for the sake of a quiet life. "Shall I get Eustace to fetch yer a pint?"

"No."

"It'd do yer good."

"No, I tell yer. Keep yer blinkin' Eustace an' yer blinkin' beer, an' fr 'Eaven's sake leave me alone. I'm fed up with the 'ole boilin' of yer—sick of it. Sick o' the War, an' this ruddy country, an' everything. I wants to get 'ome to Blighty, an', oh Gawd! to think I'll 'ave to wait another two months."

Alf was silent and sympathetic; he could remember times when he had been helpless in the grip of just such a desperate angry longing to escape from France and all that it stood for. An idea struck him.

"Couldn't Eustace ...?" he began.

"No. D'you think I 'aven't sense enough to think o' that meself? This is one o' them times when Eustace ain't no blinkin' use at all—unless you've got enough guts to send 'im over to get ole Kaiser Bill 'ere, an...."

"Well, I won't," said Alf obstinately. "I told you before. An' I don't see why Eustace can't take you over to Blighty all right. 'E brought that young lady over 'ere."

"Because," said Bill, with the air of one explaining truisms to a wrong-headed child, "if we asks Eustace to take us 'ome, what 'appens? We're deserters. Sooner or later we'd get found out an' shot. 'Tain't worth it."

I should 'ave thought even you could 'ave understood that."

With this Parthian shot he stalked heavily away, leaving Alf disconsolate. But as soon as he was alone he began to ponder Alf's scorned suggestion. Was there not some way in which Eustace could be employed to take Bill and Alf home for a space without subjecting them to the risk of subsequent execution? He turned the question over in his restless mind, but in vain; and as a result his temper at bed-time was even less equable than before. Alf was glad to roll himself up in his blanket and go to sleep.

But Bill could not sleep. Long after "lights out," he lay awake, thinking and brooding over his problem; and his longing for Blighty grew sharper till it was almost more than he could bear. But he knew that until he could find some way of circumventing his difficulties he must continue, like the cat in the adage, to let "I dare not" wait upon "I would."

At last, just as daylight began to appear, a new idea struck him. It was a scheme of masterly simplicity in which his tired brain could detect no flaw. He leant over and shook the dimly visible form of Alf, who woke in astonishment and was about to give tongue when Bill's huge hand was clapped over his mouth, and Bill's voice spoke fiercely in his ear.

"Quiet, you fool!"

"Wasermarrer?" enquired Alf thickly, as soon as the hand was removed.

"I got it!" whispered Bill triumphantly.

"Got what?"

"I knows 'ow we can work it."

There was a pause, as Alf allowed this to sink in. "Work what?" he asked at last.

"Wake up, you fat'ed, an' listen. It's a transfer we want."

"A what?"

"A *transfer*!"

"Do we?"

Bill's overtried nerves snapped suddenly.

"If it wasn't for the row it'd make, I'd dot yer one," he hissed fiercely. "'Ere, put yer things on quiet an' slip outside, an' I'll tell yer there."

A few moments later, in the dim first light of dawn, Bill unfolded his scheme.

"If we tells Eustace to transfer us to the Reserve Battalion 'ome in Blighty, that ain't desertion, because we'd still be soldierin', see. An' it's about time you and me 'ad a little go o' soldierin' at 'ome, for a change like. Oh, it's a real brainy notion, Alf. Can't think why I never thought of it before."

Alf, still half-asleep, had only the vaguest conception of the meaning of the magic word "transfer" and still less of the formalities attaching thereto; but such was his trust in the acumen and the military knowledge of his mate that he accepted the statement without reserve. Acting under Bill's instructions he rubbed his Button. Instantly Eustace appeared with his usual formula.

"We want to be transferred," said Alf. "To the Reserve Battalion in Blighty—at once, please."

"Lord!" answered the djinn, "I hear and obey."

He advanced on the two privates who, expecting to feel themselves borne with appalling swiftness through the air, closed their eyes apprehensively; but nothing seemed to happen, and they opened them again.

"Lumme!" said Alf in astonishment. "Good ole Eustace!"

The scene before them had changed with the suddenness of a cinematograph film. The dawn was still just breaking, but instead of the cheerless plains of France they saw the wooded hills and trim hedges of an English landscape. They were standing on a country road beside a camp of wooden huts. Not far away the spire of a church and the chimneys of a few houses rising above the drifting morning mist showed where a village stood; and as they tried to gather their wits together they heard a sound to which their ears had long been strangers—the distant rumble of an express train.

"Good ole Eustace—an' good ole Blighty!" said Bill softly. "Come on, Alf. There's a sentry at the gate. We'll report to 'im."

The sentry at once handed them over to the sergeant of the guard, who produced a piece of paper and a stubby pencil.

"Nice time o' day to come in, I don't think," he observed severely. "Overstayed yer week-end leave, I s'pose. Where's your passes?"

"We 'aven't got no passes, sergeant. We've...."

"Names, please," interrupted the catechist. "1287 'Iggins A. an' 2312 Grant W. Which comp'ny?"

"'C' Comp'ny, 5th M.F., B.E.F."

"Yes, yes," said the sergeant with heavy sarcasm. "You can say yer alphabet arterwards. An' I don't want yer past 'istory, neither. This ain't the B.E.F. an' I want to know which comp'ny you belong to 'ere."

"We dunno, sergeant. We been transferred from the B.E.F. an' we're just reportin'."

"What, at this time o' day, an' without any kit? All right, you needn't trouble to tell me any more. You tell it all to the C.O. when 'e sees you. 'E'll 'arf skin yer, I expect, for rollin' in at this time, because the last train for 'ere gets in at eight o'clock in the evening."

Alf and Bill sat in the guard-room, their first elation rather dashed. Once more things were turning out unexpectedly difficult. They were indeed back in Blighty, but were to be half-skinned as a result. If on top of this Eustace managed to make any mistake in the transfer, they might reasonably expect to be completely flayed by the colonel, who had the reputation (which had reached the brigade in France by means of the drafts he sent out to it) of being a fire-eater. Bill began to regret bitterly his impulsiveness in leaving the technical details of his scheme to Eustace; but he realized that it was now too late to do anything. He and Alf would be kept under strict surveillance until the time of their interview with the C.O., and there would be no possible chance of summoning Eustace and ascertaining just what he had done.

They decided to do nothing, and to hope for the best. Even a guard-room in Blighty seemed to them at that

moment preferable to their billet in France.

Soon after breakfast the hour for the inquisition arrived and the two friends found themselves side by side "on the mat" before the great man, who was physically a very little man. Colonel Watts was a "dug-out." Some time before the war broke out he had retired from a very long and incredibly undistinguished military career with the rank of major, and had devoted himself to bullying his meek wife and generally making her life a misery. When the war began the gallant major, much to Mrs. Watts' relief, applied for and obtained command of a New Army battalion. Unfortunately, however, he managed to quarrel so violently with all his immediate superiors and most of his colleagues that the divisional general refused to take him to the front. Shortly before the division sailed for France the little man returned raging to Tunbridge Wells, discharged all his wife's servants, poisoned her dog, and proceeded to vent all his accumulated spleen on the poor lady herself. Eventually, only just in time to save Mrs. Watts' sanity, he was offered the command of the Territorial reserve battalion of the Middlesex Fusiliers, a post which he had held ever since.

He sat behind a very large table, with Captain Sandeman, his adjutant, standing beside him. Alf and Bill were marched in by the regimental sergeant-major, an unctuous person very different from the martinet who controlled the 5th Battalion at the front.

"Private Higgins, sir, and Private Grant," he announced—as who should say, "Mr. and Mrs. Platt-Harcourt, my lady!"

"Higgins!" repeated the Colonel, gazing ferociously at Alf from under his beetling eyebrows. "Higgins! Higgins!!"

"Yessir!" said Alf, thinking that confirmation was being required.

"Be quiet!" roared Colonel Watts, with such suddenness that Alf took a step backwards in alarm. "And stand still!"

"Stand still, man, and only speak when you are spoken to," said the oily voice of the R.S.M. in Alf's ear.

The colonel fixed the unfortunate Alf with a protruding eye, and continued his baleful glare until his victim was on the very verge of crying out. His one idea seemed to be to intimidate Alf; he paid no attention whatever to Bill, who was standing stiffly to attention, his eyes fixed in a lack-luster stare on the wall above the adjutant's head.

"Well?" the C.O. ground out at last between his teeth. The sergeant-major gave a consequential little cough and signed to the sergeant of the guard to give his evidence.

"These men arrived 'ere, sir, in the early hours of this mornin', about four o'clock, and failed to give any satisfactory account of themselves. They 'ad no kit, sir, an' no passes. They state that they 'ave been transferred to us from the Expeditionary Force, sir, but they 'ave no papers to prove it."

"Good God!" shouted the colonel. "This is disgraceful. More incompetence! If I've written one letter complaining of this kind of thing I've written a dozen. Men come here without papers, without kit, without orders, and expect us to look after 'em. The Army in France is one mass of incompetent fools, in my opinion. It's a scandal, Sandeman."

The adjutant said nothing. The C.O. hardly seemed to expect him to, for he swept on without a pause.

"If I'd my way, I'd scrap the whole lot of 'em, and have a few men who know their jobs put in instead. No papers, no nothing. Disgraceful! Where's your kit, man?"

Alf, finding that this question also was addressed to him, and having no reply ready, merely gaped.

"Speak up!" bawled the Colonel.

"L—l—lost it, sir."

The C.O. dashed his pen violently on to his desk, where it stuck quivering on its point, turned round in his chair and silently eyed his adjutant for ten palpitating seconds.

"D'ye hear that, Sandeman? He's lost it. Good God! What are we coming to?... The Government has fitted him out with a complete set of kit and he's lost it ... and how," he vociferated, turning round once more with such unexpected speed that Alf once more gave back a pace. "How d'you mean to tell me you lost it, eh?"

But Alf's inventive powers were exhausted, and Bill judged it time, at whatever risk to life and limb, to take a speaking part in the little drama.

"Overboard, sir, in the Channel," he said, without removing his eye from the wall. "Off of a ship," he added as an afterthought, in order that there should be no misunderstanding possible.

Colonel Watts appeared to regard this as the last straw. For a moment he seemed unable to articulate at all, and the hue of his countenance deepened through successive shades till it finally arrived at a congested purple. He hammered on his desk with his fist.

"I will not have my valuable time wasted in this way!" he roared. "Bring these men before me to-morrow, sergeant-major, and if I can't get a coherent account of them from some one, there'll be trouble. Incompetent fools!"

He puffed passionately out of the orderly-room and slammed the door, leaving it uncertain whether his last remark was addressed only to Alf and Bill, or whether it was not rather intended to include the adjutant, the R.S.M., the sergeant of the guard and the impassive privates acting as prisoners' escort. He was to be heard faintly outside in unkind criticism of the sentry's method of presenting arms. Then there was silence, and a general feeling as though the sun had come out.

"Prisoners and escort," began the R.S.M. "Right-TURN! Quick...."

"Wait, sergeant-major," said Captain Sandeman quietly. "I want to ask these men a question or two. Send the escort off."

Bill's heart sank. Captain Sandeman had lost the air of passive indifference which he wore as protective armor in the presence of Colonel Watts. He looked horribly intelligent and wide-awake.

"Now, listen to me," he said. "I don't understand your case at all. Are you rejoining from hospital?"

"No, sir. From the front. Transferred, sir."

"But why? And where are your papers?"

"Didn't 'ave no papers, sir. We was just told to report 'ere. The papers is comin' by post, I think, sir."

"Um. Which is your battalion, and company?"

"The fifth, sir—'C' Comp'ny."

Bill was beginning to realize that Eustace had, in his muddle-headed way, landed them in a very tight corner. He would have lied had he dared; but he knew that there must be scores of men serving now with the Reserve who had known both himself and Alf at the front.

"That's Captain Richards' company, isn't it?"

"Yessir. But the Captain went away on a course yesterday, sir, and Lieutenant Donaldson is in command now."

"*Yesterday?* How d'you know that?"

Bill had seen his slip as soon as he made it.

"I 'eard 'e was goin' before I left, sir," he answered readily.

"Um. And you don't know why you've been sent back?"

"No, sir."

Captain Sandeman became suddenly stern.

"There is something very irregular about the whole business," he said. "I don't see how you can possibly have got across the Channel in any legitimate way without papers. The whole thing looks most fishy, and it seems to me that you two men are asking for very serious trouble. Now, I warn you, I give you an opportunity now of telling me all about it; but if you persist in that story about being transferred without any papers, I'll have to keep you safe here till I can find out the truth from Mr. Donaldson. Now, what have you to say?"

"Nothing, sir," said Bill quickly. For one moment he was afraid that Alf was going to lose his head and tell the incredible truth; he shot a glance of warning at his mate, who subsided; and the adjutant waited in vain for an answer to his appeal.

"Very well," he said. "Put 'em in the cells, sergeant-major."

The two unfortunates were accordingly marched away and were once more handed over to the sergeant of the guard.

"Cells for these two beauties, an' keep 'em safe, or it'll be worse for you. Deserters they look like. It's a court-martial case."

Alf quaked at this realization of his worse fears, while even Bill looked concerned.

"I've on'y one cell, sir," said the sergeant of the guard.

"Very well. Shove 'em in together. Can't be helped."

The R.S.M. went off.

The instant the key turned on the two men, Alf produced the Button and rubbed it.

"What wouldst thou have?" began Eustace, his deep voice reverberating round the little cell. "I am..."

"Stop it—they'll 'ear you!"

"They 'ave 'eard 'im," whispered Bill. "Quick, Alf."

The sergeant, who had heard the rumbling voice, was already fumbling with the stiff lock.

"Take us away," whispered Alf in trembling tones. "Anywhere out of 'ere. QUICK!"

Before the sergeant had opened the door the whole camp had faded from their view, and the two found themselves in a desolate waste, faced by a very puzzled and indignant djinn.

"Lumme, that was a near squeak!" gasped Alf.

"Yes," said Bill. He addressed Eustace in heated tones. "What the 'ell did you want to go an' land us in a mess like that for? Didn't Mr. 'Iggins say as plain as print it was a transfer we wanted. Don't you know nothing at all?"

"It's always the same," put in Alf parenthetically. "No common sense. Too slap-dash an' 'olesale."

But Eustace was ignorant of the nature of his offense. He was conscious only that he had had to be called in at a desperate crisis to rescue his master from danger. He was full of indignation at such sacrilege.

"Lord!" he said. "Command me that I should go to that impious one and instantly reduce him to ashes—both him and his family and all that are about him. Ill beseemeth it that any should lay impious hands upon the Lord of the Button, and live."

"'E's a bloodthirsty customer, ain't 'e?" said Bill in awed admiration. "Talk about 'olesale! Look 'ere, Eustace, you'll be getting us into 'orrible trouble if you don't look out. What was it you wanted to do—reduce the R.S.M. to ashes? We're in a bad enough 'ole as it is, but that would fair put the lid on. You wants to be a little more up to date. Me an' Mr. 'Iggins is on'y privates, you know; an' if we get monkeyin' with sergeant-majors there'll be 'ell on for all of us."

"Verily," said the djinn in perplexed tones, "I do not understand thy speech. Ill beseemeth it that any man should presume to order the comings and the goings of the Lord of the Button. Bid me abase this proud upstart, and thou shalt rule in his stead."

"No, thank you," said Alf. "I don't want to be no bloomin' orficer. I'm a plain man, I am. You see, Eustace, it's like this. In this 'ere war, every one's fightin'—soldiers an' civilians an' all. Now, I'm not a soldier by trade—fruit and vegetable salesman I am. So I 'as to obey the orficers an' the sergeants, 'cos they knows the job. If they'd come into the fruit an' vegetables not knowin' a carrot from a crisantlemum, they'd 'ave 'ad to obey me. See?"

"I don't think!" put in Bill. "Look 'ere, Eustace, your job's to get us out o' this 'ere mess. Just through yer bloomin' ignorance you're landed us in a proper 'ole. 'Ere we are; we've deserted from the front, an' we've broken arrest in the Reserve Battalion. 'Ow are we goin' to get out o' that, eh?"

Alf made a tentative suggestion, his mind on Colonel Watts.

"Better go back to France, 'adn't we?"

"I sh'd think we '*ad*." Bill's hopeless nostalgia of the day before was entirely forgotten. "Why, I'd sooner

stay in France the rest o' the war than serve under that blighter we was before this mornin'. 'E was a corker."

"But if we're deserters," said Alf dismally, "'ow can we go back? Wouldn't they shoot us?"

Bill looked at his watch.

"Why, it's on'y ten o'clock now," he said. "They'd find we was gone at revally, so we've on'y been away about four hours. What's four hours when the battalion's restin'? They can't do much to us."

"Might stop our leave."

"True for you. So they might. Now, what can we ...? I got it. 'Ere, Eustace, put us down about 'arf a mile from the camp in France, will you? Alf, you tell 'im. 'E won't do it for me."

Alf complied. The familiar flat landscape reappeared before them and they welcomed it almost with joy.

"Now," said Bill impressively, "tell 'im to 'op over into the Boche lines an' bring us a prisoner. An' mind, none of 'is 'olesale ways! 'E'll bring a 'ole army corps over if you don't look out, an' then we'd look silly. Just one, tell 'im—a officer."

In a moment a fat and haughty-looking German officer stood beside them. When he saw the khaki tunics, his hand went to his side, but the two Tommies flung themselves upon him.

"Get 'is revolver, Alf," panted Bill. "That's the ticket. Now then, 'ands up, Fritz. You come with us. You're our blinkin' alibi."

"What are you?" asked the Boche, in excellent English. "You have, I suppose, escaped from your cage. I warn you, you English dogs, to be more respectful to your superiors. When you are caught it shall go hard with you. That a common English swine shall call *me* Fritz."

"Nothin' to what you'll be called in a minute if you don't be'ave. Alf, I b'lieve the pore blighter thinks 'e's still in 'is own lines. What a sell for 'im."

"Come on, Bochie," said Alf, his finger on the trigger of the revolver. "Quick march."

"I will not move," declared the prisoner sullenly. "You cannot escape. There are men of mine on every side. Give me the revolver and I will see that you are not punished—much."

"Thank you for nothing," said Bill. "These 'ere are the British lines you're in, Fritz dear, an' you're our prisoner—see?"

The German, who still failed to grasp the situation, broke into a torrent of abuse and threats.

"Ain't 'e the little gentleman," said Alf in admiration.

Bill suddenly lost patience.

"'Ere," he said. "Let's kill 'im an' get another one. I can't stand 'ere arguin' all day. For one thing, the longer we stays away the bigger row we gets into. Now, Fritz, take yer choice. Will you come quiet, or will you 'ave a nice cheap funeral?"

The German, seeing that Bill was in earnest, and believing that his rescue could not be long delayed,

marched stiffly off with a very bad grace. His astonishment was pitiable when he found himself being marched through little knots and groups of staring figures in khaki to a British camp. His bombastic air disappeared, and his knees sagged under him.

"Thought you'd 'ave a shock before long, Fritz," said Bill. "Comes o' not believin' a gentleman's word. Step lively, now. We're just 'ome, an' I want you to look yer best. After this," he added in an undertone to Alf, "they can't say very much to us, anyway."

Bill was right. In the excitement caused by their dramatic return, the authorities forgot to make any inquiry into the unauthorized absence of the heroes of the hour.



CHAPTER IX

LIEUTENANT DONALDSON BECOMES SUSPICIOUS

Some days later, Lieutenant Donaldson was sitting in "C" Company officers' billet, when the battalion intelligence officer entered.

"Hallo," said Donaldson. "You look worried. What's up?"

"I am worried. I wish you'd point out to your company what a nuisance they make themselves to their superiors when they go capturing Boche officers in the rest area. Ask 'em to think twice in future. It'd save trouble if they'd kill the next one they find and bury him on the spot."

"Why, what's up?"

"Well, the Staff's very anxious to know what this particular chap was doing and how he got there. I do see their point, you know. They take the highly reasonable view that as prisoners are not usually captured miles behind the lines in full uniform, this chap must have been up to some extra special form of devilry. The presumption is that he'd been spying, but they can't get a word of sense out of the man himself. He pretends not to know how he got into our lines. And the queer thing is that we found papers on him dated the same day as his capture—routine orders and so on—which tally with papers of the same date on other prisoners taken in the usual way. The thing's uncanny, because it's so senseless."

"Have you noticed," said Lieutenant Donaldson reflectively, "that there've been one or two things out of the ordinary that have happened in this battalion lately?"

"I know. And the colonel wants it stopped. Says it'll give the battalion a bad name."

"Perhaps we've a family ghost," suggested Donaldson. "Anyway, I don't see how it hurts *you*."

"Me? The Staff seem to think I'm entirely responsible for the whole thing. They want to know—in writing—why I didn't get a full biography of the blighter when he was brought in—as if he was any more likely to unbosom himself to me than to the people who caught him. And now, to give me a chance of recovery of my prestige, I suppose, I've to see Higgins and Grant and find out anything I can from them. Could you have 'em sent for?"

"Of course."

"The officer's compliments to 'is conquerin' 'eroes," said Sergeant Lees when the message arrived, "an' would they favor 'im with their company for a quiet chat?"

Ever since Alf and Bill's exploit had shed brilliant if unexpected luster on their platoon, Sergeant Lees had unbent with them and assumed a heavy jocularly. This was his method of indicating that he was pleased with them, but it filled Alf with grave forebodings. Bill, on the other hand, took what the gods gave and basked in the brief sunshine of the sergeant's smile. On this occasion, however, he basked too openly and the sun went in.

"Well," he answered in languid, aristocratic tones. "If Don feels 'e'd like to see us, I s'pose we might as well drop round for a minute or two, eh, Alfred?"

"Ere," said the sergeant, who held that a joke was only a joke so long as the right person made it, "none o' that. Clean yourselves up an' report to the officers' billet immediate."

"Come in," called Lieutenant Donaldson, as Bill knocked on the door. "Stand easy. Now, Grant and Higgins. I haven't had a chance of congratulating you on what you did the other day."

"That wasn't nothing, sir—on'y luck, that was," murmured Bill, and Alf shuffled his feet sympathetically. Each had an uncomfortable feeling that he was obtaining credit on false pretenses.

"However," continued the company commander, "what I want you to do now is to tell the intelligence officer just how it all happened, and answer his questions."

He was looking at Higgins as he spoke, and could not help being struck with the expression of horrified apprehension that flitted across those ingenuous features. He said nothing, however, but while the intelligence officer was catechizing them he kept his sleepy-looking but most observant eyes more than ordinarily wide open.

"And that's all you can tell me?" asked the I.O., after he had asked a dozen questions and received nothing but the most unsatisfactory of replies.

"Yes, sir. The Boche, 'e didn't tell us nothing. 'E comes down the road, an' we jumps out on 'im. 'Iggins 'ere grabs 'is pistol, an' we marches 'im 'ome. That's all."

"Did you question him at all?"

"No, sir."

"Why not? You didn't expect to see a Boche officer there, did you?"

"No, sir."

"Then why didn't you question him?"

Bill looked about him for inspiration, and got it.

"I thought, sir, as 'ow we ought to leave all that to you."

Lieutenant Donaldson watched the relief overflow Alf's countenance, and wondered what all this could mean.

"That's what the Staff seem to think, too," sighed the I.O., getting sadly to his feet. "Well, if that's all you can tell me, I'll be off. I hope it'll pacify the blighters. I can see myself getting shot at dawn over this business. So long, Donaldson."

He went out. Higgins and Grant saluted and were about to follow, when Donaldson, taking a letter from his pocket, stopped them.

"I've had a most curious letter," he said slowly, "from the Reserve Battalion." He looked up sharply as he spoke, and saw sheer panic terror gazing at him from Alf's eyes. "Captain Sandeman writes to ask if you two men are here or whether by any chance you have deserted. He gives your names and numbers correctly, and a description of you both, and says that these two men reported to his battalion and then broke out of the guard-room and mysteriously disappeared."

He looked sharply from one to the other. Alf was trembling visibly; Bill was trying to look unconcerned, but with little success.

"Now, listen to me," said Lieutenant Donaldson, in the most impressive voice he could summon. "Understand this. I've had my eye on you two men for some time, and this little game of yours has got to stop. I shall say no more now, but the next time...."

He glanced once more at Alf, and saw that the effects of his remarks were good.

"Now go," he said, "and remember, be very careful in future. You're both due for your month's leave in a short time, and it would be a pity to spoil it. That's all."

As the two saluted and shambled out their officer gave a rueful laugh.

"Now, I'd give a good deal," he said to himself, "to know just exactly what I was talking about just now, and what they thought I meant."

* * * * *

"What are we goin' to do now, Bill?" asked Alf miserably, as soon as they had left the company commander's presence.

"Do?" said Bill, who had recovered his balance to some extent. "Why, nothin'. What d'you want to do?"

"Well, it's all up, ain't it, now 'e knows all about it?"

"Rats!" said Bill contemptuously. "'Ow can 'e know all about it? I told you before that Don's no fool, but 'e ain't such a bloomin' conjurer as all that. 'E's just noticed that there's something funny about me an' you, that's all; an' 'e's got both eyes wide open now waitin' for next time. Well, there ain't got to be no next time, that's all."

"You mean I'll 'ave to throw the Button away?"

"*What!* Throw it away? You're barmy." Bill glared at his pal.

"Well, what do I do?"

"I tell yer. Do nothing."

"Nothing at all? Keep the Button, an' ..."

"O' course you keep the Button, you blinkin' idjit. Does Don know anything about yer blinkin' Button? It's my belief Don don't know a thing—'e's just bluffin' us. But all you 'ave to do is to leave the Button alone till we get our leave. No more Eustace till we're safe 'ome; but if you chuck the Button away, Alf 'Iggins, I'll 'arf kill you. But I'd give a good bit, I would, to know 'ow much Donaldson really knows."

Next day the news came through that the brigade was not after all to be sent to another part of the front; instead, it moved up once more for a tour of duty in the well-known sector. The attention of both sides at this time was concentrated on the great battle going on at Arras, and the remainder of the front was quiet but watchful. On the brigade's frontage nothing more strenuous happened than a continuous but not very intense bombardment, and though the division on their right made a trench-raid, the Middlesex Fusiliers were not called upon for any exciting work.

During all this period Alf and Bill were as conspicuous by their presence among their mates as they had formerly been by their absence. Whenever wiring-parties and similar delights were required, their names were usually the first on Sergeant Lees' list, while fatigues of every kind became to them a hobby.

"It's a queer thing," the sergeant observed caustically to the company sergeant-major one day, after he had fallen in a working-party for Lieutenant Donaldson's inspection, and had heard the officer comment favorably on the appearance of Privates Higgins and Grant, "what good soldiers all our scally-wags seem to 'ave become, now that there's a chance of gettin' a leave. They'll eat out o' me 'and now, but you see what'll 'appen as soon as they've 'ad their leave. More trouble they'll be 'n a bagful o' monkeys."

The two were feeling the monotony of their return to the ordinary existence of the front very bitterly.

"Takes all the spice out o' life, not bein' able to do things with Eustace," said Bill, quite forgetting that he had managed to infuse quite a considerable amount of spice into his life in the days before the coming of the djinn. "If our leave don't come through soon I shall go clean barmy, I b'lieve."

At last the longed-for moment arrived. They were both officially informed that their reëngagement leave of twenty-eight days was duly sanctioned and that, barring accidents, they would depart in one week's time.

"A week?" sighed Alf dolefully. "We may both be pushin' up the daisies in a week from now."

"That's what I like about you, Higgins, you're so cheerful," said Corporal Greenstock, who overheard this remark. "Anyhow, if you want to start daisypushing this journey you'll have to hurry. We're being relieved to-night." He passed on.

"A week is little enough, too," said Bill suddenly, "for all we got to do."

"What d'you mean?"

"We got to settle up about this 'ere marriage o' yours, to begin with. Why, we don't even know the bloomin' girl's name, yet."

Alf grinned sheepishly.

"I do," he said. He extracted from his pocket a bulky and dilapidated pocket-book, from the dusky recesses of which he produced a wad of paper. He unfolded this and smoothed out its many creases, when it disclosed itself as a page torn from the last number of *The Sketch* which had reached the battalion. It was headed "A Paradise for Wounded Heroes." The first photograph showed Alf's wonderful visitor in nurse's uniform, and beneath it was written, "Miss Isobel FitzPeter, the famous society beauty. She has now left Town altogether and is devoting herself entirely to the Convalescent Home for Officers which she has established at her father's beautiful place, Dunwater Park, of which we give pictures below. Miss FitzPeter has taken entire charge of the administrative work of the Home. We congratulate the fortunate few whose lucky stars will lead them into the care of so fair a pair of hands."

"Umph!" said Bill, when he had inwardly digested this. "So that's 'oo she is! Well, I must say I thought she might 'ave been Lady Something. Why, she ain't even a 'honorable.' You'd better change your mind, Alf, before you get too far. Sure you wouldn't like a princess? Eustace'll get one for you as easy as wink."

But Alf shook his head; he had been thankful to find that the lady of his dreams moved in no more rarefied an atmosphere. It had made her a little more accessible.

Bill continued his study of the page in his hand.

"Dunwater Park, from the South," he read. "Nice little villa enough—'bout the size o' Buckingham Palace. You won't 'ave to turn the kids out of their bedroom when I come week-endin' with you an' the missus there, will you?"

Alf gave a nervous snigger.

"Dunwater Park, from the North-West," pursued Bill. "Yes, it's a big place, but we'll make Eustace put one up for us as'll beat this all to nothing. What's this? 'Group of officers at present under Miss FitzPeter's care.' Look 'appy enough, don't they? Why ain't she in it? If I'd been 'er, I'd 'ave planked meself down in the middle of that photo, I would. 'Ullo, 'ere's one 'oo looks like our Mr. Allen."

"P'raps it is 'im."

"They don't put names, so we can't tell. Ever 'ad yer photo in the papers, Alf?"

"No. 'Ow could I?"

"Well, they 'ave lots o' silly things in sometimes. Any'ow, once you've married this girl and got a big 'ouse you'll 'ave yer photo in once a day, an' twice on Sundays. 'Oo's this ole cock at the bottom o' the page? 'Sir Edward FitzPeter.' That's 'er pa. If I'd been you I'd 'ave 'ad a lord, but you never was proud, was you, Alf?"

"Bill," answered Higgins seriously, "it ain't no good."

"What ain't no good?"

"My marryin' 'er. It—it ain't right. She's too 'igh up for me. She—she ought to 'ave a gentleman."

"Lumme," said Bill scornfully, "you ain't goin' to get cold feet now, are you? 'Ere you are, the richest man in the 'ole world once you get 'ome, an' you go an' get the wind up because some bloomin' girl without even a Hon before 'er name is too 'igh for you."

"Oo's the richest man in the world?"

"You are, o' course. Don't you ever sit down an' think out what you can do with that Button o' yours? Lumme, if *I* 'ad it.... 'Ere, just as a test like, tell Eustace to bring you a thousand quid!"

"Not me. We said we wouldn't...."

"Right you are—my mistake," conceded Bill. "Well, you can take it from me it'll be all right."

"Eustace generally mucks it some'ow."

"Ah, but that's because we been giving 'im things to do as 'e's not used to. But this weddin' business an' the 'ouse an' so on'll be easy to 'im; he's done it all before for Aladdin. If only that ole lady'd send me that book what I asked 'er for, we'd know better what Eustace can do. But if she don't get a move on it'll be too late."

But next day, when the company reached its billet, a mail arrived, in which was a bulky package addressed to Mr. William Grant, Pte. The old lady had not failed her protégé. The parcel contained an aged copy of the *Arabian Nights*, leather bound and smelling faintly of camphor. Between two pages of

the book had been slipped a letter.

"DEAR WILLIAM GRANT," it ran.

"I can so well imagine how the hearts of our dear boys in the trenches must yearn for the simple stories of their childhood. I have been unable to obtain for you a separate edition of the story you desire, so I send you a complete edition which belonged to my poor brother. It was one of his most cherished treasures, and I have always preserved it in memory of him; but I am sure that he could have wished nothing better than that his book should be instrumental in adding to the happiness of our brave soldiers. That it may bring you some cheer in the midst of your terrible troubles is the earnest wish of

"Yours most truly,
"SOPHIA BROWNE."

"I call that pathetic, I do," said Alf.

"Pore ole girl," said Bill. "Seems a shame, don't it?"

"Tell you what," Alf suggested, "we'll keep it nice an' clean an' send it 'er back when we've done with it. Don't seem fair, do it, not to?"

"Well, you ain't started very well, 'ave you?"

"What d'yer mean?"

Bill leant forward and laid his finger on the open page, whose slightly yellowed surface was now adorned with a smudgy impress of Alf Higgins' unwashed thumb.

For the rest of that day Bill devoted himself sternly to study. He found the story of Aladdin very long and full of irrelevant detail, but by night his task was ended.

"Nice people they was in them times," he said, as he shut the book. "Kill you as soon as look at you. Alf, 'ere's a bit of advice for you. Whatever you do, mind you never send Eustace birds-nestin' for you."

"Birds-nestin'?"

"Yes. Seems it's the one thing 'e can't stick. Aladdin nearly upset the apple-cart that way. 'E asked for a rook's egg and Eustace turned nasty. Read for yourself."

Alf plodded painfully through the passage.

"Do R-O-C spell 'rook'?" he asked finally.

"Course it do," said Bill. "So now we'll 'ave to be careful. 'Tain't the kind o' thing a sensible bloke would ask for any'ow, but people do get silly fancies."

"What else do the book say?"

"Just what I told you. There's on'y one thing in this world you can't 'ave, my lad, an' that's this bloomin' rook's egg. Eustace'll rig you up a 'ouse in 'arf a tick as'll make Windsor Castle look like workmen's dwellin's. You've on'y got to say the word, an' there it is. So what we 'ave to do is to 'ave a real tip-top palace stuck down somewhere near this Ditchwater Park."

"But 'ow can we?"

"Ow d'yer mean? Eustace'll do it."

"Yes, but if we go plantin' palaces on other people's ground we'll get sent to clink, or something. Then we'd look silly."

"Good for you, Alf. That's true. In the book Aladdin got a bit o' land from 'is girl's father, an' built 'is 'appy 'ome on that. We can't do that. That ole boy in your picture don't look that sort. No, I'll tell you what—we'll 'ave to take a 'ouse—one of these 'ere big 'ouses in the country like the one your girl lives in, an' we'll let Eustace do it all up. Arter all, if we went an' told Eustace to build us a palace all in a night we'd 'ave the police an' the newspapers an' I don't know what else on our tracks."

"There mayn't be no big 'ouse goin' in 'er neighbor'ood."

"Well, we'll 'ave to send Eustace over an' find out."

"Send Eustace?" inquired Alf vaguely.

"We'll 'ave to. We got no time to waste."

"But the officer said...."

"I know what 'e said as well as you do; an' I'm no more wishful to get my leave stopped than what you are. But after all, where's the 'arm? We never been found out yet, an' it won't take 'arf a tick, an' I know a place where we'll never get spotted."

Reluctantly Alf was persuaded to Bill's retreat—a disused dug-out—and there, in much trepidation, he summoned Eustace. He produced *The Sketch* cutting once more from his pocket-book, and Bill explained to the djinn what was wanted.

"Mr. 'Iggins wants to marry that young lady you introduced 'im to, Eustace," Grant explained.

"Verily," replied the djinn, "the maid is of a fairness surpassing even the Princess Badralbudour, the bride of the Prince Aladdin."

"Yes. Well, this is 'er 'ouse, see? 'E wants you to take a 'ouse for 'im near by, something after the same style."

"In truth," said Eustace disdainfully, "it is not meet that the Lord of the Button should dwell in so mean a house. Command me that I build thee a palace like unto that of Aladdin, or even more richly bedight still, and it shall be done."

"Palaces ain't the fashion now," returned Bill imperturbably. "This sort of thing is all the rage. The lady won't like anything else, an' we 'ave to think of 'er, you know."

"See what you can do, Eustace," said Alf, "an' we'll wait 'ere for you."

"Lord, I hear and obey."

The djinn disappeared, and remained absent for half an hour, when he materialized once more, wearing a complacent expression.

"Lord," he said, "it is done. When will it please my Lord to see his dwelling place?"

"Ave you took a 'ouse already?" asked Alf, aghast.

"Verily, the dwelling is unworthy that the Lord of the Button should inhabit it; yet is it not less in appearance than the dwelling of thy bride's father, and assuredly in the magnificence of its interior it doth far outshine his."

Alf turned despairingly to Bill.

"There 'e goes again. Slapdash an' 'olesale. 'Ow do we know what 'arm 'e's done? 'E's probably mucked up the 'ole show now. I'm getting fed up."

"Lord," said the djinn, "the dwelling is lacking in nothing that the most extravagant of monarchs could desire."

"You read the book, Alf," advised Bill. "It'll be all right. If there's one thing Eustace does know all about, it's 'ouse-furnishin' an' decoratin'. You wait a week, an' you'll...."

He broke off in the middle of his sentence and listened intently. Voices were heard above, and then the sound of feet descending the stairs. Eustace vanished without waiting for orders—he was quickly becoming accustomed to his new routine. The two men, pocketing their pipes, retreated to the farthest depths of the dug-out. The footsteps grew louder, till three figures, dimly silhouetted against the light from the stairway, entered the dug-out.

"This is the place, sir," said Lieutenant Donaldson's voice. "I noticed it the other day. It runs quite a long way back, and if Finlay cares to put his stuff here I'll put a sentry over it."

"Seems all right," said another voice, at the sound of which Bill clutched Alf's arm. "Let's have a look at it."

Colonel Enderby switched on his pocket torch and cast its faint beam round, but without disclosing the cowering figures in the corner.

"Well, Finlay," he said at last, "I don't think you'll get a better bomb-store than this."

"No, sir." The bombing officer switched on his own torch and walked to the far end, examining the walls for signs of damp. "Seems quite dry, too. I—Hallo!"

"What's the matter?"

Lieutenant Finlay had found the rays of his torch throwing up into ghastly relief the open mouth and glassy terrified eyes of Private Higgins.

"Who are you?" he said sharply. "Come out of that!"

"What's the matter?" repeated the Colonel.

"There's a man here, sir—two men, I mean. Who are you?"

"Privates Grant and Higgins, sir." The two came sheepishly into the light.

"What?" said Lieutenant Donaldson in tones of thunder. "You two again? What are you up to *now*?"

"Looking for another German officer, I expect," said the colonel humorously. "Well, well, we mustn't be too hard on such a remarkable pair, Mr. Donaldson. But they must understand that this straying from their platoon must cease."

"Yes, sir." The company commander turned to his two scapegraces. "Clear out of this," he said in a fierce tone, "and you can thank your lucky stars that the colonel was here. I'm fed up with you."

The two, returning to their platoon at the double, sought out Sergeant Lees and volunteered for a carrying party for which that N.C.O. was just detailing a reluctant squad.

"Cert'nly," said he. "Always ready to oblige, I am. Sure you 'aven't any little friends you'd like to bring? Very well, then, never say I didn't do anything for you."

CHAPTER X

EUSTACE BLUNDERS AGAIN

The leave-train, which had been in motion for quite ten minutes, stopped once more with a jerk, and Bill, curled up in a corner, swore comprehensively.

"Lord," he said, "if I didn't know it was Blighty I was bound for, I'd get out an' walk back to my blinkin' battalion."

"Don't seem too anxious to get away from the front, do they?" said a gunner sitting opposite. "Seems as though the old engine can't bear to leave it. 'Ullo, we've started again. Bet you we don't go further'n that little bridge along there."

"It's a bet!" said Bill. "'Ere, Alf, wake up an' 'old the stakes."

With keen interest they watched the bridge coming nearer. At last they rattled across it in a leisurely manner.

"I win," said Bill. "'And over, Alf."

"On'y just, though," said the gunner with a rueful grin, as the train stopped once more with a grinding of brakes.

"'Ere, I'm tired o' this bloomin' train. Come out an' stretch yer legs a bit, Alf."

"Don't get left be'ind," advised the gunner. "I want to win my franc back."

They sat down by the side of the track.

"Some train!" said Alf, breaking a long silence.

"Perishin'," answered Bill. "But it's a bit better'n doin' them blinkin' fatigues for the sergeant, eh?"

"You bet!"

The two men had spent a very wearing week. Wherever they went the cold disapproving eye of Lieutenant Donaldson seemed to be upon them; and they had been constrained to live a life of painful and laborious virtue. Sergeant Lees, divining their feelings, had taken shameful advantage of them with a view (he explained) to keeping them out of mischief.

As a consequence they had for the past week lived in a giddy social whirl of ration-parties, carrying-parties and similar entertainments. But relieved as they were at having started their journey, they were not beyond chafing at the dilatory methods of the train. At no time did it travel at much above a walking pace; and it was liable at any time and for no apparent reason to abandon all attempts to proceed. It would stand miserably for minutes together, and when it moved on, it did so without warning—a habit which, in a more energetic train, might have proved annoying.

"Come on," said Alf suddenly. "Train's starting."

"No 'urry," Bill grunted placidly. He got up, stretched himself and trotted leisurely along the train till he came to his own carriage, and swung himself in.

"Ow about another bet?" said the gunner as they appeared. "A franc we don't pass that church over there this spasm."

"Righto. But you'll win—it must be 'arf-a-mile from 'ere."

"Well, if we're goin' to get to Blighty at all this week we'll 'ave to do a 'arf-mile stretch now an' again, you know."

But Bill's prophecy proved correct. Long before the church was reached he had handed back his newly-won franc to the gunner and, in sheer irritable restlessness, insisted on the somnolent Alf leaving the train once more.

"What makes me sick," he said, "is to think of that 'ouse in Blighty all ready an' waitin' for us, an' beer an' drinks, an' 'ere we are as dry as a bone in a 'owlin' French desert."

"Tell you what, then," answered Alf, struck with an idea. "What's to prevent us slippin' away be'ind that bridge an' lettin' the train go on without us?"

"An' tell Eustace to.... Lumme, you must be wakin' up, Alf. Why, it'll mean us 'avin' about three days extra leave. Come on!"

They strolled casually along the line without exciting comment or interest on the part of their fellow-travelers scattered about the line, and when the train started these were much too busily occupied in scrambling back to their own places to notice that two of their number had unostentatiously slipped behind a culvert. The train puffed off busily; after it had gone a hundred yards or so a head appeared at one of the windows.

"Keep down," cried Bill. "It's the gunner—wonder what 'e'll do with our kits?"

The question was hardly out of his mouth before it was answered. The gunner—obviously a creature of impulse—was seen to push the two packs and rifles of his late companions out of the window of the train.

"Nice fool 'e'd 'ave looked if we'd been on the train arter all, in another carriage," said Bill. "Still, p'raps it's just as well to 'ave the things. Now for Blighty."

Alf removed the black covering which still shrouded his talisman.

"Better wait till the train's out o' sight," said Bill. "She seems to be gettin' really started at last.... I s'pose there'll be plenty o' beer in your new 'ouse?"

"If there ain't we'll jolly soon 'ave some. Tell you what, Bill: 'Ow'd it be to 'ave one room in the 'ouse rigged up as a bar. We c'd 'ave proper sanded floors, an' a barmaid, an'—an' no closing time. Just for you an' me, so's we could 'ave a drink any ole time. Make it seem more 'omelike, wouldn't it?"

Bill stared at him in hopeless disgust.

"An' I thought you was beginnin' to think!" he said. "This fair takes the biscuit. What low ideas you do 'ave! Why whatever'd the wife think, an' your swell neighbors? You'll 'ave to be'ave like a gentleman, you know, when you marries a lady."

"Ow'm I goin' to do that?"

"I'll teach yer. You trust me."

"You! An' 'ow d'you know?"

"I do know. It's easy enough. Never you fear, I'll look after you."

Alf, looking a little skeptical, returned to the subject nearest his heart.

"Well, then, when'll I be able to get a drink when I'm a gentleman?"

"Why, you can 'ave 'em all day long. You sits in one easy chair an' me in another, an' a footman brings us whatever we wants."

"Lumme! A footman?"

"O' course. An' then, in the evenin', we 'as a reg'lar slap-up spread every day of our lives, with your missus in laces an' diamonds: an' then when she's finished 'er supper she goes off an' leaves us to finish the drinks."

"Ow d'you know she will?"

"They always does. 'Aven't you been to no plays, nor read no books? Lucky you'll 'ave me to keep you straight. 'Ullo, the ole train's pretty near out o' sight now. 'Adn't we better ...?"

Alf, his hand shaking excitedly, rubbed his Button.

Eustace appeared.

"That 'ouse," said Alf. "It's still all right about that, I s'pose?"

"Master," answered the djinn, "for a week past it hath been prepared for thine entry. Say but the word and I will transport thee thither."

"Right. Me an' Mr. Grant's quite ready now. On'y just get our kits an' rifles off the side o' the line first."

"Ome, John!" added Bill facetiously.

Eustace advanced upon them and they closed their eyes involuntarily. As before, nothing seemed to happen to them; and yet, when they opened their eyes again they were standing on the carriage sweep before the front door of an imposing country-house built of gray stone, overgrown for the most part with ivy and Virginia creeper. The building seemed to them vast—immense. It was long and low, and covered a great deal of space. They gazed about them hurriedly, and received an impression of great trees and smooth-shaven lawns, ornamental waters and flagged paths.

Alf gazed about him in awe.

"What do we do next?" he asked in a whisper.

"Ring the bell," answered Bill. "It's yours."

Alf advanced timidly up the steps, but recoiled in alarm as the door opened unexpectedly. It disclosed an Eastern personage whose clothes were stiff with gold and dazzling with gems; bowing low, he took both

Alf and Bill respectfully by the hand and led them through the doorway. Here the personage with another deep obeisance stood aside and motioned to them to precede him.

They crossed the vestibule towards the great hall which formed the center of the building, realizing that the whole house was one glittering mass of shifting barbaric color. In the hall itself stood slaves in ordered ranks, black and white, male and female, each attired with magnificence only one degree less than that of the personage who had received them. The whole crowd stood waiting, silent and motionless, for their new master to appear.

Bill came first. He sauntered easily into the hall with his hands in his pockets—that is, as easily as is possible on mosaic pavement to one wearing ammunition boots—and stood looking about him in a silence in which a pin's fall would have caused a reverberating crash; then Alf, who had been wrestling with a demon of shyness in the darkness of the vestibule, clattered sheepishly across the threshold.

In that instant the silence was shattered into a million pieces. Seven bands of weird and piercing oriental instruments came simultaneously into action in seven different keys and, so far as could be discerned above the frenzied beating of tambours, playing seven different tunes. Such of the gathering as had no instruments contributed to the joyful effect by shrieking and howling at the tops of their voices.

Alf—already awed by his surroundings—was quite overwhelmed by this demonstration. For one moment he seemed to contemplate flight; then, pulling himself together, he sought the side of his mate.

Bill turned towards him and shouted something, but it was utterly lost in the hideous din.

"Can't 'ear!" bellowed Alf, and shook his head in confirmation.

Bill's mouth opened and shut in a frenzied manner, and his face turned purple. He was utterly inaudible. At last, encircling Alf's ear with his two hands and using them as a trumpet, he bawled with the full force of his lungs:

"STOP IT!"

Alf leapt away as if he had been shot and began to massage his ear tenderly. His lips moved fervently, and his eyes held bitter reproach. The joyous din of welcome continued and swelled. Forgetting his injury Alf bawled back in the same way:

"Ow?"

"EUSTACE!" returned Bill impatiently.

Alf's fingers flew to his Button; in the mental paralysis caused by the awful din he had forgotten the djinn; but the instant his fingers touched the talisman every sound ceased. It did not die away; it ended suddenly, as though a giant had stopped his gigantic gramophone in the midst of a bar. At the same moment the entire assembly, even to the magnificent major-domo behind them in the vestibule, fell forward on its face and remained motionless. Alf and Bill—to whom, after three years at the front, it was second nature to take cover whenever their neighbors did so without asking questions—groveled likewise for a moment. Then they rose sheepishly and stared about them in astonishment. Not a sound or a movement came from the assembly. Then Alf, whose fingers had paused involuntarily when the noise shut off, rubbed the Button and the djinn appeared.

"'Ere, Eustace," said Alf with some heat, "what was all that blinkin' noise about, eh? We can't 'ear

ourselves think."

"Lord," said the djinn in pained surprise, "this was a concert of music in thine honor such as delighted the ear of the great Caliph Haroun Alraschid."

"Aaron 'oo? Never 'eard of the bloke, but 'e must 'ave 'ad a queer taste in music. Any'ow there's no need to kick up such a blinkin' row about it. Very nice of you an' all that, but you're bein' too 'olesale again. My ears is singin' now—let alone Mr. Grant 'avin' near busted me ear-drum." He caressed his injured member again.

Eustace, who only half comprehended this harangue, but gathered that his unaccountable master was once more finding unexpected faults in his arrangements, said nothing.

"Look 'ere, Alf," suggested Bill suddenly, "'adn't you better let some o' these pore blighters get up? The blood'll be running into their 'eads something 'orrid."

Alf addressed himself to the prostrate crowds. "'Ere," he said in diffident tones, "you can get up now." Not a soul moved.

"Squad!" said Bill loudly, in the formula sacred to the use of the army instructor in physical training. "On the feet—UP!"

The assembly remained prostrate.

"The blinkin' 'eathens don't understand English, that's what it is," said Alf with sudden enlightenment. "You tell 'em, Eustace."

The djinn uttered one guttural, staccato syllable. In a moment the multi-colored crowd had melted away, and the great house began to hum with life. In every direction slaves could be seen, each engrossed in his or her duties. Alf, master of all he surveyed, felt for the first time the full weight of his responsibilities.

"I say, Eustace," he said querulously, "'ow the 'ell am I goin' to look after a lot o' niggers as don't understand a word I says to 'em? Can't you get me an English 'ousemaid or two?"

"Can't be got," said Bill. "I read it in a paper t'other day. They called it the Servant Problem. You be thankful you've got these. An' very nice too!" he finished, his eyes on two langorous-eyed maidens in brilliant draperies who were descending the stairs.

"Lord," said Eustace, "none are there of thy speech among the slaves of the Button. But thy steward"—he indicated the personage who had welcomed them, now waiting patiently till he should be required again—"he is skilled in thy tongue, and through him will these thy servants perform all thy will. His name is Mustapha."

Eustace disappeared.

"Phew!" said Bill, looking about him. "All gold, an' silk, an' marble! Looks more like one o' them pantomime scenes than a real 'ouse, don't it? An' all them niggers, an' the girls an' all. An' 'im!"

He indicated once more the major-domo.

"Ain't much furniture about, is there?" said Alf after a pause. "Only sofas an' things."

"No. That's Eustace an' 'is old-fashioned ideas. Don't matter, though. Anything we want later on we can send 'im for. What I want now's a drink. Tell 'im."

"What did Eustace say 'is name was?"

"Mr. Farr, I think. Something like that. Call 'im an' see if 'e answers."

The major-domo did answer. Before long the two warriors were slaking their mighty thirst with real beer. Eustace might be slow to learn, but he seldom forgot a lesson.

"Ah!" said Bill, smacking his lips. "Now, I begin to feel something like. What's the next move? Farr 'ere seems to 'ave something on his mind. What's up with you? Speak up."

Mustapha, with another obeisance, spoke up.

"If my lord permits, thy slaves await thee that they may bathe thee and change thy traveling-dress for a garment better befitting thy state. After this there is prepared for thee a banquet."

"Civvy clothes? That's a bright idea o' yours," replied Bill condescendingly. "Of course we can't go on wearing these 'ere things. We'll 'ave another drink—a long 'un, Farr, an' a strong 'un—an' then you can do what you like."

"While I think of it," said Alf, "p'raps I'd better take the Button off me tunic; then it can't get lost."

He suited the action to the word, and threaded the talisman on to the cord which hung round his neck and supported his two identity disks.

The drink was brought. This time it was not beer, but some far more potent liquid. Its immediate effect on Bill was to stimulate his imagination.

"What's your name goin' to be, Alf?" he asked suddenly after the first draught. "I'm goin' to be Mr. Montmorency."

"Why?"

"Well, you don't want anybody recognizing us, do you? If this girl o' yours knows you're Private Alf 'Iggins of 'Ackney she'll never look at you. But if you shaves off yer mustache and calls yerself Wentworth, and dresses yerself like a gentleman—what ho, how about it?"

"You are a one," said Alf admiringly, wiping his lips and then his eyes. "You think of everything. This stuff don't 'arf tickle you up, do it? What about you? You 'aven't got a mustache to shave off. Will you 'ave a false one?"

"Eh? Oh, I don't marrer," said Bill thickly.

The effects of the drink—whatever it was—were now the reverse of stimulating. They were swift and complete. When Mustapha entered a moment later his lord and his lord's companion were side by side on the floor in stertorous slumber. At his command a party of slaves entered and carried the recumbent forms reverently upstairs.

* * * * *

Next morning Alf was awakened by the sun shining through the latticed windows and falling in brightly colored patches across his room. Wherever the light struck there was a glitter almost unbearable to his heavy eyes. He was lying in a bed of wonderful softness in a lofty chamber in which everything about him gave the impression of sumptuousness and luxury. Where the sunlight struck his coverlit it shimmered and

shone and twinkled till he was completely dazzled. It was made of cloth of gold thickly sewn with diamonds and pearls.

He gazed about with an idiotic expression, for his intellect was still in abeyance; and he tried without much success to remember where he was and how he got there. He could recall nothing clearly since he had fallen asleep in the great hall, still in his worn khaki with the dust of France upon him. He knew in a dim way that much had happened to him since then. There were various hazy recollections in his mind: of a bath, warm and scented, wherein he had lain at ease while other hands than his had cleansed him; of being clothed in garments more gorgeous than his imagination could have conceived, and of reclining with Bill (no less gorgeously clad than himself) on a divan where strange foods had been brought to them by lustrous-eyed girls; of listening to weird music and witnessing queer, sinuous dances. Lying here this morning he could not say whether these things had really happened or whether he had dreamed them. Only he knew that the effort to think made his head ache, and that judging by his general condition he must have had a remarkably "thick" night.

He closed his eyes and dozed uneasily, but was soon awakened by the sound of stealthy footsteps and the swish of silken draperies. He half opened his eyes, and, glancing cautiously under lowered lids saw that his room was gradually filling with people whose one care seemed to be to avoid waking him. They disposed themselves round the chamber in some kind of settled order and, with eyes fixed on his recumbent form, stood waiting. Alf, still wondering what this might mean, suddenly noticed that quite half of his unexpected visitors were women—just such women as haunted his hazy recollections of the night before.

Shocked to the depths of his respectable soul, Alf opened his eyes and sat up. Instantly the entire assemblage prostrated themselves—except some of the women, who, Alf saw with horror, carried musical instruments and displayed every sign of being about to play upon them.

Alf clutched his aching head.

"No, no!" he shouted imploringly. "Stop it. Farr—Mr. Farr! Take 'em away!"

"Lord," said Mustapha, entering and bowing gravely. "I am here."

"Turn them shameless 'ussies out o' my room. What are they doin' 'ere? I never 'eard o' such goin's on."

"Verily, Lord, they are the ladies of thy household, whose duty it is to be present at thy *levée*. And these others are ladies skilled in music, who are about to wish thee good-morrow with a concert of soft sounds."

"Not if I know it—not while I've got a 'ead on me like this, any'ow. Clear 'em all out, every last one of 'em—men as well."

Mustapha said a few words to the concourse, which went away saying no word but looking very much astonished.

"An' now," said Alf, "where's me clothes?"

"Lord, they are here." Mustapha indicated a magnificent garment which was lying with a jeweled turban on a cushion at the side of the bed.

"Clothes, I said," remarked Alf caustically, "not a blinkin' dressing-gown—what's that?"

"That" was a bull-like roar in the distance, which repeated itself over and over again until it at last resolved itself into a call for "Alf."

"'Ere, Bill," bellowed Alf in return.

"Oh! 'Ere you are," said the newly-christened Mr. Montmorency in wrathful tones as he entered. "Every room I go into seems to be full o' women. 'Ere, what d'you think o' this?" He displayed the garment he was wearing—a voluminous coat of some rich shimmering stuff. "Pinched me clothes, they 'ave, an' left me this ... this...."

Words failed him.

"An' a pair o' pink satin trousers," he concluded with heat. "What's the game?"

"Dunno. Same 'ere," answered Alf. "Look 'ere, Farr, don't you start no funny jokes with us. Clear this mess away an' bring us some proper civvy clothes."

"Same as what a gentleman 'ud wear," added Bill. "Pot 'at, an' gloves, an' spats, an'—an' so on. An' 'urry up."

"But, Lord," protested Mustapha, "these are garments of the greatest magnificence, such as the great Caliph Haroun Alraschid delighted to wear...."

"All right, take 'em to 'im. 'E can 'ave 'em, for all I care. Look 'ere, 'ave you got any ordinary clothes or not?"

"Suits less magnificent have I many, O Master. But as for the hat called pot, or the spat, I have no knowledge of such. Nevertheless...."

"I see what it is," said Alf disgustedly. "It's just Eustace. 'E's mucked it again. We'll just 'ave to send for 'im an' tell 'im what sort of a rig-out we want. Pity 'e can't never get nothing right the first time, ain't it?"

He sat down on his diamond-studded coverlet and once again summoned his sorely tried familiar.



CHAPTER XI

THE VICAR'S WIFE OUTRAGED

"Well, Julian," said Mrs. Davies in her most determined tones. "I think it's your plain duty to call at once."

The Vicar of Denmore sighed, and laid down his paper on the breakfast-table.

"But, my dear," he protested mildly, "we know nothing of the new people at the Manor. We don't even know if they have taken possession. If it is true that extensive alterations are going on, they can hardly be there yet. Why, it's only a week since they took the place."

"Julian," returned his wife, "there is no use in arguing the point. It's quite time that all the mystery about the Manor was cleared up. You know I hate gossip...."

She paused. The vicar took a drink of coffee.

"You know," resumed Mrs. Davies very distinctly, "that I hate gossip...."

"Of course, of course, my dear," agreed the vicar hastily.

"But it is impossible not to know that the whole neighborhood is talking. I'm not asking you to pay a ceremonious call. If the people turn out to be German spies.... The feeling of everybody is that the sooner somebody finds out just what is happening at the Manor, the better. And you've got the best excuse."

Mr. Davies got up and walked about the room.

"Really, my dear," he said at last in what was (for him) quite a fierce tone, "if you're asking me to do this out of mere idle curiosity...."

"Idle fiddlesticks! Do remember there's a war on, Julian. When a great big house like that suddenly becomes full of people from nobody knows where, who never seem to come out of the grounds, and who certainly don't deal with the local tradesmen, what is one to think?"

"That they import their provisions from London," suggested the vicar.

"But they don't. The only London van that comes here is Harrods'—the FitzPeters deal there, but I know they don't call at the Manor."

"Did Miss FitzPeter tell you that?"

"No. She doesn't seem very interested in the concerns of the village. She could or would tell me nothing.... But I stopped Harrods' van in the village and asked the driver. The whole business is most suspicious. So we think—I think that it's quite time you went up to the Manor and found out whether they're going to use the Manor pew."

The vicar sighed deeply.

"Very well, my dear," he said with resignation. "Since you insist. But I fear my talents do not lie very much in the direction of private detection. What is the nature of the gos ... the—er—tales that are going

about in the village?"

"Oh, just vague and exaggerated rumors. You see, nobody has been allowed inside the grounds at all. There haven't even been any letters for the people yet. I was at the post-office yesterday and Mrs. Rudd was most aggrieved about it. Of course everybody thinks they're spies, or horrible plotters, or something. Otherwise, why should they behave like this? Bobby Myers says that he and another boy climbed over the fence and saw a lot of black men in the garden, but that I do *not* believe. I have seldom found Bobby truthful."

"I fully expect that I shall find something in the nature of a mare's nest," said the vicar. "But perhaps I can do some good by reminding these people that a village is always a hotbed of—that is, that people will talk, and that...." He broke off, realizing that to express tactfully just what he wanted to say was beyond his power. "All the same," he finished, "if there is anything wrong, I am afraid that so very shortsighted an emissary as I will prove of little use."

"Never mind about that, Julian. I shall do all that part of it—as if I could trust *you*! You are just my excuse, that's all."

"But, my dear, is it quite usual ...?"

Mrs. Davies snorted.

"Is it usual to shut oneself up as these people are doing—especially in war-time? Anyhow, usual or not, I'm going. For a whole week there's been something mysterious going on in that house and I mean to find out what it is before anything dreadful comes of it. I'll be ready soon after lunch, Julian."

Later in the day the reluctant clergyman and his far from reluctant wife turned in at the drive gates of Denmore Manor. They walked along the thick and somber avenue, at the end of which the trees suddenly ceased altogether and the drive gave a half-turn before sweeping on to the house. There was no one visible except a far-away gardener, of whom so little could be seen that it was quite impossible to judge whether he were a suspicious-looking character or not. The visitors looked round them at the smooth, green lawns and the riot of flowers, and the vicar sighed once more—this time in content.

"I should like to know," observed his wife with asperity, "how many men of military age it took to do this in a week? Why, the place was a wilderness. It had not been looked after for two years, and even in peace-time it took a small army to look after it. However, I suppose you can get things done even in war-time if you're rich enough and unpatriotic enough."

She marched resolutely up the steps, evidently more firmly convinced of the righteousness of her mission than ever, and paused with a hand on the bell.

"All the windows are barred," she commented darkly, as the lattices which Eustace's Eastern taste had brought into being struck her questing eye. "Does *that* convey nothing to you?"

The vicar, who could not honestly have said that it conveyed anything very sinister to him, merely looked uncomfortable. Mrs. Davies pulled the bell-handle. The door opened with embarrassing suddenness to display two massive negroes, clad in uniforms of startling brightness. Inside the vestibule could be seen the magnificent Mustapha.

"My goodness!" said Mrs. Davies, shrinking back suddenly. "Blacks!! Bobby was right."

The major-domo bowed low and with a gesture invited them to enter; but the lady, who distrusted "blacks" fervently, left her husband to reply.

The vicar beamed vaguely in the direction of the doorway.

"Er—is Mr.—er—that is," he began feebly.

"Enter, O Master," said Mustapha, leading the way inside, "thou and thy woman with thee."

"Woman, indeed!" muttered Mrs. Davies in outraged tones as she followed them. "Woman!! A black..."

"My dear," urged the vicar in an earnest undertone. "It's probably only the Eastern way. I do not suppose he means any disrespect."

"I hope not, indeed.... Good Heavens!"

The newly decorated hall had burst suddenly on Mrs. Davies' vision, and her injured pride was forgotten in her amazement at the sight. The vicar, who could only discern a blaze of color, gazed too. Mustapha moved majestically across the hall and disappeared up the marble staircase.

"Julian," demanded Mrs. Davies, "are we dreaming? What has happened?"

The vicar, who had now managed to focus his myopic eyes, glanced at the wall opposite the front door, and gave a wail of anguish and horror.

"The tapestry!" he cried. "The great tapestry. They've taken it down. How *could* they?"

He went over to the wall where once the tapestry had been and gazed forlornly at it as though he hoped by some occult power of thought concentration to bring it back.

"Well," said Mrs. Davies acidly, "they are at least consistent. You could hardly expect tapestries to go with this kind of thing." She was at the foot of the stairs, examining the knob of the heavily gilded banisters. It was studded with diamonds and completed with an enormous ruby worth about as much as the house. "Terrible pieces of glass stuck about everywhere. Dreadful sham orientalism; why, they've even had that fine old staircase taken down and marble put in instead. It looks more like a second-class restaurant than...." She wandered off on a tour of inspection; a moment later her voice was angrily upraised.

"What do you want, you shameless hussy? How dare you touch me? Go away. Do you hear me? Take your hands off me and go away.... Let me go, woman.... Julian! Julian!!"

The vicar rushed blindly in the direction of his wife's voice; his pince-nez fell off and flew wildly at the end of their cord. He stumbled over a divan, slithered across the marble floor and stood, panting and peering, at his wife's side. He found her, flushed and angry, standing at bay before a group of lovely and perplexed but very scantily clad female slaves, who had approached at Mustapha's command to conduct her to the women's quarters of the house. As the vicar arrived, the leader made another attempt to take Mrs. Davies' hand, and received from the angry lady a stinging smack across the face. Instantly she and her following prostrated themselves on the floor.

"My dear Hermia!" murmured the vicar.

"Julian," returned Mrs. Davies in a terrible voice, "this is no place for me, or for you either. Take me

home at once. This"—she eyed the prostrate but shapely forms around her, and shuddered—"is worse than I could have imagined. I insist on your taking me home at once."

"But really, Hermia," said the vicar mildly, "I am sure this young lady ... perhaps in the East...." The leader of the slaves, taking heart of grace from the vicar's gentle tones, was rising to her feet; but meeting a glance of concentrated venom from his wife, she flopped back once more, appalled.

"East, indeed!" Mrs. Davies laughed scornfully. "Hussies from the stage, most likely. Of course you'll take their part, Julian. Men are all alike. I'm only thankful that I came with you to this place."

She swung round to depart and came face to face with Alf, who had ventured out to receive his first guests. He was in a state of great trepidation which the sound of Mrs. Davies' angry high-pitched voice did nothing to allay. It was a transformed Alf. He had compelled Eustace to take away all the wonderful but highly unusual garments with which he had stocked his master's wardrobe, and, explaining once more to his familiar how useless it was to be wholesale without at the same time being up-to-date, had commanded him to supply instead modern clothes suited to every requirement of his new position. He now appeared resplendent in a voluminous frock-coat, gray trousers, a stand-up collar of inordinate height and patent leather shoes. The whole effect was completed and rounded off by a very shiny top-hat.

This Alf at once removed. He stood nervously twisting it in his hands. Mrs. Davies, not knowing quite what to make of him, gave him a menacing glare.

"Good afternoon!" she said in threatening tones.

"Yes 'm," said Alf feebly.

"You, I suppose, are the butler. Is your master in?"

"Yes 'm ... I'm ... that is, 'e's ... er, I'm 'im," was the lucid reply. It conveyed nothing whatever to the lady. The vicar, however, who had realized from the top-hat that he could not be speaking to a butler, rose to the occasion.

"My name is Davies," he said courteously. "Er—my wife—I have called to—er—the Manor pew...."

Alf, feeling a shade happier, put his hat on again.

"Sit down, sir," he said. "Won't the lady take a chair—that is a—er—cushion?"

"I will not," snapped Mrs. Davies fiercely. "I am shocked and astonished at the things I have seen and the way I have been treated, and if you are responsible I demand an explanation, Mr.... Mr...."

"Ig ... Wentworth," supplied Alf, remembering at the last moment his change of name.

Once more he clutched his hat. It seemed to afford him moral support in dealing with this terrifying lady, and he clung to it for the remainder of the interview.

"Really, my dear, Mr. Higg-Wentworth can hardly be blamed for an error on the part of his ... er...."

The vicar's eyes rested with unclerical appreciation on the form of the recently smacked leader of the slaves. He wondered what her exact status in the establishment might be. Was she guest or servant? He decided not to risk it. "I am sure the—ah—young lady acted under a pure misapprehension."

His wife snorted.

"It is disgraceful, and their clothing is nothing short of immodest. Please send them away at once."

Alf gave an order to Mustapha, who translated it into Arabic. The slaves rose and after bowing low to Alf disappeared up the stairs with much swirling of draperies and jingling of anklets. Mrs. Davies averted her face, but the vicar's gaze followed them up the stairs until the last had disappeared.

Alf was feverishly anxious to make things right, and he turned on Mustapha.

"Look 'ere, Farr," he said sternly, "what's all this mean? Why was them girls bothering this lady?"

"Lord," said the steward, "verily it was supposed that this man had brought the woman hither to sell her unto thee, and for that reason...."

"WHAT!" Mrs. Davies' voice and expression were such that even the imperturbable Mustapha broke off in alarm. Alf stammered out something unintelligible, but was cut short.

"You need say no more. I have heard and seen *quite* enough. I am ashamed to have set foot in such a place as this house has become. Dreadful!" She swept a glance of regal scorn round the hall. "Let me tell you, Mr. Higg-Wentworth, or whatever you call yourself, that you have not heard the last of this, nor those shameless undressed hussies of yours either. This is a law-abiding English village, where such things can be stopped I feel sure. I shall go straight to Sir Edward FitzPeter and see if something cannot be done. Come, Julian."

She stalked out. The vicar, perplexed and unhappy and far from being convinced that his wife was not making a fool of herself, followed.

Alf watched them out of sight, wondering miserably whether it was still too late to do something to retrieve the situation; then as Mrs. Davies disappeared with a jerk round the corner of the drive, he crammed his hat down on to his head with fierce despair, regardless of the havoc he was causing to its beautiful nap, and wandered dispiritedly up the stairs to Bill.

That warrior was far from being dispirited. He was lying on a divan with an expression of utter content. He was even more gayly clad than Alf; but he was now taking his ease, and his coat was lying neatly folded on a cushion near by, revealing to the gaze in all its glory a waistcoat which would have occupied the place of honor at any exhibition of futurist art. By his right elbow stood a tiny inlaid table on which was a foaming flagon of beer. At his feet, looking like a brilliant, shimmering heap of silk, lay yet another of the army of female slaves. She lay in an attitude of sinuous ease, but her dark eyes were fixed on Bill's face with something of the adoring expression of a faithful dog.

"'Ullo," began Mr. Montmorency (*né* Grant) with a cheerful grin. "'Ere you are. 'Ave a drink with me. This 'ere girl"—he jerked an expressive thumb at his attendant—"she's a fair wonder, she is. Mr. Farr, 'e's told 'er off special to look after me, an' she don't 'arf take a pride in 'er work neither. She don't understand a word I say, but it don't matter. She just fetches me another every time I finish, an' seems to like me better the more I make 'er do. Never 'ad such a time in all me little life. Lucy, I call 'er."

"Seems fond o' you," said Alf gloomily.

"She is that. Thinks I'm no end of a nut. Well, 'ow did you get on with the nobility an' the gentry? 'Oo was it came? None o' your girl's people, I s'pose."

Alf shook his head.

"That's all up," he said. "None of 'er people won't never come to this 'ouse."

"Rats!" said Bill. "Why, we ain't been 'ere more'n two days, any'ow, an' 'ere's somebody been to see us already. Why, it's on'y neighborly for them to look us up. 'Oo was it to-day, any'ow?"

"The parson and 'is wife."

"Very good, for a start," commented Bill.

"'Tisn't good at all," Alf retorted hotly. "I tell you, Bill Grant...."

"Montmorency," inserted Bill in gentle parenthesis.

"... It's all up."

"What's all up?"

"We are. This place. It won't do. I've—I've mucked it all up, I s'pose. Comes of you not bein' there."

"That's right. Put it all on to me! I've got to trot round like a bloomin' nursemaid, 'ave I, to keep you out of mischief. What 'ave you been an' done, any'ow?"

"This 'ere parson's wife, she's a fair terror. She thinks we ain't respectable, an' she's off to get ole Sir FitzPeter to fire us out of 'ere."

"'E can't."

"No, but it knocks the bottom out o' me gettin' 'is daughter. 'Twasn't much of a chance before, but it's all up now."

Bill considered.

"Why don't the ole girl think we're respectable?" he asked at last.

"'Cause of the blinkin' silly way Eustace 'as done the place up. An' she saw a lot o' them girls, an' she didn't like the way they was dressed."

"Well, I don't know as I'm altogether surprised at that." Bill's eyes rested thoughtfully on Lucy's bare leg, ornamented with a flashing anklet. "You couldn't 'ardly expect it, could you? But we can easy change that, you know. It'll mean you 'avin' Eustace up again, but after all that's 'is look-out. 'E ought to get things right first time. If 'e won't, 'e must take the consequences. You can 'ave all these girls dressed in nice black dresses, an' caps an' aprons—except my Lucy o' course. They won't change you, will they, my dear?"

He stirred Lucy gently with his foot, and she sprang up ready to perform her usual task. Finding her master's flagon still full, she sank back again into her place with a puzzled but still adoring smile.

"What's the good ..." began Alf.

"An' then," pursued Bill, taking no notice whatever of the interruption, "we'll 'ave some furniture in, an' about time too. Then what can the parson's wife 'ave to say, eh?"

"But what ..." began Alf.

"Mind you," Bill continued serenely, "you'll 'ave to tell Eustace just exactly what you want. It's no good

leaving it to 'im—we know 'ow much good 'is ideas are. Tell 'im what you wants an' see you gets it."

"Yes, but 'ow much good will that do? The ole woman's gone off ravin' like a blinkin' lunatic, an' once she gets round to ole FitzPeter all the furniture in the world won't do us no good. 'Ow can we stop 'er tellin' 'im?"

"Easy enough," said Bill with unabated confidence. "Strike 'er dumb!"

"Eh?" Alf's eyes and mouth opened to their utmost extent.

"Tell Eustace to make 'er dumb. Then she *can't* tell anybody anything."

"She could write it," said Alf, after consideration.

"Paralyze 'er, then," retorted Bill callously.

"Even then, 'er 'usband'd know. 'Sides, that ain't goin' to do us no good. The neighbor'ood 'ud be bound to notice it if she came 'ere an' then went dumb an' paralyzed—specially if we 'ad to do it to the parson too."

"True for you, Alf—it wouldn't make us what you might call popular."

Bill took a long drink, to assist thought. The faithful Lucy uncurled herself once more and left the room with the empty flagon.

"Good girl," said Bill, looking after her. "She'd make a fine wife, she would. I ain't goin' to 'ave no cap an' apron put on my Lucy, Alf; she can keep out o' the way when there's company about, but I'm goin' to keep 'er dressed as she is, see?"

"Seems to me," Alf answered crossly, "if you don't 'urry up an' think what's to be done, you an' your Lucy'll 'ave to part company any'ow. Once that ole woman gets to Ditchwater Park she'll make these 'ere parts too 'ot to 'old us. An' she must be 'arf way there by now."

Bill gave a scornful laugh.

"I'm ashamed of you, Alf, gettin' the wind up like that. I am, really. Tell you what to do. Tell Eustace to fix 'er whenever she tries to talk or write about us—she an' the parson, too. Then she can't do no 'arm to anybody! 'Ow's that for a scheme, eh?"

Bill put his thumbs in the armholes of his pictorial waistcoat; Alf stared in speechless admiration.

"Lumme," he said at last. "You do think o' things. But 'ow d'you know that Eustace can do it?"

Bill held up the old lady's brother's copy of the *Arabian Nights*.

"I been readin' this," he said, "seems to be just the sort o' thing they used to like doing in them times. I tell you, I'm glad it's us as 'ave got Eustace an' not the 'Un, because ..."

Fearing that Bill was about to bring up once more his favorite scheme for using Eustace to kidnap the Kaiser and end the war Alf cut him short by producing his talisman. Lucy, entering the room at the same moment with a full tankard of beer for her lord, caught sight of the Button and instantly prostrated herself. The tankard reached the ground just before she did, with the result that Lucy's clothes and hair and Lucy's devout forehead weltered in a foaming pool of wasted beer.

Alf gasped.

"Tripped over the mat, I expect," he volunteered feebly.

"You silly owl," roared Bill, exasperated no less by the discomfort of his Hebe than by the waste of his drink. "Don't you know yet what 'appens if you bring out the Button in front of the servants? Down they goes an' down they stays. Put it away, quick, or you'll be drownin' the girl. 'Ere, Lucy, 'op it an' get dried."

Lucy, dripping with beer, fled, and Alf, looking rather sheepish, once again produced the Button.

He hesitated.

"You know," he said, "I 'ardly like to—I mean, we 'ad Eustace up on'y yesterday, you know. If we 'ave 'im again now won't 'e be fed up?"

"Let 'im," said Bill. "S'long as you don't ask 'im for a rook's egg, 'e can't turn nasty. An' any'ow you've got to 'ave 'im to swop the furniture, so 'e may as well do the two jobs together. And for 'eving's sake let's 'ave a few tasty pictures on the walls, an' some ornaments an' things. We want to make the place a bit 'omey."

"'Ave whatever you like," replied Alf. "You knows more about that sort o' thing than what I do."

He rubbed the Button.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, as the vicar and his wife had turned into the road at the Manor gates, the doctor's gardener, one Amos Goodwin, had chanced to be passing.

Amos was a sociable creature who measured his success in life by the amount of new and in some cases original gossip he managed to put into circulation. He was the most prolific purveyor of intimate domestic scandal in the neighborhood. Certainly he was the indispensable right-hand man of Mrs. Rudd the post-mistress, supplying her with the material on which she ran an informal Bureau of Unreliable Information. Amos had come past the Manor on the off-chance of seeing something which might suggest a plausible theory about the Manor mystery; but he was too good a journalist not to prefer to deal in the truth when he could get it; and the appearance of Mr. and Mrs. Davies actually leaving the suspicious premises held promise of a real and authentic "scoop"—if he could only hear what they were saying. He hobbled after the pair as quickly as he could, his long ear straining forward; but they swung off down the road at a pace that his rheumatic old legs could not hope to emulate. All the same, he had his reward; before she was out of earshot he heard Mrs. Davies' loud and piercing voice, remarking:

"Well, Julian, all I can say is that *I* consider the whole place a perfect scandal. Those black men, and the horrible women—ugh! The whole place looked more like a scene from 'Chu Chin Chow' than an English country house. And one thing I consider *most* suspicious...."

Amos could hear no more. But on his way home he stopped at the post office.

CHAPTER XII

ALF RECEIVES

That evening a deep peace had settled over Dunwater Park. Except for two people sunning themselves on the terrace, all the inhabitants of the hospital had gone to the tennis-court or the golf-links or the river.

"Oh dear," said Isobel, breaking a long silence. "I suppose I ought to go and finish the day's work before dinner."

"Don't," urged Denis Allen earnestly.

"But duty calls."

"Let it. And if you're as virtuous as all that, please note that it is your duty to entertain your guests—meaning me. Tell me the—I say, there's somebody coming across the lawn."

"Help!" Isobel pulled a face. "My pet aversion."

"Of course," grumbled Allen disconsolately, "this *would* happen the very first time I've had you to myself." He sat up and regarded the approaching couple with malevolence. "Which is your—er—friend? Male or female?"

"Oh, female. The vicar's rather a dear, but his wife...." She gave an all-expressive gesture, and rose to be polite to her unwelcome guests.

"This is Mr.... Why, do you know each other?" For the vicar and Allen had fallen into one another's arms.

"Last time we met," explained the reverend gentleman, "I was bowling for your father's team and this young man was what is technically known as taking tea off me."

"I remember," said Isobel. "I was scoring and very busy you kept me."

"Well, well, how splendid to see you again, and recovering your strength, I hope? And what tremendous luck for you falling into the hands of friends!"

"I should rather think it was," agreed Allen with enthusiasm.

"No luck about it at all," corrected Isobel. "I heard he was in London, so of course he had to come here." Allen beamed. "I'd have every one of my friends here if I could only get hold of them," she added maliciously; Allen's face fell.

"We must organize some cricket for you," went on the vicar. He was proceeding to enlarge on this congenial topic when his wife brought him sternly back to the object of his visit.

"Is Sir Edward in?" she asked Miss FitzPeter. "The vicar and I have called to see him about...." She broke off her sentence in the middle with a startling suddenness and seemed to be struggling with herself. Mr. Davies, not knowing what was the matter, but anxious to cover his wife's confusion, hurled himself into the breach.

"Yes," he corroborated, "we feel that he ought to be told that...." He got no further. A comical look of mingled fear and suspicion crossed his face. Isobel and Allen waited for the sentence to be brought to some conclusion, but in vain.

"Well," replied Isobel, when it was plain that no more was forthcoming, "I believe dad is in the library. I—I hope nothing awful has happened—nobody's dead, or anything, are they?"

The vicar looked distressed.

"Oh, no, no. Nothing of that kind at all—not in the least. I just want to tell him that...."

Again there was an awkward pause. All four were now plainly embarrassed.

"I'm sorry—perhaps I oughtn't to have asked," Isobel apologized at last. There was just a touch of stiffness in her tone, and poor Mr. Davies grew more troubled than ever.

"Not in the least," he protested. "Please don't think that. The whole matter is simply that.... I mean to say, you see, we...."

A strained silence followed.

"Please come in," Isobel said coldly. "I will see if dad is in."

She and her visitors went into the house, leaving Allen lost in amazement.

In a moment or two Isobel returned.

"Tell me," Allen asked in a melodramatic stage whisper, "have they confessed?"

"Not a thing. What can have made them behave like that?"

"I thought it was my presence that was worrying them. After all, if he's murdered his mother-in-law for her lump sugar he'd hardly like to tell you about it before a comparative stranger."

"Perhaps," suggested Isobel, "they've come to clear up the mystery of Denmore Manor."

They both laughed. The Manor Mystery had become a family jest at Dunwater.

"What's the latest about it?"

"The plot thickens," answered Isobel. "My maid was full of rumors at teatime. Somebody—I couldn't make out who—has been up to the Manor and seen black men and, oh, every kind of horror. Martin was quite breathless with emotion when she told me about it."

"I wonder how much there is in it."

"I'd love to go and find out. Really, you know, it's time some sensible person went. According to the village these people might be cannibals."

"Perhaps they are."

"Well, whatever they are, I frankly own I'm curious about them."

"Why don't you take me as bodyguard and call on them?"

"No excuse."

"Go and ask 'em for a Red Cross subscription. It's about the only house in the neighborhood you haven't been to."

"D'you mean it?" Isobel asked eagerly.

"Of course I do. I'm as curious as anybody."

"Righto, then I will. To-morrow morning. Don't say a word to any one, or dad may object. Meet me at the garage at eleven, and we'll sneak out. You'll have to look after me like anything. Bring a card-case in one hand and a revolver in the other; then we'll be ready for anything. Hallo, dad—your visitors didn't keep you long. What did they want?"

Sir Edward came out on to the terrace and dropped into a chair.

"Mad!" he said meditatively. "Quite mad, so far as I can see."

"Who?"

"Both of 'em."

"But what did they want?"

"That's just it. I don't know. They kept on saying that they wanted to tell me something I ought to know, but not a thing more would they say."

He walked irritably up and down the terrace. Allen and Isobel looked at each other.

"In the end," said Sir Edward, "I lost my temper. I practically kicked 'em out, and I've no idea now why they came. I'll go and see Davies to-morrow, to see if he's recovered his sanity."

He paused in his pacing and faced them.

"By the way," he continued, "Malcolm tells me that he hears in the village that Denmore is full of black men, and done up like a scene from 'Chu Chin Chow'—what's the matter?"

Both Allen and Isobel had had a sudden fit of helpless laughter.

"*What* a set of gossips we all are—go on, dad."

"All I was going to say," pointed out her father huffily, "is that these people are obviously from the East, and if so I shall be glad to cultivate their acquaintance. You know how interested I am in the East. Gossip, indeed!"

He shot into the house, still in a very ruffled condition.

Isobel glanced at her watch.

"Heavens," she said, "I must fly. I've a crow to pick with the War Office over the telephone before dinner. Don't forget—eleven to-morrow, and don't tell anybody."

Allen decided that he was not likely to tell any one. The mere feeling that he and Isobel shared a secret was too precious for that. Every day he fell more deeply in love with her, and every day he felt more sure

that the spoilt beauty of the illustrated papers had never existed save in the perverted imaginations of unkind people. On the surface, he and she had slipped easily into the old intimacy they had enjoyed once before, when Isobel was a small girl, but every now and then some chance word or look had awakened a hope in Allen that some deeper bond was being or had been formed between them.

He lay in his chair pondering these and other imaginings with a pleased and fatuous smile, until the sight of his fellows returning reminded him that dinner-time was approaching, and he went in and changed from his flannels into uniform. That evening they played boisterous and childish games. Isobel, looking more than usually lovely, was in a mood of irresponsible gayety; and the patients, catching the infection, became over-excited to such an extent that the sister-in-charge (who was making as much noise as any one) had to assume an official demeanor and threaten to stop the revels. To Allen Isobel hardly spoke a word the whole evening; and if she was aware of his presence where he sat in a big arm-chair in a corner of the hall she gave no sign. When ten o'clock came and sister was shepherding her unruly flock to bed, Isobel was not there to say good night. Allen went to bed in a state of acute misery, convinced that Isobel had done this on purpose (which was the truth) and because she disliked him (which was not the truth). He lay awake pondering dismally on the incomprehensibility of women.

He came down to breakfast next morning in a state of anxiety, and found Isobel in the center of a clamorous mob busy dealing out coffee and tea, while sister dealt with the porridge queue. On his plate was a folded note, which he opened. Underneath a skull and cross-bones neatly executed in red ink was a message:

"Meet me beneath the gnarled oak at eleven. All is prepared. Be silent and secret. The password is 'coffee-pot'—A FRIEND."

So all was well, after all!

Allen slipped away to the garage at the appointed time, and found the little car, with which Isobel was accustomed to terrorize the countryside, being filled with petrol by an aged chauffeur.

"Who goes there?" demanded the car's owner.

"Coffee-pot," answered Allen, in sepulchral tones.

"Pass friend, and all's well. Jump in, and we'll get away quick."

"Not *too* quick, please. I'm not in the Flying Corps," pleaded Allen. But Isobel—who had a wide reputation as a fearsome driver—let in the clutch with a suddenness which nearly sent Allen out over the back of the car, and they fled down the drive and disappeared amid the cheers of the few patients who happened to see them. The car went round the corner on one wheel at a speed which would have meant certain disaster had any other traffic chanced to be passing. Allen clutched at the sides of his seat lest sheer centrifugal force should deposit him head downwards in a ditch.

"It's all right," said Isobel reassuringly, as they gathered speed on the straight road.

"I'm glad to hear it," answered Allen. "Tell me when you're going to take another corner. I'm glad I'm not a nerve case."

The landscape streamed past them for a space, till Isobel slowed down.

"Here we are," she said.

They turned into the Manor drive, and a moment later pulled up before the house.

"I'm so excited. I feel just like a cinema actress," whispered Isobel.

"So'm I. I've got one hand on my revolver and one on my card-case. Which d'you suppose will be wanted?"

"Neither. You'll have to use the revolver hand to ring the bell with."

"No, I shan't. Somebody's coming. Get ready to fly for your life.... Why, it's an ordinary butler!"

It was Mustapha who was the cause of Allen's disappointed whisper—a transformed Mustapha, wearing instead of his gorgeous robes the sober black of the English serving-man, and looking so villainous that Allen wondered for one moment whether he ought not to have brought his revolver in real earnest.

"Er—" said Isobel, "is Mr.—er...."

Mustapha, casting one glance of appraising admiration over her, did not wait for more. Bowing low to Allen he signified by a sign that they were to await his return, and disappeared round the angle of the house.

"I—I hope it's all right," whispered Isobel a little nervously.

"We can still escape," Allen pointed out.

"No,—I'm going through with it. But—it was a black man!"

"Very," said Allen. "Probably he'd look less of a villain in his native dress."

"I hope so, I'm sure."

On a lawn at the south side of the house stood two long chairs above which the blue smoke from two pipes curled heavenwards. On one lay Bill, with the faithful Lucy still curled up at his feet; on the other was the *soi-disant* Mr. Wentworth. Both had changed from the ceremonious raiment of the previous day, and now appeared in the rôle of gentlemen of leisure. Bill was gorgeous in a red-and-black blazer, white trousers, and brown-and-white canvas shoes; but Alf—as befitted the lord of the Manor—outshone him by far. He had a straw hat with a gaudy black-and-yellow ribbon; a Norfolk coat in the bold black-and-white check; and trousers and shoes like Bill's. A stiffly-starched collar nestled furtively behind a satin tie of aggressive color and immutable form. But the crowning glory of the whole get-up was a strange garment—a cross between a cummerbund and a dress-waistcoat—which encircled his middle and supported a gold albert watchchain ornamented with many dangling seals.

By the side of each chair stood an inlaid stool bearing each an enormous flagon of silver. As Mustapha approached the little group, an arm appeared from each chair, and the two flagons were simultaneously lifted, were inverted for a space and were replaced simultaneously on the stools. Bill's voice spoke ecstatically.

"Bit of all right, eh?"

Alf grunted. Not even his consciousness of sartorial perfection could cheer him up. He was brooding darkly on the probable results of the liberty he had taken with the Davies family, and was fast working himself into a panic. All his experience of Eustace's enchantments filled him with profound misgivings;

and in the circumstances Bill's soulless and unsympathetic delight in the ephemeral pleasures of the moment infuriated him.

"Cheer up, mate," said Bill. "What's the matter now? Still off it because the ole lady told you off? You've stopped 'er mouth, any'ow."

"Well, an' even if I 'ave, 'ow much better are we then? We might sit 'ere for a year, an' never get nearer doin' anything than we are now. 'Ow are we goin' to get to know a toff like ole Sir FitzPeter, eh? 'Ow can we.... 'Ullo, Farr, what is it now?"

"Lord, there standeth at thy door one desiring entrance; and verily he bringeth with him a maiden possessing the rarest beauty, so that if her mind and attainments be but of a piece with her fairness of face, not less than ten thousand pieces of gold would be her price."

Alf gaped at him.

"I don't know what the 'ell you think you're talkin' about, Farr," he said at length. "But bring 'ooever it is along 'ere."

Mustapha bowed and retreated.

"If there's a lady in the case," said Bill, "Lucy 'ad better cut away. 'Ere! skedaddle, Lucy—quick! You ain't dressed for company."

Lucy departed disconsolately for the house, quite unable to understand why she was thus dismissed. In her lord's honor she had put on her most striking finery. She had touched up her eyes with kohl, her cheeks with carmine and her finger-tips with henna. She was comfortably conscious of looking her best. Why, then, was she dismissed the Presence?

"'Ere," called Bill after her, "not that way; you'll run right into 'em... Lumme, 'ere they come.... Why, Alf—it's 'er—your girl ... an'—an' Lootenant Allen with 'er. 'E'd know me for sure. I'm off."

And while Isobel and Allen were occupied in gazing speechlessly after Lucy's disappearing form, Bill beat a panic-stricken and precipitate retreat into the rose-garden. Alf, unnerved almost as much by the unlooked-for good fortune which brought Isobel to him as by the embarrassment of having to face his old platoon-commander, turned to receive his visitors.

"I hope you will excuse us, Mr...."

"Wentworth," supplied Alf. He was getting used to his new name now.

"Mr. Wentworth, for bursting in upon you in this way. I am Miss FitzPeter, and this is Mr. Allen." Alf, quaking at the knees, shook hands with his late commander. He felt, in spite of his clean-shaved upper lip, that nothing could prevent his detection now; but Allen gave no sign of recognition. Indeed, he hardly looked at Mr. Wentworth's face at all in his delighted examination of his clothes.

Isobel, struggling with herself, went straight to the point. Only by doing this, she felt, could she stifle the demon of laughter within her; and if she chanced to catch Allen's eye nothing could save her.

"I'm afraid I've come on business, Mr. Wentworth. Worse than that, on begging business. I'm collecting for a Red Cross hospital which is being started at Anston. It's such a good object and they do need funds so badly—and I wondered—would you be so kind—anything will do...."

She concluded with her famous smile which had in another life done yeoman service to the country at flag-days and bazaars. Alf, whose obfuscated intellect had been groping wildly for a meaning in her elliptical remarks, suddenly understood. Here was a chance for a display of his wealth. Fate was indeed playing into his hands.

"Farr," he said, "go an' get some money."

Mustapha, who had all this while been gazing upon Isobel with lively and increasing satisfaction, was much pleased to find that this lovely "slave" had found favor in his master's eyes. He went off joyfully to the house to obey Alf's command, and in a few moments he returned followed by six female slaves. Isobel and Allen, whose hopes had been raised by their glimpse of the polychromatic Lucy, were disappointed to find that these were clad in sober black, relieved only by the neatest of caps and aprons. But this only threw into greater prominence their un-English appearance.

Each of the six carried a bulky bag. Mustapha, coming forward, laid a cloth upon the ground at Allen's feet, and made a sign to the first slave. She approached, and having (with much crackling of her apron) made a deep obeisance, poured out upon the cloth a jingling, flashing stream of gold coins. Then she bowed once more to the earth and retired.

Allen and Isobel, who for three years or so had seen no gold except an occasional stray half-sovereign, stared as though hypnotized; but Alf was the most astonished of the three. Nobody seemed capable of speaking a word. Mustapha, interpreting their silence to mean that the sum offered was not large enough, signed to the second slave; and the glittering heap was forthwith doubled.

"But," said Allen at last, recovering his power of speech with an effort, "we—we can't take this. You know we can't."

"No, sir," agreed Alf unhappily. "It's all a mistake. 'Ere, Farr, this won't do, you know."

"Verily, master, if thou didst offer to this merchant all the gold that is in the six bags, it would not be an over-payment; for verily mine eyes have not looked upon so fair a slave."

He signed once more, and the four remaining bags were emptied on to the pile.

"Heavens," said Isobel, suddenly realizing Mustapha's meaning, "he thinks...."

"Yes, confound him, he does," replied Allen indignantly. "Not much doubt about the Oriental there!" He glanced angrily at the puzzled Mustapha. "While as for the question of gold-hoarding...."

Alf caught the last word.

"S'welp me, sir," he said earnestly, "I never knew 'e 'ad it, I swear I didn't. 'Ere, Farr, where the blue blazes did you get all this coin from? Don't you know there's a war on?"

"Lord," replied Mustapha with pardonable pride, and not comprehending in the least what the true position was, "this is but the smallest part of the riches that lie heaped in thy treasury, the full extent whereof no man may count. Therefore chaffer not with this merchant, but pay him that which he asks; for in truth the maid is passing fair. Her lips...."

"That'll be about enough from you," roared Allen with sudden fury. Mustapha, his eulogy checked in mid-surge, retreated a pace or two in alarm, while Alf, obeying subconsciously the ring of authority in the tone, came to attention. Luckily, however, his lapse was not noticed; and he remembered his status as a

country gentleman and put his hands in his pockets.

"'Ere," he said to Mustapha, who was still unequal to the intellectual pressure of the conversation, "take that stuff back where it came from. An' look 'ere, Farr, you got to get every last farthing o' gold in the place changed into notes right off. An' if I catch any more 'oardin' goin' on..." He broke off and turned to his guests. "If you'll be so good, miss and sir, as to step into the 'ouse, I'll 'ave it brought to you in notes."

"Thank you," said Isobel feebly. She followed Alf into the house with eager anticipation, but at the same time wondering how much more she could bear without giving way to hysterics.

Since Mrs. Davies' visit Alf and Bill had done their honest best to introduce into Eustace's exclusively Oriental scheme a touch of that "'omeyness" which it had so obviously lacked. As a result, the jeweled magnificence of the original scheme now served as a back-ground to an impression of solid mid-Victorian comfort. Plush-covered chairs and sofas now abounded; so did clumsy and top-heavy side-boards, draped mirrors and lace curtains. Mats of hot, black fur reënforced the priceless Persian rugs; a stuffed bird in a glass case stood in each window; and the walls were covered with a choice selection of colored "presentation plates" in heavily gilded frames. The whole effect was as though some rather dissipated roysterer, returning from a fancy dress ball in the robes of a gorgeous caliph, had protected them from the weather by the addition of a frock-coat.

Isobel, who had expected a stage setting of the "Chu Chin Chow" order, was utterly unprepared for the improvements. She sat down suddenly on the nearest plush monstrosity and looked about her. Her mouth was firm, but her eyes filled gradually with tears; and she knew that if she looked at Allen she would disgrace herself.

But now, fortunately for both of them, Alf, full of determination not to let slip this golden opportunity of impressing his lady, bustled out of the room to summon the much-enduring Eustace and explain to him the nature and functions of paper currency. Allen and Isobel, watching his departure anxiously, just managed to preserve their self-control until he had gone; but then the floods of laughter burst forth irresistibly. They wallowed breathlessly, feebly wiping their streaming eyes. After a time Isobel managed to pull herself partially together and to sit up; but the sight and sound of Allen, who was at full length on a sofa gasping like a fish and quaking like a jelly, set her off again. It was a shameless spectacle.

But by the time Alf came back two weak but happy people were gravely examining the decorations, and were even far enough recovered to be able to congratulate their host on his taste without a quiver.

"You have been in the East, I suppose, Mr. Wentworth?" asked Isobel.

"I went to Yarmouth once," said Alf.

"Ah, yes. But I mean the Orient. Egypt—Persia—India."

"Oh!" Alf caught the allusion and began to fidget. The conversation seemed to be taking an awkward turn. "You mean this 'ere?" he asked, waving a comprehensive hand about him. "I can't say as I've ever been in them parts meself like, but them as did the 'ouse up for me comes from there. I 'ad it brought over regardless. Only they didn't 'ave much furniture, an' no pictures, so I 'ad to order them meself. That's a nice thing, now." He pointed to a glaring lithograph depicting a dog of no known breed being mauled by a small child apparently in the advanced stages of scarlet fever. It was called "Happy Playmates."

"Always been fond o' that from a boy, I 'ave," he said.

"Very nice," agreed Isobel gravely. "What do you think, Denis?" She slipped a hand inside his arm and gave it a delighted little squeeze.

"Charming!" His voice shook ever so little, but he had completely regained control of his expression.

Alf judged that the time had arrived to bring his heavy batteries into action. He produced from his pockets a little bundle of notes, and handed them to Isobel.

"There, miss," he said in admirably casual tones, "a little something for your 'orsepital."

"Thank you so much," said Isobel, smiling at him. "It's *most* kind of you. Denis, would you ...?"

She glanced at the packet in her hand, and her voice trailed away in speechless surprise. Then she offered the notes back to Alf.

"Surely," she gasped, "there's some mistake?"

Alf glowed; when Isobel had taken his "little something" so casually he had for one moment been afraid that his *coup* had failed—that in spite of his increasing confidence in Eustace's powers, he had not been "wholesale" enough; he was thankful to find that this was not so.

"Quite all right, miss," he said jauntily.

"But—but they are thousand-pound notes! I can't—I really can't allow...."

Allen opened his eyes wide in astonishment.

"If you please, miss," said Alf earnestly, "I shall be most honored if you'll 'ang on to—I should say keep—the 'ole lot."

Isobel, looking slightly dazed, went through the notes in her hand. There were ten notes, each for a thousand pounds. She laid them on the table beside her.

"Thank you very much indeed, Mr. Wentworth," she said, "but really, it's quite impossible...."

"I can spare it easy. It's nothing to me, I give you my word. If you'd just take it to oblige me, like, I shall be much obliged. I shall really."

"But I don't understand why you should want to do this."

Here was a splendid chance of advancing his cause with a telling compliment. Bill would have taken it, Alf felt, at once; he himself simply shuffled his feet and went very red.

"It's just to oblige me," he said shamefacedly. "I'd—I'd like you to 'ave it."

Isobel suddenly realized that this eccentric little man meant the money to be the token of a personal tribute to herself. She took the topmost note.

"Mr. Wentworth," she said in a gentle voice, "I couldn't possibly take all that money from any one. It's far more than the fund is trying to collect, and there are other things which need money so badly. But I will take this, and thank you most tremendously."

She put out her hand, and Alf, still very red, grasped it so heartily that she winced. Then he followed his visitors to the front door. As Isobel cranked up (declining Allen's proffered help with a stern reminder

that he was an invalid) Alf realized that something still remained to be done. He must not let Isobel go without arranging for a future meeting. He must strike while the iron was hot.

"Could you—would you an' yer pa step in some day an' 'ave a bit o' something to eat?" he blurted out.

"I'm sure he'd be delighted," said she impulsively. The little man's earnestness had quite melted her for the time being, and she committed Sir Edward without a thought. "He is so interested in everything that comes from the East. Come to tea with us on Friday and ask him yourself."

She nodded, and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Alf watched her out of sight, and turned to find Mustapha at his elbow.

"Farr," he said excitedly, "that's the young lady what I'm going to marry. I'm goin' to 'ave tea with 'er father on Friday. What d'you think o' that?"

"Lord," said Mustapha, "all shall be prepared."

Alf dashed upstairs to Bill without considering what it was that Mustapha was going to prepare.

Bill listened unmoved to his friend's narrative.

"Did Lootenant Allen reckernize you?" he asked at the end.

"No more 'n nothin'. Look 'ere, you don't seem to take it in. I'm goin' round to tea on Friday."

"I 'eard. What did I tell yer?" asked Bill cynically. "It's all a matter o' money. All you got to do now is pile on the swank for pa FitzP., an' you'll be 'is dearly beloved son-in-law before we know where we are. What oh!"

Bill closed his eyes and seemed to indulge in a beatific vision. Alf did not share his sublime confidence, but even he felt that the campaign had now made a really auspicious start.

* * * * *

When the car was out of sight of the Manor, Allen once more fell a victim of paroxysms of laughter.

"Go slow, for Heaven's sake," he gasped, "or I shall fall out."

"Stop it!" Isobel commanded sharply. "Stop it at once. I won't have that poor little man sneered at. I think he's a dear, so there."

"Cupboard love," Allen retorted, wiping his streaming eyes. "He hasn't given *me* a million pounds for the Red Cross and he hasn't asked *me* to dinner, so I'm free to laugh if I want to. Those clothes ... and that furniture ...! If I'd caught your eye again I should have had a fit."

Isobel laughed a little herself.

"Who can he be?" she asked. "It's rather dreadful that a common little uneducated Cockney like that should have all that money, isn't it? And did you see his friend, who bolted when we arrived?"

"Yes—a shy bird in gorgeous plumage. D'you know, I'm sure I've seen that chap Wentworth somewhere before, or some one just like him."

"That's funny. I felt just the same. Who can it be?"

"Wait a bit—it's coming to me. Why, of course, I've got it. If he had a mustache, he'd be the living image of a silly ass in my platoon, Higgins by name, and so.... I say, what's the matter?"

The car gave a violent double lurch as Isobel momentarily seemed to lose control of the steering-wheel. Luckily they were traveling very slowly. Allen leant across her and stopped the car.

"Iso," he said, unconsciously using the affectionate abbreviation for the first time, "whatever's the matter? Are you ill? You're as white as a ghost."

She ignored his question.

"Tell me," she said, "had you really a man in your platoon called Higgins?"

"Yes—but why ...?"

"And is he really like this Wentworth man?"

"Yes. But you can't have seen him."

"Only—only in a dream."

"What!"

"Oh, I know it sounds mad to you; but I had the most dreadful vivid dream about being at the front. I was being shown round the trenches by a couple of Tommies—I'd always said I wanted to see them, you know. I didn't realize ... it was awful.... One of the two Tommies was just like Mr. Wentworth, and was called Higgins. The other's name was—wait a bit—oh, yes, Grant. And then *you* came into it and.... Denis, don't look like that!"

"Grant?" echoed he hoarsely. "Why, it must have been.... Iso, shall I tell you what you said to me when I came round the corner of the trench?"

Her eyes dilated; she caught at his arm and nodded silently.

"You said, 'It must be a dream. If it isn't, I can't bear it!' Was that it?"

She nodded again. She could not speak. Allen felt a strange dryness in his throat. He put his arm round Isobel, and she leant against him trembling.

"Then—then you disappeared. I thought I must have been seeing things, but—but...."

"It was real," she whispered. "I *knew* it was, somehow. That's why I came here to work—that's why I brought you here. Denis—I'm frightened. What does it all mean?"

"Mean?" repeated Allen. "My darling, you're shaking like a leaf. What can it mean but—this?"

They kissed.... Years later, it seemed, Isobel caught sight of Allen's wrist-watch, and came suddenly back to earth.

"We must simply fly," she said. "Thank Heaven there was nobody on the road to see us. No, Denis, you mustn't. We must get back.... Oh, well, then...."

They kissed once more, blissfully unconscious that a pair of youthful but malicious eyes had been drinking in every detail of the scene, or that when the car had proceeded on its way—hopelessly late for lunch—Bobby Myers scrambled out of the hedge and scurried hot-foot to entrust this precious information to the safe keeping of Mrs. Rudd. By teatime there was not a soul in the entire neighborhood who had not heard the news, with the exception of the isolated and deeply suspected inhabitants of Denmore Manor.



CHAPTER XIII

P.C. JOBLING INVESTIGATES

"Humph," said Mrs. Rudd the post-mistress, "lot o' good the police force is, I don't think, ain't they?"

The police force shuffled its feet and looked uncomfortable.

"Well, now, auntie," it began mildly, "I don't see 'ow...."

"None o' yer 'Well, now auntie' for me, please. Are you policeman in this 'ere village or are you not?—answer me that."

"O' course I am."

"Well then, 'ere's a lot o' 'eathen foreign nigger German spies gettin' ready to murder us all in our beds under our noses, an' 'ere you sit and do nothin'. I'm ashamed of you, Artie, I am. You go spendin' all yer time with yer nose in detective stories, an' dreamin' about the promotion you're goin' to get; an' now you get a real fine chance o' detectin' something an' runnin' a lot of shady foreigners in, an' all you do is twiddle yer great silly thumbs an' say, 'Well, now, auntie'!"

"But 'ow *can* I go to the 'ouse?" wailed the sole representative of law and order in Denmore miserably. "You can't take a man up 'cause 'e's a foreigner."

"No, worse luck." Mrs. Rudd considered that in any properly-governed state a law to that effect would have been made long ago. "But you can take 'im up for 'oardin' food. It ain't for me to teach you yer own job, Artie Jobling; if I was policeman 'ere I'd pretty soon think out a way to get into that 'ouse an' 'ave a look round. 'Ow did the ones in them books o' yours do it?"

"Disguised theirselves gen'rally," said Artie without enthusiasm, "an' went an' walked out with the maids."

"Well, why don't you do that?"

"I ain't no 'and at disguises," sighed Artie, gazing sadly at his regulation boots. "I sh'd 'ave all the kids in the village runnin' arter me."

Mrs. Rudd followed the direction of her nephew's eyes, and forbore to press the point further.

"Besides," resumed P.C. Jobling after a little reflection, "they say that the maids in this 'ere 'ouse is niggers, an' none too respectable at that. 'Orrible things might 'appen."

He brooded darkly on the possibility.

"Well, if you don't do something we shall 'ave 'orrible things 'appening any'ow," said Mrs. Rudd. "Sure as fate we'll all be murdered. I was saying to-day to Mrs. Green...."

"If I went," interrupted Artie, struck with a new thought, "they might murder *me*."

"They might," agreed his aunt, "an' they might not. Any'ow, that's what you're 'ere for, Artie. If anybody in

this village is to be murdered it ought to be you, Artie. It's your plain dooty. If you ain't goin' to do it, you ought to be in the trenches."

Constable Jobling stared at her without a word. This view of his mission in life had never been brought to his notice before. Apparently it disconcerted him no little.

"Lot o' good the police force is when anything does 'appen." Mrs. Rudd returned with freshness and vigor to her original line of argument. "An' a lot o' promotion you'll get, my lad. Why, I'd make a better policeman'n you out o' a turnip-top an' a broom 'andle any day. Why 'ere's Mrs. Green."

The door-latch clicked, and Mrs. Green of the general stores entered. "'Ere, Maria," said Mrs. Rudd, "I was just tellin' young Artie...."

But young Artie had had enough. He tramped heavily out, slammed the post-office door behind him, and retired to his own cottage to brood on the cursed spite which had selected him to minister to times so out of joint.

For ten days or more the whole village had been in a ferment over the strange people and stranger doings at the Manor. The fact that neither the vicar nor his wife, who had been seen to leave the place, could be induced to say a word of what they had seen, only deepened the dark and formless suspicions held in the neighborhood. Jobling had had an increasingly strong idea that the public opinion of him as a smart and ambitious young member of a distinguished body was gradually changing, but his outspoken aunt was the first person to put this new feeling into words and to force the unfortunate policeman to look facts in the face. He was frightened of the unknown murdering heathens who might possibly lurk in ambush for him in the grounds of Denmore Manor, but he was even more frightened of the known and well-tried power of his aunt's tongue. He sat behind the curtains in his cottage and gave himself up to melancholy thought.

Before long he saw Mrs. Green, her chat with the post-mistress concluded, coming up the street. She met with another decrepit old dame, and the two began to discuss some choice piece of scandal with great animation. Mrs. Green closed her peroration by pointing at Jobling's window and shaking her head sorrowfully. The other lady also shook her head and doddered off up the street, where she could be seen a few moments later in deep and direful converse with *her* dearest friend.

Jobling knew the signs. Unless he did something, and quickly, he was a marked man. But how *could* he push himself into a house without a pretext? Failing the subtle methods of the detective of fiction, what reason could a large but timid policeman find for penetrating into a nest of probably dangerous criminals without giving them offense?

The problem remained unsolved all day, and troubled him so much that at night he found himself attracted to the place by a sort of morbid fascination. Twice, greatly daring, he walked up and down the strip of road on which the Manor grounds fronted; and then, turning down an unfrequented lane, he reached a corner which was the only spot not actually in the grounds from which the Manor could be seen. He hardly knew why he had come there, as it was a dark, moonless night, and he could not expect to see as far as the house. But when he reached the corner and looked across the fields, the whole building was blazing with lights, standing out pitilessly against the decorous war-time gloom. P.C. Jobling heaved a sigh of relief and went home with his problem solved. He would call on Mr. Wentworth on the morrow and would point out to him politely, but firmly, that he must not show bright lights at night. Not even the most murdering of heathens, or the most heathen of murderers, he felt, could take exception to that.

Next day, however, the prospect looked less bright. He was not quite so sure that his reception would be

peaceable. He pictured himself penetrating into the fastnesses of the Manor and never again coming out—never, that is, alive. He decided that he would let his aunt know where he was going; then he could at least be sure that he would not die quite unavenged. Then, on second thoughts, he determined to say nothing about it. If he did, he would be tied down definitely to a venture of which he disliked the idea more and more. He put on his helmet and walked majestically through the village, to restore his self-respect. Unfortunately for his purpose, the first person he met was Master Bobby Myers, who since his exploit of climbing over the Manor wall had regarded himself as no small hero.

"Yah!" said Bobby with derision. "'Oo's afraid of niggers?"

Outwardly Jobling did not deign to notice this insult, but it struck deep all the same. He strode back through the village and burst into the little post-office.

"Auntie," he said loudly, "I'm goin' up to the Manor to-day to 'ave a look round."

"An' about time too," replied his aunt in acid tones.

But there were several people present, and it was obvious that P.C. Jobling's resolution had caused the general opinion to veer round once again in his favor.

"Good lad," said an aged gentleman. "Find out all you can. Thieves an' robbers they'll be, I reckon. Tell p'liceman what you 'eard, Mary."

Mary, one of the maids at Dunwater Park, spoke up, pleased at occupying a position of public importance.

"They're gold hoarders, Mr. Jobling," she said. "The mistress an' Lootenant Allen was there yesterday an' saw it."

"Ah," put in somebody, "an' where do they get their food from, eh? Not in the village, nor yet from London. You go an' 'ave a look round, Artie, an' if you come back all right you'll be made a sergeant."

"Why shouldn't I come back all right?" demanded Artie, with a chill at his spine. "Miss FitzPeter did."

"She's quality—they wouldn't dare touch 'er."

P.C. Jobling returned to his cottage in a despondent mood. There was no going back for him now—he had burnt his boats. All the old ladies of the village would be on duty behind the curtained windows to see him start on his quest. Struck with self-compassion he prepared himself a more than usually lavish meal, just in case it should be his last. Then he smoked a reflective pipe. The sun was hot, and a comfortable drowsiness began to steal over him.... His head nodded.... For a second or two he dozed off.... Then, suddenly wakeful, he put on his helmet and started out, feeling every inch a hero. The village street was deserted except for a dog asleep in the very middle of it; but Jobling knew that he was performing under the eyes of an appraising and critical public. He walked as jauntily as his official boots would allow, his head well back and his chest well out.

As soon as he was clear of the village, however, and had reached the stretch of lonely road leading to the Manor gates, his pace slackened and his chest deflated suddenly. He began to recall all the wild and vaguely terrific rumors about the people at Denmore and his heroism oozed slowly out of his backbone. When he came at last in sight of the gates themselves, he stopped stock still on the road and wrestled fiercely with himself.

Supposing he turned tail now, would he ever be able to live it down in the village? He thought of his

aunt's tongue—of Mrs. Green's wicked old face as she talked to her wicked old crony in the street—of Bobby Myers' taunt, and he knew that whatever lay before him would be the lesser of two evils. He reached the gates and paused once more, as though he could see written above them in letters of fire "All hope abandon, ye who enter here." Then with shaking knees he passed in and up the gloomy avenue.

Alf chanced to be looking out of a window overlooking the drive, and saw him as he turned the corner.

"Lumme!" he called to Bill. "The police!"

"Let 'em," responded Bill lazily. He was lying back on a long chair, with his beloved flagon beside him; and the indefatigable Lucy, garbed like Solomon in all his glory, was fanning him with enthusiasm. "Let 'em," he repeated, and closed his eyes happily.

"But look 'ere, what can 'e *want*? An' 'sposin' 'e wants to know 'oo we are?"

"Tell 'im," said Bill, "Mr. Wentworth an' 'is friend, Mr. Montmorency, of Denmore Manor."

"But if 'e wants to see our papers?"

Bill sat up with a spasm of energy.

"What's it matter what 'e wants, you chump? You're a blinkin' landowner now, an' p'licemen don't matter. Be 'aughty with 'im an' kick 'im out."

"*You'd* better see 'im, Bill."

"Me?" Bill sank back once more on his cushions. "Why should I do yer dirty work? I'm quite comfortable as I am. See 'im yerself, an' be 'aughty with 'im. Call 'im 'My man'! Probably 'e wants a subscription. Give 'im 'arf-a-crown. On'y you'd better 'urry down before Mustapha gets 'old of 'im an' gives 'im a few bags o' gold; that'd put us fair in the cart. Keep the fan goin', Lucy, my dear."

Alf tore down the stairs and met P.C. Jobling on the steps of the Manor. Each made great outward show of boldness, but it would be difficult to say which felt less bold in his heart. There was an awkward pause.

"W—w—well," said Alf at last, mindful of Bill's advice. "Wh—what can I do for you—er—my man?"

The words were haughty enough to show the most imposing of policemen his position in the scheme of things; but the tone in which they were uttered entirely spoilt their effect. P.C. Jobling took heart of grace and puffed out his admirably developed chest.

"It is my dooty to inform you, sir, that you 'ave several exceedingly bright lights showin' from yer 'ouse at nights, contrary to regulations."

"I'm—I'm sorry," stammered Alf, relieved that the policeman had come on so trivial an errand, but disturbed at having incurred the notice of the Law. "If you'll wait 'arf a second I'll 'ave my butler in an' tick 'im orf for it. 'Ere, miss," he said to a dusky but decorously clad maidservant, "send Mr. Farr. Savvy?"

The maid, catching the name, sped off. P.C. Jobling, feeling now quite reassured that his life was in no danger, began to sigh (like Alexander the Great) for fresh worlds to conquer. He knew that if he penetrated no further than the Manor's outer defenses it would go hard with him when next he faced his aunt.

He took off his helmet and mopped his moist brow.

"'Ot day, ain't it, sir?" he said.

Alf, whose chief rule in life had been always to keep on the right side of the law, swallowed the bait whole.

"It is 'ot," he agreed. "'Ow'd a glass o' beer be, eh?"

"You're very kind, sir."

"Not a bit—not a bit, my man." This time the tone was much better. "Farr," he continued as that functionary appeared. "'Ere's the police been about the lights. It's quite time as you knew as 'ow we don't 'ave to show no lights at night. 'Ave 'em covered to-night, or I'll know the reason why. An' bring this gentleman a pint of beer."

Mustapha bowed gravely and departed. Now was the crafty Jobling's opportunity.

"Oh, no, sir," he said. "I couldn't let 'im 'ave all that trouble, sir, I'll go into the kitchen myself, sir."

He was across the hall before Alf recovered his wits. The master of Denmore was exceedingly proud of his kitchens, but he realized in a flash that no minion of the law must be allowed to gaze upon them. The Manor kitchens were of noble proportions—the banqueting hall had been built to seat 200 people, and the cooking accommodation was on the same generous scale—but they were none too big for Alf's enormous retinue. Crowds of dusky workers were ceaselessly engaged on the preparation of the sumptuous banquets which Messrs. Montmorency and Wentworth failed dismally to appreciate; and there was an air of bustle and lavishness and reckless waste about the whole assembly. Butchers might be seen forever slicing up carcasses of meat; pastry cooks and confectioners were endlessly intent on the concoction of wonderful dainties; scullions ceaselessly carried away buckets whose contents bore witness to an utter disregard of the principles of economy and the possibility of by-products. Even Alf, who knew that his foodstuffs were drawn from stocks not under the control of any government official, had felt a twinge of conscience when he had gazed upon the scene. And now the round eyes of P.C. Arthur Jobling would be taking in its details; and if something were not done very quickly, the official notebook of P.C. Arthur Jobling would be taking those details in to ... and then....

Alf snatched at the Button and rubbed it.

"Eustace," he commanded tersely. "Take that blinkin' policeman out of the kitchen an' put 'im back where 'e came from."

"Lord, I hear and obey."

Eustace was gone.

"'Ope 'e 'asn't seen too much already," soliloquized Alf. "'Owever, it's done now, an' I don't suppose 'e'll come back 'ere in a 'urry. Better be on the safe side, though. Mustapha, tell 'em to be a bit more careful in the kitchen, will you? If the Food Controller comes there'll be 'ell on."

Mustapha did not quite get the hang of this remark; but he did gather that the kitchens under his care were being adversely criticised. He assumed a tone of deferential remonstrance.

"Lord, thy kitchens are the most lavishly furnished of all the world; thy larders are stocked from floor to

ceiling with all manner of rich meats, with rare fruits, with spices, with grain of every kind, so that whoso should see them would say, 'Truly the lord of the Button is a great Caliph, for what man of lesser rank could make so brave a show.'

"Well, that's just what I'm gousin' about," said Alf irritably. "You're just as 'olesale as ole Eustace. Put the stuff away out o' sight somewhere, or you'll 'ave us all doing time. Step lively now; you never know 'oo's goin' to pop in on us next."

Mustapha, feeling he was losing his grip of things, went off to execute this latest strange command of his strange master. Alf went upstairs again to Bill, feeling rather weak.

As for P.C. Arthur Jobling, in the very act of taking out his official notebook he found himself sitting once more in the chair in his little parlor. He rubbed his eyes and blinked around him; then he seized hold of his own arm and pinched himself—and, leaping to his feet with a yell, decided he was really awake.

"Gorblimey!" he said to himself. "Must 'ave been a dream! I must 'ave dropped off arter all. I remember feelin' mazed-like, but I got up and—no, I can't 'ave, 'cos 'ere I am. Well, well! It was that life-like I could 'a sworn it 'appened. And 'oardin'! My eye—piles an' piles o' food there was. P'raps it's a 'int from 'Eaven to tell me what to look for. Well, if I'm goin' it's high time I started. 'Allo, I must 'ave put me 'elmet on in me sleep!"

He opened the door and stepped into the street. Conscious that he was performing under critical and appraising eyes, he puffed out his chest and walked as jauntily as was consistent with dignity—and behind the curtains there reigned consternation; for while everybody had seen him start out half-an-hour before, nobody had seen him come back; and yet here he was, starting out again! When he cleared the village, he stopped and scratched his head uneasily.

"I'm sure I done all this before," he said uneasily. "That blessed dream o' mine seems to be with me still."

He turned up the dark avenue, and the eerie feeling deepened. His knees shook, and he had much ado to prevent his teeth from chattering, but he went doggedly on, and once more turned the corner.

"By Gum," said Alf blankly, "'ere's that blinkin' copper again. I can't face 'im again, Bill. You'll 'ave to go."

Bill, who had reached a stage where even his appetite for beer had been temporarily sated, got up.

"Righto," he said, "anything to oblige. 'E won't find no food *this* time, any'ow."

He lurched downstairs and met the policeman in the drive. Jobling drew a breath of relief at finding that he was received by a stranger.

"That settles it," he said to himself. "'Twas on'y a dream. That black butler ain't to be seen, neither. It is my dooty to inform you, sir," he went on aloud in measured official tones, "that you 'ave several exceedingly bright lights showin' from yer 'ouse at nights, contrary to regulations."

"'Ave I really, ole son?" said Bill breezily. "My mistake! Come right in, won't you, an' 'ave a drink while I see about it."

Alf, watching at the upper window, watched them disappear, with a puzzled expression.

"Now, why the 'ell," he asked himself, "does 'e bother to tell the tale about them lights over again? That's

on'y cammyflage, 'cause it *must* be the food 'e's come about this time. 'E must think we're mugs if 'e tries to do us with the same yarn twice.... Wonder what's 'appening?"

He gazed moodily out of the window in a state of great suspense. But he had not long to wait. There came a sound of some one running swiftly in heavy boots; and P.C. Jobling appeared, with eyes staring in terror, fleeing down the drive as though pursued by the Furies. Alf watched him out of sight, and turned in amazement as Bill staggered into the room and collapsed on his divan, weak with laughter.

"What's 'appened, Bill? What you done?"

"Me? Nothin'. I took 'im an' showed 'im the kitchens, all as bare as a board—an' just as we turns to come out we meets Mr. Farr comin' in. The minute the copper sees Farr 'e gives a yell an' about-turns an' legs it so you couldn't see 'is coat-tails for 'eel-plates! Laugh? I laughed meself dry. Get me another, Lucy!"

But Alf looked grave.

"I don't like it," he said in a troubled voice. "I do 'ate monkeyin' about with the p'lice. This ain't goin' to do us no good, you mark my words!"



CHAPTER XIV

MR. FARR'S MISGUIDED ZEAL

After breakfast on the following Friday Allen approached Isobel solemnly.

"May I speak to you for one moment, please, Commandant?" he asked, in portentously official tones.

"Certainly, Mr. Allen," she replied in the same manner. "Come into the office."

She led the way into the not very tidy sanctum from which she conducted the voluminous correspondence with various military bodies which formed a large share in her work in the Dunwater Park Auxiliary Hospital for Officers. She sat down at her desk and stirred some papers with an air of importance.

"You find me very busy," she intimated austerely. "But I can give you a moment. What can I do for you?"

Allen, as befitted one in the presence of authority, came to attention.

"Please," said he humbly, "I want leave to go up to town by the noon train."

"But Sister's the person who runs the leave department."

"Yes, but she's gone up herself by the early train."

"So she has. Well, what's your reason for this dreadful request?"

"I want," said Allen, his eyes twinkling, "to buy myself an engagement ring."

Isobel managed to preserve her severity with an effort.

"Really," she replied; "I don't think that is at all a good reason. The War Office discourages...."

"Very well; then I'll buy you one in the village. I saw a sweet thing in diamonds and sapphires yesterday—only one-and-six."

"Don't forget that it's to-day that Mr. Wentworth's coming to tea. Are you going to desert him?"

"I am. I can't behave in his presence."

"Here's your half-fare voucher, then."

"Thank you, darling."

"Hush! Stop it! Go away—some one might come in. Patients mustn't kiss commandants. It isn't discipline."

"It would be, with some commandants. Well, good luck to the tea-party. And if Wentworth offers any more thousand-pound notes, just remember you've me to support now, and accept."

"I do hope he won't do anything awful," said Isobel anxiously. "I asked him for to-day because I thought there'd be nobody here that mattered, and of *course* Lady Anderson *would* take the opportunity to come and look round on that exact day."

"Who's she?"

Isobel sighed.

"She is my Hated Rival," she explained. "That is, I'm hers. She also runs an officers' hospital, and she's coming over to see how I run mine. She disapproves of me altogether—always has—and now she's furiously jealous about the hospital, so we *are* in for a nice time. She's father's pet aversion, too."

"Thank God I've picked to-day to go to town!" said Allen piously. "I wish you joy of your day."

She smiled mournfully.

"Get back early and comfort me."

* * * * *

Alf was not looking forward with pleasure to his afternoon, either. All the morning a sense of the importance of the impending function weighed upon his mind; and as the day wore on the more particular problem of what clothes to wear refused to be either settled or banished.

Immediately after lunch he went to his bedroom and, spreading out his entire wardrobe before him, spent an hour in an agony of indecision. Finally he went to Bill and implored his help.

Bill was heavily occupied with his flagon and his handmaid and at first refused to apply his intellect to the matter at all; but the mere idea of having to solve the insistent sartorial problem unaided drove Alf into desperation. He pleaded and threatened until Bill rose in disgust from his divan and, with Lucy following, went into Alf's room.

"A nursemaid is what you wants, Alf," he said bitterly. "I never see such a blinkin' kid as you in my life. I should have thought you'd have known what's what at your age better'n to 'ave to come runnin' to me about it. 'Owever...."

He sat down on the bed and regarded the wild confusion of clothes with lofty scorn.

"Well," said Alf—his agitation lending a touch of asperity to his tone—"instead of talkin' like that, s'spose you get on with it. What ought I to wear?"

Bill sniffed scornfully.

"Why," he said breezily, "a pot 'at, o' course, and them black things o' yours. You can't go wrong that way."

"I thought you'd say that," answered Alf dejectedly. "I was 'opin' as 'ow a straw 'at might—them black things is that 'ot I can't 'ardly breathe. 'Owever, I s'pose yer right."

He began to sort out his garments of ceremony from the pile before him.

"Don't forget your spats," said Bill. He settled himself more comfortably on the bed. "'Ere, Lucy, my dear, come over 'ere beside me."

"Oh, indeed," said Alf, realizing her presence for the first time. "No, you don't. I don't 'ave no females in my room while I'm dressing."

"Don't trouble yerself about that," replied Bill airily. "Carry on. Lucy won't mind."

Alf stared with strong disapprobation at Lucy, who smiled coyly at him and displayed a large expanse of bare leg.

"No," he agreed in a meaning tone. "Lucy wouldn't mind. I ain't bothering about Lucy, though. It's me as minds. Tell 'er to 'op it at once, Bill Grant, an' think shame of yerself. I dunno what the 'ell's come to yer."

Bill, however unwillingly, was constrained to bow before Alf's outraged modesty, and Lucy accordingly withdrew. Then Alf proceeded to dress himself. A struggle with a stiff and terribly high collar made both Alf himself and his temper exceedingly hot; but at last the operation was over. He placed his glossy topper on his head and displayed himself for his friend's inspection.

Bill looked him over minutely and critically.

"Yes," he said at length. "Yes, you looks all right. Seems to me you wants brightening up some'ow. I know! 'Old on 'arf a mo."

He went out of the room and returned a moment later with something rolled up in his hand.

"This is what you want to brighten yer up," he said confidently. "This'll fair knock 'em."

He unrolled the object in his hand. It was his pictorial waistcoat.

Alf looked askance at it.

"I dunno...." he began feebly.

"Put it on, you blinkin' idjit," said the waistcoat's owner with sudden heat. "Why, it'll make all the difference. Just what you want."

"But perhaps *she* won't like it," objected the love-sick swain.

"More fool she, if she don't. But she will. I knows what the nobs likes. You trust me."

Alf, reassured and over-persuaded by Bill's tone of easy confidence, put on the gorgeous garment, and then, ready at last, he went downstairs prepared for a very hot and uncomfortable walk to Dunwater. Bill followed; but finding Lucy waiting for her master outside Alf's bedroom door with a full flagon in her hand, he with the faithful damsel disappeared forthwith in the direction of his divan, and was no more seen.

As Alf opened the front door he started back in surprise and swore deeply and inexcusably. The drive was full of brightly colored figures. All his immense retinue seemed to be gathered together waiting for him, their sober garments laid aside and their richest robes put on. Six motionless figures mounted on magnificent and gayly caparisoned black horses formed the center of the group; and a seventh horse, even more gorgeously bedight, was being led up and down by a coal-black groom. Alf's heart sank. Somebody had apparently been wholesale once more.

"Farr!" called Alf sharply.

Mustapha came forward. He was clad in garments so encrusted with gems that they crackled together as he walked. He wore the air of the good and faithful servant about to receive the praise he knows to be well merited.

"What the 'ell's all this about?" demanded his master.

"Lord," replied Mustapha, his face radiating a quiet joy, "I have made all ready. For so great a day it is meet that thou should'st be surrounded with all magnificence, that the father of the maiden may know how great is thy wealth and power. Therefore have I caused to be prepared a concourse of splendor outdoing even that of the great Prince Aladdin at the time of his betrothal to the Princess Badrabadour—upon them be peace. Thus shalt thou shine in beauty as the full moon upon the night of its completion, for verily the like of this gathering hath not been seen upon earth."

"Umph!" said Alf. He reflected that Mustapha seemed very fond of giving himself a great deal of trouble for nothing.

"Furthermore," continued Mustapha serenely, "thy steed awaits thee. For speed and grace he hath not his equal upon earth; black is he as a raven's wing, and of a mettlesome spirit withal."

Alf glanced at the prancing steed. He had only once in his life been on horseback. That had been when he had fallen lame on a route march and had been mounted on Captain Richards' patient and war-weary charger. This horse, however, seemed different. There was more life about it, somehow.

He turned to Mustapha.

"Farr," he said, "you may mean well, but there's times when I think you tries to be aggravating. For being a blinkin' fool you 'ave not yer equal on earth. Now you can just wash the 'ole thing out again—see? I don't want no circus processions round me. What d'yer take me for?"

Mustapha bowed low and then, as patiently as though he were explaining to a child, he spoke.

"But, lord, it is thy bodyguard," he remonstrated. "And indeed already have I dispatched before thee a concourse of incredible richness."

"*What?*" Alf clutched his hat in horror.

"There have gone to the palace of the maiden's father other forty of thy slaves, twenty white and twenty black. Upon his head each black slave beareth a bowl of jewels of surpassing worth, while each white slave as he goes will scatter money amongst the people, that thy popularity may be great in the land. With them are musicians to discourse sweet sounds. Even now they pass the outer gate."

At that moment there came, borne faintly down the breeze, the discordant clash of distant but barbaric music.

"Lumme!" said Alf. He felt wildly for his Button, and, as the whole concourse fell prostrate on its face at sight of the talisman, he called up Eustace and gave him excited but definite orders. The music in the distance stopped suddenly, and at the same time the crowd in the drive (with the exception of the chastened Mustapha) disappeared into thin air. Alf, desperately anxious to get away from the house before any further horrible thing happened, stood not upon the order of his going, but went at once up the drive full of anxiety lest anybody from the village had chanced to be passing the gates at the moment when the band had been so ruthlessly suppressed.

As he turned into the road he saw the massive blue form of P.C. Arthur Jobling, and his heart missed a beat. But the policeman was a pitiable sight. His helmet had fallen off and lay in the road beside his official notebook, and he was gazing from side to side in a horrified and vacant manner, as though he were searching for something and were terrified lest he should find it. Alf was reassured.

"Good afternoon—my man," he said jauntily.

Jobling stared at him.

"G—good afternoon, sir," he gulped. "Beggin' yer pardon, sir, but do you 'appen to 'ave sent a—a sort o' procession like, with a band, out of 'ere?"

Alf controlled his voice with difficulty, but managed to keep his jaunty tone.

"Do I look like it?" he said.

Jobling groaned.

"I'm goin' barmy!" he muttered. "Look 'ere, sir, as a great favor, like, might I ask yer not to tell 'em in the village what I asked yer?"

"Betcher life!" answered Alf cheerily, much relieved at this unexpected stroke of good fortune. Then, leaving the unfortunate constable to collect his property and what remained to him of his wits, Alf set out for Dunwater, growing at every step more convinced that, whatever clothes might be correct for an afternoon call on a hot day, his present get-up was hopelessly wrong.

As he passed through the village he found himself the object of much interest—of an unmistakably hostile kind. On every side unfriendly faces scowled at him. Knots of people were standing in the street, and as he passed them he heard a confused medley of remarks not openly intended for his ear, but evidently to his address.

"Spy!" said somebody.

"German!" supplemented several others.

"Food 'oarder!"

Finally as he passed the post-office Mrs. Rudd's voice might have been heard through the open door upraised in some denunciation of which Higgins caught only two words:

"... Scotland Yard...."

Alf was devoutly thankful when at last the village was passed and the road to Dunwater lay before him. As he plodded along the hot road he pondered dully what sinister events those two words "Scotland Yard" might portend. He was worried for a moment; but then his arrival in sight of the Dunwater Park gates drove all worries other than those of etiquette from his mind. What ought he to do when he arrived? What ought he to say? How did one address baronets? He wanted to make a really memorable first impression on Isobel's father—but how? Of course, if he had left himself to be guided by Mustapha's ideas, his first impression would have been only too memorable.

"Pity ole Farr's so bloomin' 'olesale," mused Alf, "because it wasn't 'arf a bad notion me bringing ole FitzPeter a bit of a present, but Farr always plasters it on so bloomin' thick.... But lumme, what's to prevent *me*?... That's a bit of an idea—never thought o' that. I'll do it."

He glanced cautiously up and down the road. Nobody was in sight. He climbed through the hedge at the roadside and found himself in a little, dark wood.

"Just the place," he said to himself. "Now for Eustace."

Unbuttoning his tightly fitting garments, he fished out the Button and rubbed it....

* * * * *

Meanwhile, on the lawn at Dunwater Park, strange events had been taking place. A large party was gathered together, but instead of the merry gabble of voices and laughter which characterized the tea-hour as a rule, a solemn silence brooded over the scene. A blight had fallen over the entire gathering. Light-hearted and empty-headed subalterns, whose whole duty in the scheme of things had till now been the outpouring of frothy nonsense, sat mum and miserable. Tea had not yet appeared.

Dominating the scene and acting as a sort of High Priestess of Blight, was a small, gray-haired woman, sitting bolt upright in a basket-chair, and gazing about in an acidulated manner. This was Lady Anderson. She had come over—as Isobel had foreseen—manifestly with the intention of drawing odious comparisons between her own hospital and Isobel's. She had brought with her two dispirited patients—a sapper major and an infantry captain—who were both sitting well on the outskirts of the group. Sir Edward FitzPeter, upon whom Lady Anderson always had an infuriating effect, had joined these two, in order, like them, to be as far away from her ladyship as possible.

A terrible silence fell, which was broken only by a whispered remark from one of the more irrepressible spirits that he was suffering from "septic melancholia."

It hardly seemed humanly possible that one person could, unaided, have reduced this usually lighthearted—not to say boisterous—gathering to such a pitch of gloom. Sister looked as if she might at any moment give up the unequal contest and burst into tears.

Isobel looked round her miserable party and sighed. She had spent a strenuous afternoon with the Wet Blanket, and was weary in body and mind. Lady Anderson had started by inspecting the ground floor arrangements of the Hospital, and had with diabolical ingenuity succeeded in finding or inventing some damning flaw in each; afterwards, it had been the pleasant duty of Isobel and Sister to exhibit the more intimate and important domestic machinery, and give their visitor an opportunity of expressing (under a very thin veil of acid politeness) her disapprobation of their methods here also.

It was a dreary outlook. The only ray of hope that Isobel could see was in the knowledge that the infliction could not last much longer. On her arrival the Wet Blanket had announced that she must leave early, as it appeared she had promised to go and blight somebody else that afternoon. But tea had not yet come; and Isobel began to fear that, if the atmosphere progressed in gloom at its present rate, some of her more nervous patients would be driven to commit suicide in the ornamental pond.

At last, when nobody but Isobel herself had made the slightest attempt to speak for nearly five minutes, Barnby, the butler, appeared with tea, followed by two maids with trays and cake-stands. He was just in time to save his mistress from committing the social solecism of uttering a loud scream. He also furnished Lady Anderson with further material for acid comment.

Fixing her lorgnette (an instrument of torture with which she did dire execution) on her nose, she eyed the approaching procession with pained surprise. Then, turning to Isobel, she informed her:

(1) That in her opinion it was a fundamental error to have tea out of doors. Men did not like it. At *her* hospital tea invariably took place indoors, whatever the weather.

(The two dispirited officers she had brought with her caught one another's eye at this point and exchanged a wan smile.)

(2) That in her opinion it was a fundamental error to run a hospital with servants. Men did not like it. At *her* hospital all the work was done by V.A.D.'S—so much pleasanter.

(Another wan smile, hardly complimentary to the V.A.D.'s,—was exchanged.)

"But, of course, dear Miss FitzPeter," concluded the lady; "here they have you. How could they ask more than *that*?"

She left no room for doubt in the minds of her audience that in her private opinion one could ask a great deal more than that. At that moment, any one of the thirty or so people present would cheerfully have drowned or strangled the speaker, but nobody was bold or rash enough to engage her in wordy warfare. Isobel, heroically preserving a dogged society smile, was devoutly thankful that Denis was not there to do battle for her. He would only have made matters infinitely worse. As it was she was anxious about Sir Edward, who was fidgeting on his chair, obviously only prevented from an explosion by his sense of duty as host.

Fortunately a diversion occurred in the shape of the vicar and his wife, and Isobel breathed an audible sigh of relief. She had little love for Mrs. Davies, but on this occasion there was nobody whom she would more gladly have seen, for she knew that the task of entertaining Lady Anderson would now be transferred to other and enthusiastic hands. Mrs. Davies had for Lady Anderson a passionate regard almost amounting to adulation—a regard which the cantankerous old dame made no attempt to reciprocate. This fact failed utterly to dash Mrs. Davies; snubs and slights slid off her back like butter from a hot stove, and she continued on every possible occasion to absorb large quantities of blacking from Lady Anderson's shoes with every appearance of delight.

On seeing the little, black-clad figure now she rushed forward, hardly noticing Isobel at all in her eagerness.

"*Dear Lady Anderson*," she cooed. "How perfectly *delightful* to see you and how *sweet* you look."

Here one of the patients, a callow second-lieutenant with an imperfect command of feature, guffawed, and had hastily to simulate a painful cough. Mrs. Davies' choice of epithet was certainly unfortunate, and Lady Anderson herself appeared to feel this, for she was more than ordinarily brusque in her manner.

"Umph!" she said. "Sit down, do."

Mrs. Davies obeyed with alacrity and proceeded to take entire possession of her idol, sitting very far forward on her chair, bending her body to a servile curve and prefacing every remark with "*Dear Lady Anderson*." This treatment appeared to agree with the lady, for she ceased for the time being to terrorize the assembled company and allowed herself to be drawn into a conversation in which, while not going to the length of being amiable, she did at least refrain from being actively objectionable. Gradually the gloom cleared, until something like the usual cheery babble was to be heard.

Over her cup of tea Lady Anderson thawed yet more. A sour smile appeared on her face.

"Well," she said to the vicar's wife, "and what's the latest bit of gossip in Denmore?"

Mrs. Davies looked pained.

"*Dear Lady Anderson*," she gushed reproachfully, "you will have your little joke! You know how I hate gossip of all kinds."

"Yes," said the old lady dryly, "I know."

"But there is one thing about which I think everybody ought to be told. The Vicar and I have kept silence until now, because—er—because the time was not ripe."

Isobel leant forward with interest. At last the meaning of the parson's mysterious visit of the other day was to be cleared up.

"I refer," continued Mrs. Davies firmly, "to...."

Exactly as she had done on the previous occasion, the speaker stopped suddenly in the middle of her sentence as though an invisible hand had been clapped over her mouth.

They waited for a space in suspense.

"Well?" said Lady Anderson at last.

"I refer," began Mrs. Davies once more, uneasily, "to...."

Dead silence again. Lady Anderson showed signs of losing her temper, never her securest possession at the best of times. The prospect of incurring the great lady's wrath impelled Mrs. Davies to struggle with the mysterious ban that seemed to be laid upon her speech. Three more attempts to explain herself did she make; and when the last of these had failed a kind of hysteria seemed to seize Mrs. Davies. She mouthed impotently, gasping like a fish, but no sound came forth. Lady Anderson stared at her in malevolent amazement, while a monstrous suspicion grew in her mind.

"Are you ill?" she said sharply. It is hard to explain exactly how she succeeded in making these words, in themselves innocuous, convey an insinuation of insobriety; but the fact remains that it was clear to Isobel and Sister (who fortunately were the only spectators of the scene, the rest having all unostentatiously edged away from Lady Anderson's sphere of influence) that no other meaning could have been intended. Indeed, it penetrated even the bemused brain of Mrs. Davies herself, and completed her demoralization.

She stretched out a shaking hand.

"*Dear* Lady Anderson," she began.

"Don't touch me," snapped that lady, at last losing all control of her rising temper. "I will be charitable, Mrs. Davies, and suppose that you have got a touch of sunstroke; but in any case I will not remain here to be made a fool of. Good afternoon, Miss FitzPeter."

"Oh, must you really go?" murmured Isobel, with a feeling that it was too good to be true, and taking care not to allow enough warmth to creep into her voice to give Lady Anderson any excuse for changing her mind. Sir Edward bustled forward to perform the highly congenial duty of seeing the Wet Blanket off the premises; but she declined his aid and went off in a raging passion, her two cowed and apprehensive patients following at her heels.

Meanwhile the Vicar, who had mixed with the crowd and had been happily engaged in discussing cricket with four or five other enthusiasts, became aware of his wife's voice calling hysterically for him.

"Julian! Julian! Take me home. Where's my husband?"

"Here, my dear," he said, blundering across chairs and tripping over feet in his haste. "What is it?"

"Take me home!"

"But...."

"It's all right, Mr. Davies," said the quiet voice of Sister in his ear. "Your wife has been a little upset by Lady Anderson, and I think she'll feel better at home."

"Dear, dear!" the Vicar muttered in distress. "How unfortunate!"

He knew that life would be difficult for him if Lady Anderson had really removed the light of her countenance from his wife, and he sighed as he took her arm and helped her away. She was trembling violently and her nerves seemed to have failed her altogether for the time being.

"Oh dear!" said Isobel, sinking back into her chair and watching the two receding figures. "What a day! Poor Mrs. Davies will never live this down, I'm afraid! What's going to happen next, I wonder."

She was not allowed to wonder long. As the Davies family reached the angle of the house, Barnby appeared; behind him came Alf, perspiring freely with sheer fright; and behind him again came two enormous and imperturbable negroes, dressed in robes of shimmering cloth of silver, and bearing each on his head an enormous chased bowl of gold.

The effect of the little cortège on Mrs. Davies was remarkable. She uttered a loud scream, tore herself free from her husband and shot round the corner at a run. The Vicar, who had lost his glasses owing to the violence of his wife's departure, groped wildly for them and then disappeared in pursuit.

"I believe they really *are* mad," said Isobel in an undertone to Sister. Then she came forward once more to greet her new visitor. But Sir Edward was before her.

"How do you do!" he said heartily. "I needn't ask if you are Mr. Wentworth—your escort gives you away! I suppose my daughter told you I was interested in things oriental. How good of you to think of bringing these fellows for me to see!"

He trotted up to the negroes, who executed a wonderful simultaneous salaam, after which, rising on to one knee, they held out their bowls towards him. It was beautifully done; the tea-party, who had quite forgotten the gloom of the earlier proceedings, and were watching with all their eyes, felt that they ought to applaud. Sir Edward was delighted.

"Magnificent!" he said. "And what wonderful bowls! I'd no idea anything so fine survived."

He lifted one bowl with an effort and examined the chasing.

"Marvelous!" he whispered.

Alf, whose former shyness and apprehension had been dispelled like a cloud of smoke in a strong wind by his kindly reception, made his first remark.

"They're for you, sir," he said. "A present."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow, I couldn't possibly...."

But Alf was dismissing his two servitors. They understood his gestures, and went. Sir Edward determined to leave the question of the bowls until later. The collector's greed was in his heart, and perhaps if the fellow was as rich as he seemed he'd never miss them.... Ruminating, he followed Alf to the tea-table,

where Isobel was already filling a cup.

Mr. Wentworth, now quite at his ease, showed a strong desire to sit by his hostess; but she was still too worn out in mind to cope with another visitor. She introduced him, therefore, to one or two of the officers about her and delivered him over to them.

Alf was already—owing to the mystery which enveloped him—a local celebrity; and now he found himself a popular hero. He was borne off round the grounds by a small crowd of half-admiring, half-amused young officers, who extracted a great deal of enjoyment from him while contriving not to hurt his feelings. He found himself on terms with them such as he could never have dreamed possible in the days when he had been a mere private with a conviction that the less he had to do with the commissioned ranks the better for all classes. He was encouraged to call captains by their simple surnames and to venture on familiarities with subalterns; and he played a game of extraordinarily bad billiards which (more to his own astonishment than his opponents') he won.

When at last he returned to retrieve his top-hat and to take his leave, he was jubilant. In the past he had been diffident; but gradually his confidence in himself and his new powers had grown, until now he was triumphantly sure of himself. Nothing, he felt, could stand in the way of such a man as he had shown himself to be. Immense riches, in themselves, need lead a man nowhere; but immense riches combined with social success—who could resist them? He had been accepted by these people as an equal and a friend; from that to being accepted by Isobel as a lover seemed to his excited brain only a step.

In the veranda stood Isobel herself, talking to her father and another man. With a slight throb of misgiving Alf recognized Lieutenant Allen. In his usual diffident frame of mind, he would have avoided an unnecessary meeting with his old platoon-commander; but now, intoxicated as he was by success, he greeted a spice of risk. He approached the group. Both Isobel and Allen looked excited—Alf had never seen his lady look so desirable, or felt her so approachable.

"Ow do, Allen?" he said with such an air of jaunty familiarity that the others stared at him in sheer surprise. "Pleased to see you again, I'm sure. Well, I ought to be toddlin' off. Never 'ad such a time since I don't know when. But you'll be sure an' bring Miss Is—Miss FitzPeter round an' 'ave a bit o' something to eat an' a look round the 'ouse, won't you, sir? 'Ow about to-morrow?"

Sir Edward, still overflowing with loving kindness towards his neighbor, and having decided that, come what might, he must keep the bowls, beamed on him.

"Don't go, Mr. Wentworth," he said.

His daughter looked up sharply and shook her head; Mr. Wentworth was all very well in his way, but she wanted him on her hands no longer, now that Denis had returned. But her father did not notice her little pantomime and blundered genially on.

"Those boys have monopolized you so that I've seen nothing of you. Stay to dinner, won't you, and afterward—if you'd be so kind—I'll get your expert opinion on a small article I'm writing on Eastern dress and architecture."

In his joy at the first part of this invitation, Alf hardly listened to the second; but his sense of propriety intervened for a moment.

"But I didn't ought ... these clothes...." he began.

"Oh, never mind. You'll do splendidly as you are, eh, Iso?"

Thus appealed to, Isobel had only one course open to her.

"Do stay, Mr. Wentworth," she said perfunctorily.

"Delighted, I'm sure," said Alf gallantly. His heart glowed. Here was a wonderful opportunity. If only he could get rid of Allen, and make some real impression on Isobel ... how could he get rid of Allen ...?

This question occupied him as he went with them to explore a tangled wilderness in a part of the garden he had not yet seen. If only he could tip the wink to Isobel, it ought to be easy for them to slip away from the intrusive Allen ... could he?

He suddenly found, with some perturbation, that he was alone. He had been busy with his thoughts and had not noticed which way the others had gone. He hunted for a time—and fell into the arms of a group of exuberant youths who insisted on bearing him off to learn clock-golf.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, Denis and Isobel, panting from their sudden and inexcusable dash through the tangled undergrowth, had reached a sequestered retreat known as the Dutch garden. Allen drew from his pocket a small parcel.

"I thought we'd never get rid of the fellow," he said. "I've got it, darling—a little beauty. Let's see if it fits."

CHAPTER XV

THE CAPTURE OF MASTER BOBBY

As dinner-time approached, Alf found himself left alone while his companions slipped upstairs to change their flannels for uniform. He felt rather lonely and out of place. He wandered into the great hall and sat down in a large leather-covered armchair. But Barnby the butler was fussing about here, and his disapproving and contemptuous eye fixed on Alf's clothes was more than the sensitive Mr. Wentworth could bear. He therefore looked about for a more secluded spot, which he found in a little alcove behind some palms. Here he could see without being seen, so that he could give himself up undisturbed to his reflections. He hoped that Isobel would be the first to appear—then he could seize the opportunity and see her, for the first time, alone.

But the first person to appear was Denis Allen. He came downstairs quickly and looked about with an eager air. His face clouded with disappointment, and he picked up an evening paper and sat down in an armchair. He had hardly settled, however, when a Vision appeared at the top of the stair. He threw down his paper and sprang up.

Alf, in his alcove, stared with all his eyes. He had never seen Isobel in evening dress before, and she quite literally took his breath away. She had put on her favorite frock for Denis' benefit, and was looking radiant.

"Lumme!" said Alf softly to himself.

A new feeling began to stir inside him. Up till now he had accepted his quest of Isobel as one of the strange things which his mad, uncomfortable new life had brought to him. He had wanted her because both Bill and Eustace had made him feel that his duty to his new position demanded it. Now, to his own surprise, he found himself wanting her for himself. Social differences had suddenly ceased to count. The triumphant self-confidence of the afternoon was still with him. He was, for the time, drunk with the heady wine of success, and all things seemed possible to him.

She paused only for an instant at the stairhead, then she came down into the hall. Alf gazed and gazed, drinking in the grace of her movements with eyes that seemed only now for the first time to have learnt to see.

Alf stood up, trembling, and was on the point of leaving his retreat; but as Isobel reached the hall Allen took a couple of steps forward and after a quick glance round to make sure that they were unobserved, he caught Isobel in his arms and began to kiss her passionately. Alf had some hazy idea of rescuing beauty in distress; but he caught sight of Isobel's transfigured face and hastily fell back again into his alcove. Beauty had no desire to be rescued. Alf, with his house of cards in fragments about him, saw Isobel slip free of Allen's enthusiastic embrace.

"You mustn't, darling," she said softly—yet not so softly that Alf could not hear. "Somebody will be coming. Let's go into the garden."

She picked up a wrap from a chair and led the way out. They passed within a yard or two of Alf's hiding-place, and he noticed the gleam of the engagement ring on her finger. What a fool he had been!

If the blow had fallen on the previous day, Alf would have borne it with stoicism, perhaps with a certain relief. He would have debited the Button with one more dismal if not unexpected failure, and there the matter would have ended. But that he should have his hopes dashed to the ground to-night, just when the prize seemed most worth winning and almost in his grasp, was a cruel blow.

He sat for some minutes completely dazed and helpless, but at last he was recalled to earth by the sound of his own name. Two of his new friends of the afternoon had met in the hall.

"Where's Wentworth?" asked the first. "He isn't anywhere about, is he? I say, have you seen Philips? He was in the village this afternoon and he says that some sportsman or other has got the wind up and reported that Wentworth & Co. are German spies. Scotland Yard is sending some men down. Isn't it priceless?"

The other man laughed.

"Good Lord! Wentworth, of all people! I say, hadn't we better find the little man and tell him? He's somewhere about, I expect. Let's try the smoking-room."

They went off.

Alf sat petrified with horror. Scotland Yard! The very name sent cold shivers up and down his innocent spine. He must get away quickly and tell Bill. But what excuse could he give for his unceremonious departure?

But now Fate, having dealt poor Alf two stunning blows, relented and gave him the excuse he needed. Sir Edward and Barnby came into the hall, both looking very agitated.

"Mr. Wentworth was 'ere not long since, sir," said the butler. "I'll go and...."

"'Ere I am, Sir Edward," said Alf, coming out of his retirement. "Did you want me?"

"Mr. Wentworth," said Sir Edward gravely; "I am sorry to say that your presence is urgently needed at the Manor. The village policeman has called to report that there has been trouble between your men and the villagers. Perhaps you know that your establishment is for some reason regarded with deep suspicion in the village? Anyhow, it comes to this: that the two men who came here with you have disappeared into the Manor taking with them a youth called Myers as a kind of hostage. He was throwing stones and I have no doubt he deserved all he got. But the excitement in the village is intense, because your men—doubtless in self-defense—drew their scimitars and marched Master Bobby off under an armed guard. The village is convinced that he's cooked and eaten by now."

Alf got up; he was deeply grateful to Bobby Myers for giving him this chance of getting away.

"I'll go now," he said.

"I'm so sorry!"

"Don't mention it."

Alf found his topper and joined P.C. Jobling outside. The two men set off through the darkness in silence—Alf because he was plunged in black gloom. Jobling because he was too terrified to speak.

They reached the Manor gates at last and the entire population of the village seemed to be gathered at the

spot in a state of mind bordering on frenzy.

A raw-boned female fury, brandishing a meat-chopper, recognizable as Mrs. Myers, mother of the languishing captive, caught sight of Alf first.

"'Ere 'e is!" she shrieked. "'Ere's the villain as 'as murdered my Bobby."

"G-arh!" snarled the crowd.

"Spy!" said somebody.

"Kidnaper!" growled somebody else.

"Ound!" quavered a trembling old voice belonging to a rheumatic and usually bedridden octogenarian on the outskirts of the crowd.

Alf paused irresolutely. He did not need to be told that he was in quite an ugly corner. Mrs. Myers came forward, brandishing the meat-ax. Alf gave back in alarm.

"Where's my Bobby?" she demanded.

"I dunno, mum," said Alf ingratiatingly. "But if you'll just let me pass I'll go an' get 'im for you."

"Ho, yes! A nice game! No, my man, you'll stay 'ere till I get my Bobby back, or I'll know the reason why."

P.C. Arthur Jobling came forward in his most official manner.

"Move along there, please," he said. "Make way there; let the gentleman pass."

There was a scornful laugh.

"You just get out o' the light, Artie Jobling," said the voice of Mrs. Rudd. "We don't want to 'urt *you*, on'y this murderin' villain 'ere."

Alf felt a crawling sensation in his spine. He was far more frightened than he had ever been in the trenches. His knees shook and his teeth showed signs of chattering. On every side of him were menacing eyes and the crowd seemed to be all round him. Suddenly the whole group, as if impelled by a common will, took one step towards him. Alf lost the last small remnants of his nerve. He put down his head, selecting a part of the crowd as remote as possible from Mrs. Myers and the meat-ax, he charged blindly with whirling fists. There was a frantic moment's mêlée while the crowd, taken by surprise, rallied round the affected sector. But they were too late. Alf had burst through them and was fleeing up the drive. His cheek was bleeding from a scratch, his knuckles were torn by rude impact with somebody's teeth and his topper had finally and irrevocably disappeared. With shrieks of rage the crowd turned and pursued him, led by Mrs. Myers. Only the octogenarian remained. He found an outlet for his indignation by reducing Alf's hat to tattered fragments with his stick. P.C. Jobling, having decided that this was a matter altogether beyond his power, was pacing majestically towards the village.

At the corner of the drive the pursuers stopped, daunted. Alf rushed on with labored breath and heaving chest to the shelter of the house. A few stones rattled on the drive far short of him—he was thankful that the assembly consisted mainly of women.

He dashed into the hall. The first thing that met his eye was that bone of contention, Master Bobby Myers, under the guard of six enormous negroes with drawn scimitars. Bobby was quite undisturbed. His chief

emotions seemed to be pride at the amount of attention he was receiving and the wonderful adventure he was living through, and a complacent anticipation of the important position he would hold as soon as he escaped from his present predicament and returned to the village.

Alf flung himself on to a cushioned divan to get back his breath. He was conscious of the presence of Mustapha, who bowed low and appeared to wish to speak. But Alf also wished to speak.

"'Ere, Farr," he said sharply, "what the 'ell 'ave you been up to this time, eh? Nice sort o' fool you make of yerself as soon as I turn me back."

"Lord," returned Mustapha, "verily the people of the land did attack thy servants as they were returning in peace from the palace of the father of thy maiden, setting upon them with missiles and imprecations. Then did thy servants seize upon this boy, for he was foremost in the throwing of the missiles. If it be thy will, command thy servants that he be forthwith slain."

"Slain? D'you mean *kill* 'im? Lumme! No wonder the old lady was a bit upset. That's what you done for me, Farr—get me chased with a chopper. Let the boy go at once."

"But, Lord...."

"Let 'im go at once; d'you 'ear me?"

"Lord, I hear and obey."

Mustapha spoke a few words to the negroes, who sheathed their weapons and stood away from the captive.

Alf jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"'Op it!" he said, "and think yerself lucky to get off so easy."

Bobby rose to his feet as majestically as his size permitted and proceeded to the door. He managed to convey the impression that he attributed his release entirely to his own intimidatory demeanor; but not until he had made sure that his retreat was not cut off did he speak. At the door he stopped, placed his right thumb on the point of his nose and spread out his fingers, at the same time displaying a large expanse of insolent tongue.

"Yah!" he said—replacing his tongue for the purpose. "You just wait. You won't 'arf get it in the neck for this. I'll summons yer, see if I don't. Food-'og!"

He was gone. On the drive his parent received him, with incredulous joy, as one returned from the tomb, greeting him—to his great embarrassment—with an unaccustomed kiss. Then, having cuffed him on the head to restore her self-respect, she led him down to the village, where Master Bobby found himself occupying a position in the public eye calculated to swell his head beyond all hope of recovery.

But Bobby's threats and Bobby's taunts were alike immaterial to Alf. His mind was occupied with greater things. He went upstairs to Bill and found that sybarite placidly sleeping, while Lucy sat by his head rhythmically waving a fan. Mr. Montmorency's mouth was open and his snores reverberated through the room. Alf eyed him with disgust, and then woke him by the simple but efficacious method of kicking him in the ribs. He sat up and expostulated.

"What the 'ell ... oh, it's you, is it?... Well, what d'yer mean by it? An' what's wrong now?"

Alf glared at him morosely.

"A lot you care," he returned. "'Ow much 'elp 'ave you given me over this job, you blinkin' soaker?"

"If you wants a clip over the ear-'ole," began Bill, with heat, "you on'y got to go on askin' for it. As for 'elp, I'm waitin' till I'm needed. What's up now? 'Ave they slung you out o' the 'ouse, or what? *I* can't 'elp yer table manners, you know."

"She's engaged."

"'Oo is?"

"'Er—Miss FitzPeter."

"'Oo to?"

"Mr. Allen."

Bill pursed up his lips into a silent whistle.

"Lumme," he said, "I never thought of that."

"No. You just lie 'ere swigging beer an' cuddlin' yer blinkin' Lucy. I'm fair ashamed to see yer. An' now the 'ole thing's over an' done with, an' you 'aven't lifted a finger."

"There 'asn't been any need yet," said Bill coolly. "*This* is where I come in."

"But it's too late now."

"That's all *you* know. Why don't you read the book properly? Aladdin, 'e got into a much worse mess than what you 'ave, because 'is girl got married to the wrong man, instead o' just engaged."

"What did 'e do then?"

"'E told Eustace to make it 'ot for the other man; an' Eustace made it so 'ot that the other man went an' got divorced from the girl, an' Aladdin married 'er. It's easier for you, much. Just tell Eustace to fly off with Lootenant Allen, an' there you are, all plain sailin' again. 'Ow did you get on with the old bird?"

"Splendid. 'E was all over me," said Alf listlessly.

"There y'are, then. What did I tell yer? Splash a bit more money about an' 'e's yours, an' so's the girl. Come to yer Uncle Bill when yer in trouble, me lad, an' 'e'll see you through."

"But what about the girl? 'Ow if she loves 'im? 'Sides, 'e's a nob."

"Let 'er," said Bill cynically. "She'll soon forget 'im when you begins 'andin' out the oof. Women is all alike. I don't believe in 'em meself. Lucy's the sort for me. I'm thinkin' of marryin' Lucy, I am. She's just what I want in a wife—she can't answer me back, an' the more beer I drinks the better she seems to like it. 'Ere, what are you doin'?"

Alf was unbuttoning his waistcoat and shirt. "Gettin' at the Button," he said. "Goin' to call up Eustace."

"Good lad," said Bill. "'Arf a tick, though—you know 'ow the Button upsets Lucy. 'Ere, Lucy—skedaddle—bunk!"

Lucy obediently bunked.

"Now," said Bill. "Let's call the ole blighter up and settle the 'ash of the feller as 'as engaged 'imself to yer girl, nob or no nob."

Alf rubbed the talisman.

"What wouldst thou have?" said the deep tones of Eustace.

Alf took a deep breath and began to speak rapidly and nervously.

"Eustace," he said, "I want to say that I'm sure you always done yer best for me, an' I'm grateful for it. If you 'ave made some bloomers, why, we all make bloomers sometimes. An' it's me as 'ave made the biggest bloomer o' the lot."

"'Ere endeth the second lesson," said Bill derisively. "Get on to business, you chump."

"But," resumed Alf doggedly, "I been a fool and I ain't goin' on with it. What I want you to do is to take away everything in this 'ouse as you've put in it, an' to put back everything as you found 'ere, just as it was when you took it over."

"I say ..." began Bill loudly.

"Master," said Eustace gravely, "I hear and obey."

He vanished.

Instantly the lights in the room went out. At the same moment the hum of life which had filled the building stopped dead, and an eerie stillness fell on the house. The curtains which had veiled the windows were suddenly no longer there, and the moon shining in filled the room with a half-light in which Alf could see Bill's figure silhouetted.

The dead silence was broken by a flood of picturesque and disreputable imprecations from Bill.

"What d'you think yer doin'?" he asked, when he could articulate once more. "What's the idea? Think you're funny, I s'pose. 'Ere, some one's pinched me clothes...."

He groped his way to the door and opened it. Alf, suddenly conscious that he, too, was wearing nothing but the string to which the Button was suspended, and beginning to fear that Eustace had been once more disconcertingly "'olesale," followed Bill outside. The moonbeams, shining through the glass of the roof into the great hall, faintly lighted up an utterly changed house. At one end of the hall they revealed the great tapestry whose disappearance had caused the vicar such acute pain. But there was no sign of life—the place seemed suddenly haunted and ghostly. The two men retreated hastily into the room they had just left and tripped over two piles of khaki clothing, which lay on the floor, neatly folded; by them lay two sets of kit and two rifles. Otherwise the room was utterly empty.

Alf, without a word, began to dress himself. Bill felt in his tunic pocket and produced a match. By its light he surveyed the strange room, trying to take in the meaning of this last act of Alf's.

"But look 'ere," he said stupidly at last; "Lucy's gone."

"Yes—an' a good riddance too. It's you an' your blinkin' Lucy what's done me in. Get yer clothes on now an' we'll go, too."

"Go? Us?"

Events were moving too quickly for Bill's obfuscated intellect.

"O' course. We still got a fortnight o' our leave left, thank 'Evings. I'm goin' 'ome."

"But...."

"Shut it, Bill Grant. We got to go, I tell yer. Why they'd 'ave 'arf killed me in the village just now if they'd 'a caught me. I've 'ad enough of it. Besides, they're puttin' Scotland Yard on to us."

"But it'll be all *right*, you fat-'ed. Eustace...."

"Don't you talk about Eustace to me."

Alf, dressing in feverish haste, tied his puttee-tapes and put on his tunic.

"I ain't goin' to 'ave nothing more to do with Eustace, nor no one else is neither. It ain't right. If you 'ave dealin's with the Devil you're sure to get it in the neck some'ow."

Bill, who had encountered before the streak of pig-headed obstinacy which underlay Alf's easy-going nature, realized that no useful purpose could be served by argument. For a moment the prospect of losing the life of ease that had been his for the past week tempted him to try to force Alf by physical violence to countermand his order. Then a subtler plan occurred to him. Alf had proved himself utterly unworthy to possess the Button; he, Bill, would wait his chance to get it from him by fair means or foul and then.... His brain reeled at the possibilities that opened before him. First, of course, he would send Eustace over to Germany, kidnap the Kaiser and possibly a selection of his higher command, and would thus bring the war to a speedy and triumphant conclusion; after that, he would start out upon a career of dazzling glory. Meanwhile he must humor Alf.

"Oh, well," he said, in a resigned tone. "P'raps you're right. What you goin' to do now?"

"First thing is to get clear o' this blinkin' place," said Alf. "If we get nabbed in this 'ere village, I tell yer straight we'll be damn well murdered."

Bill gave an uneasy laugh. "They'll never know us in these things," he said.

He remembered that P.C. Jobling at any rate knew him by sight, and he felt nervous. "Look 'ere," he suggested, "why not use the Button—just once more—to get us 'ome?"

Alf's jaw set.

"Never no more," he answered. "You've seen the last of Eustace, you 'ave."

Bill said no more, but inwardly he registered a passionate denial of Alf's statement.

* * * * *

Half an hour later two khaki-clad figures climbed cautiously over a remote part of the wall which surrounded the Denmore estate, and made their way with some apprehension along the road towards the village. When they passed the front gates of the Manor, they were relieved to find them no longer an object of excitement. The crowd had dispersed. But in the village street were gesticulating groups discussing not only the events of the day but also, it seemed, plans of campaign for the morrow.

"We'll teach 'em—the murderin' villains."

"Seems they think they're in Roosher, but *we'll* show 'em."

It was plain that the incident of Bobby Myers was not by any means considered closed. The two figures in the familiar khaki passed through the groups almost unnoticed; one man, pausing in a lurid description of what he could do to the villain, Wentworth, on the morrow, nodded a friendly good-night to Alf, but otherwise the topic of the night was too absorbing to leave time for dallying with casual Tommies. By the time they reached the railway-station even Bill felt thankful that he was not going to be at home to visitors at the Manor on the morrow. As for Alf, everything that he saw and heard crystallized his determination never on any account to have further recourse to the Button. Isobel was almost forgotten—she seemed as far away as a person seen in a dream. The dream had been vivid enough while it lasted, but already its edges were becoming blurred and its colors were fading.

By good fortune they were in easy time to catch the last train to London; but only as they reached the ticket-office did it strike either warrior that Eustace, when clearing away the rest of his gifts, had taken also their store of wealth.

"'Ave you any oof, Bill?" asked Alf anxiously.

"I dunno."

They sought in their pockets, each with a vision of a twenty-mile tramp to London before his eyes. Then they sighed with relief; each had still the money with which he had started out upon his leave. Alf pushed a note across the counter.

"This is no good to me," said the female and youthful booking-clerk, in superior tones, hastily retrieving the tickets she was just handing out.

"What's the matter?"

"French money, isn't it?"

"Lumme, so it is! I never thought o' that, Bill. 'Ave you any English?"

Bill looked hastily through his store and shook his head.

"Look 'ere, miss," he said ingratiatingly. "Can't you let us 'ave the tickets, as a special case like? We're on leave from the front, an' we 'aven't 'ad no time to get our money changed yet. If you don't let us 'ave the tickets we'll 'ave to walk. An' it is good money, even if it is French."

The damsel was softened but doubtful.

"I'll ask father," she said.

"Father" turned out to be the station-master. He listened to their story with manifest incredulity, and fingered the French notes with skepticism, but finally agreed to accept them in payment of the fare. But he fixed a rate of exchange which assured that the railway company—or possibly himself—would gain by the transaction an enormous and unearned increment.

There was nothing for it but to pay up, and any personal comments they might have wished to make were cut short by the arrival of the train. They found an empty compartment and composed themselves joyfully

though illegally with their boots on the seats.

Bill brooded darkly for a time on the affair of the station-master, till the bitterness of his thoughts forced utterance.

"If Eustace ..." he began.

But Alf, worn out by his varied emotions, was already asleep.



CHAPTER XVI

MRS. GRANT'S DIPLOMACY

A week later Private Bill Grant—late Mr. William Montmorency of Denmore Manor—was approaching the parental roof of his friend, Alf Higgins—*ex* Wentworth. Bill neither looked nor felt happy. Life during the period since the evacuation of Denmore had been profitless and stale. True, he had plenty of money in his pocket for a man in his position; but his trouble was that his position no longer satisfied him. His home, after the glaring magnificence of Denmore, seemed cramped and tawdry. The public-houses of Hackney, once palaces of delight to be dreamed about from exile in a foreign land, were squalid and stuffy. The liquid they purveyed was—by contrast with the full-bodied brew supplied by Eustace—tasteless and flat. The barmaids compared most unfavorably with his lost Lucy in beauty, in their manner of dressing and in their attitude towards himself. Lucy, for instance, had never advised him to boil his head.

Bill was, in fact, thoroughly miserable; and he saw no prospect whatever of any alleviation of his trouble until his leave was over. He did not see the faintest possibility of obtaining the Button from Alf, until they were back in France—and he was living in anticipation of that glorious moment.

He had no very clear idea why he was going to see Alf now. Just at present, he and his mate were in that state of acute mutual irritation known as "being on one another's nerves." Alf was still obstinately determined never again to make use of the Button, and disliked any reference to the subject; and Bill, impelled by some malignant demon, seemed unable to keep veiled allusions to it out of his conversation.

To Alf their return to Hackney brought nothing but relief. His brief spurt of passion for Isobel had been swallowed up in his joy at finding himself once more free to live his own life, no longer the helpless puppet of Fate in a station and a way of existence to which he had felt himself a shrinking stranger. Isobel herself was now more than ever the figure of a dream. In fact, all the events of that strange time seemed to him hazy and unreal, until their reality was brought home to him in an unexpected and startling manner.

Alf had imagined that the Denmore Manor chapter of his life was definitely and forever closed when he reached Waterloo on the night of his flight. He had at once started to grow his mustache again, and already a bristly growth was doing its best to eliminate the last traces of Alfred Wentworth, Esquire. But Alfred Wentworth had been too important a personage in his short career for the world to accept so lightly his disappearance. The papers had taken up the affair, and the fuss they made of it both surprised and alarmed Alf. To make matters worse, Mr. Higgins senior—who might be described politically as being a half-baked semi-socialist—had regarded the whole affair as being in some obscure way a device of Capital to defraud Labor, and had talked of nothing else for some days, until Alf's irritation came to a head in regrettable outbursts of temper.

Bill entered the house on this occasion to find Alf's father reading aloud from an evening paper and making fierce marginal comments thereon for the benefit of his wife and son. The former—a stout lady of placid appearance—was lulling herself peacefully to sleep in a rocking-chair, soothed by her husband's voice as much as by the motion. Alf was sitting hunched up in a rickety basket-chair, sucking at an empty pipe.

"Ullo!" said Alf, not very graciously.

"Ullo!" returned Bill, as sourly as he.

Mr. Higgins senior, however, was pleased at the prospect of obtaining an addition to his audience and welcomed his visitor more effusively.

"Ullo, Grant," he said. "Come and sit down. Wodjer think o' this?" He smote the paper in his hand. "The country's goin' to ruin under this 'ere gover'mint. Fair makes yer blood boil."

"What does?" asked Bill politely but without interest. Old Higgins' blood had a habit of boiling on the smallest provocation.

"The 'ole bloomin' business. 'Ere you an Alf 'ere come back on leave to this country, an' what do you find?"

He paused dramatically. His audience gazed at the fireplace with complete apathy—except Mrs. Higgins, who emitted a slight snore and dropped her head upon her ample bosom.

"What do you find, I say?" reiterated her husband.

"Well, what?" Alf asked when the pause had grown too painful to be borne any longer.

"What? Why, 'eaps of things," returned his sire rather feebly. "It's all wrong. The country's full o' spies, for one thing. Full of 'em. 'Ow do we know 'oo's a spy an' 'oo isn't?—tell me that. Look 'ere, at this 'ere Denmore Manor business. We've 'ad the papers full o' that for a week past, an' not a single arrest made. It's my belief that Capital won't let 'em make any arrests, that's what I think. Disgustin', I call it!"

"'Ow d'you know there *was* spies at Denmore Manor?" asked Alf, in whom the innocent accusation rankled deeply.

"Didn't it say there was niggers? An' didn't the paper 'ave a picture o' the little boy as they kidnaped—'e said they was spies, an' 'e ought to know, 'e ought. An' yet them blighters is allowed to escape, an' they must be all over the country now, an' yet nothing's done."

"What's the paper say?" asked Bill calmly.

Mr. Higgins, much pleased, puffed out his chest and read.

"The mystery of the whereabouts of the late occupants of Denmore Manor continues to arouse a great deal of public interest. No light has yet been thrown either on the reason for its occupation or upon the method whereby these mysterious people have made good their escape. The police have now a strong clew as to the identity of the ringleaders, and they are following this up.' And I 'ope to 'Eaven," concluded the reader piously, "as 'ow it'll come to something. But I'll bet it's a blinkin' washout. The police is no good."

Alf and Bill stared blankly at one another.

"A strong clew ... they are following it up." The words sounded ominous. And yet—what *could* the clew be? Mr. Higgins, continuing his scathing denunciation of the police, found that he had lost the attention of his audience. Alf was raising enquiring eyebrows in Bill's direction, while Bill was shaking his head. He had no idea what the "clew"—if such existed—might be. The elder Higgins regarded this pantomime with growing indignation for a moment.

"It don't seem to matter to you much *what* 'appens," he said coldly at last. "If *I* was out at the front, an'

came back an' found the country in this kind o' state, I'd ... I'd...." His vocabulary suddenly proved unequal to the strain placed upon it, and he tailed off into silence.

"I don't believe they was spies at all," said Alf doggedly.

"Not spies?" His father's voice quivered with righteous indignation. "Well, what about this 'ere parson, then?—tell me that."

Alf, who had forgotten Mr. Davies' very existence, remembered suddenly, that in the hurry of departure he had left that unfortunate clergyman and his wife still laboring under the disability so ruthlessly imposed upon them. His conscience smote him.

"Why," he asked uneasily, "what's wrong with 'im? 'As 'e being gettin' into trouble?"

"No, but 'e blinkin' well ought to!"

"What's 'e done?"

"It's what 'e 'asn't done as is the matter. 'E knows something about this 'ere business. 'E went up to the 'ouse. But 'e won't say a word. Won't tell the police nothing. Nobody can't get 'im to speak."

"But 'e ain't in no trouble, is 'e?" persisted Alf.

"Trouble? No. They can't touch '*im*. If it was you or me, now, it 'ud be a case o' the police."

Alf, much relieved, stifled his conscience. The orator continued his fierce harangue.

"Yer mean to tell me," he demanded, "as 'e couldn't say something if 'e wanted to? 'E's in league with 'em, that's what 'e is. Not spies? Not spies? Why, you're as bad as this 'ere Sassietty lady—FitzPeter they call 'er."

"What's she done?" asked Alf sharply.

"Done? Why, she goes about saying in the paper as she don't believe they was spies. All cammyflage, that is. What are they, if not spies?—tell me that. I believe she's mixed up in it 'erself, too. Why, this 'ere feller Wentworth, 'e went to 'er 'ouse to dinner the very same night 'e 'ad to clear out. That makes you think a bit, eh? An' I 'ear she went an' 'ad a talk with 'im in 'is own 'ouse too. It's all Capital an' 'Idden 'And together. These 'ere Sassietty ladies is no good. Wrong 'uns, my boy, that's what they are. If I 'ad me way I'd...."

"If I 'ad my way," said Alf with heat, "I'd 'ave people like you muzzled, I would."

"You ... you ...!"

"Ow dare you miscall a lady like Miss FitzPeter?"

"Steady, Alf—'old on," said Bill, in an agony lest passion should lead his friend to indiscretion.

"I tell yer," resumed Alf, still at the top of his voice, waking his mother from her comfortable nap, "I tell yer that Miss FitzPeter never 'ad nothing to do with no spies, never in 'er 'ole life she didn't, an' any one 'oo says so is a liar."

"Ho! I'm a liar, am I?" Mr. Higgins leapt to his feet. His wife, according to her invariable custom when her menfolk quarreled, began to weep quietly, but persistently. "Get out o' the 'ouse! I ain't goin' to be

called names by no young 'ound like you. Get out of it! An' what d'you know about 'er, anyway?"

"What do I know?" Alf laughed with scorn. "I know a dam' sight more'n...."

"Come *on*, Alf!" urged Bill earnestly in his ear, anxious only to get him away before he made some terrible revelation. Alf allowed himself to be led into the street, where Bill gave him a "dressing down."

"You blinkin' fool," he said. "What the 'ell d'you want to go an' do that for? You'll give the 'ole blinkin' show away if you ain't careful. Nice we should look if any one found out it was us at the Manor!"

"Well," returned Alf, still fermenting, "what's 'e want to go talking like that for? Spies, indeed! What's 'e know about it?"

"That ain't the question," replied Bill seriously. "What *I* want to know is, what's the police know about it. You 'eard what the paper said about a clew."

"Don't they always say that?"

"Yes, but not so confident as that. If they don't know nothing about it, they say: 'The police 'as a clew,' an' everybody knows they 'aven't got nothing o' the sort. But this says: 'A strong clew, what the police is followin' up.' Did we leave anything be'ind us?"

Rack their brains as they would, they could not remember anything they had left as a clew. The question worried them considerably. Bill made once more his suggestion that Eustace could be employed to set things right, but dropped the idea hastily in face of Alf's reception thereof.

"I expect," he said at last, hopefully, but without real conviction, "as it's all cammyflage, arter all. There ain't no clew, an' they just pitched the tale extra strong so's people won't make remarks."

Each man kept an anxious eye on the papers for the next few days, but nothing more was published concerning the clew; and when the time went on, and the day before they were due to return to the front arrived without any more light being thrown on the Manor mystery, they began to feel more easy.

But that day, as Bill and his mother (a lady as aggressive as Mrs. Higgins was the reverse) were finishing their dinner there came a heavy knocking on the door.

Mrs. Grant peeped out of the window to see who her unexpected visitors might be.

"Two policemen!" she exclaimed in angry alarm. "Is this some o' your doin's, Bill Grant? What you been up to?"

"Nothin'," said Bill as jauntily as he could for the cold chills that were chasing one another up and down his backbone. "Nothin' at all."

"I 'ope not," answered his mother grimly. She had seen his expression at hearing the word "policeman," and she suspected the worst. Whether or not the police succeeded in extracting anything from him, she was confident that he had been doing something wrong. She determined that once the police had been safely got away, Bill would have her to deal with.

"If you've been doin' anythin'," she went on, "it'll be worse for you. I'm a respectable woman, I am. Quick, go an' answer the door before the neighbors see we got the police 'ere."

As Bill went towards the door the knocking was renewed with redoubled violence. Mrs. Grant could see

interested faces at the windows of the houses opposite, and her temper became worse than ever. She went into the passage, where Bill had just admitted two large constables.

"Come in 'ere," she said.

They entered.

Under his armpit the larger of the two—a sergeant—bore a book which Bill at once recognized. It was the old lady's copy of the *Arabian Nights*—and the "strong clew" of the newspapers. Bill prepared to lie as he had never lied before.

The smaller policeman—he could not have weighed more than fourteen stone—produced an indelible pencil and an official notebook. He laid the latter on the table and moistened the former preparatory to beginning his clerical labors, receiving thereby a purple stain on the lip.

"Private William Grant?" asked the sergeant.

"That's me."

"5th Middlesex Fusiliers?"

"That's right," said Bill. He was relieved at being able to start by telling the truth. It laid a firm foundation for the lies he would have to construct later on.

"Regimental Number 2312?"

"Correct," said Bill. "What might you want o' me?"

"I just want to ask you a question or two." The scribe at the table gave his pencil another lick, increasing the stain on his lip.

"What about?"

The spokesman gave a doubtful glance at Mrs. Grant, who was still quivering in the background.

"If the lady wouldn't mind ..." he began politely.

"Op it, mother!" said Bill. "You go an' get on with yer washin'."

"Oh, indeed! I'm not to know what goes on in me own 'ouse, ain't I? Very well then, you can ask yer questions in the street, or the back yard."

"P'raps it don't matter," said the sergeant uneasily. "I only want to ask a question or two about this book."

"Right-o," said Bill. "Carry on!"

Should he deny all knowledge of the book? If he did, could he outface the policemen and convince them? How much did the police know, and how had they managed to connect him with the book at all? He could not answer any of these questions, and his only course was to wait till his adversary should give him a lead. He did not have to wait long.

"This book," said the sergeant, "was sent out to you at the front by Miss So-fire Browne at a recent date."

"It was," admitted Bill. So that was how they had traced him, was it—by the name and address of Miss

Browne's brother written on the fly-leaf? And seeing that they knew so much, it was well for him that he had not after all denied his connection with the book.

"Can you tell me under what circumstances you relinquished possession of the volume in question?"

This was the point where truth must begin to be tempered. Bill set his intuitive faculty busily to work.

"Is that Latin for when did I lose it?" he asked, more with the idea of gaining time than of procuring information or even of insulting the policeman.

"None o' that," said the Arm of the Law majestically. "Answer the question. When did you see the book last?"

The owner of the notebook, who had so far merely been ticking off the various items of Bill's description as the correctness of each was established, realized that the heavy part of his task was now just about to begin. He devoted himself to suction of his pencil-point with such assiduity that he began to look as though he had regaled himself heavily with black cherries.

Bill, his mind still working at lightning speed, gazed at the amanuensis in apparent fascination. His object was to invent a method of disposing of the book which while being credible should not admit of corroboration. Supposing he said he had lost it at Folkestone on his way home?... But that might raise the question of the date of his return to England, and he did not want his mother to know that he had been home for some time before coming to her. He might manage to put the police off, but once his mother had got hold of a suspicious fact, there was no balking *her*.

"Come on," said the police sergeant impatiently. "What's the matter with you?"

"I was just waitin' till the Town Clerk 'ere was ready," he explained with his native impudence. "When did I last see the book? I don't know as I can remember the exact day."

"Never mind that. 'Ow did you come to lose it?"

The sergeant's patience was wearing thin. Bill, who had now had time to think out his story, took a deep breath.

"Last I seen of it," he said, "I lent it to a chap in the Scottish Rifles what come into our dug-out one night—name o' Conky. 'E come in about twenty-past eleven, 'avin' lost 'is way, an' 'e sez...."

"'Ere," said the constable at the table, speaking for the first time. "Steady!"

"'Ow far 'ave you got with it?" asked Bill kindly.

The scribe, with beads of sweat standing out on his brow, and a protruding tongue whose tip followed the motions of his pencil, was writing madly.

"'Dug-out,'" he quoted. "Name o' ... what did you say?"

"Conky."

"That ain't no good," interposed the sergeant with severity. "Don't waste yer time takin' down muck o' that kind, Collins. What was 'is other name?"

"Smith, I think," said Grant, his fertile brain casting about for further corroborative detail with which to

give artistic verisimilitude to his otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative. "I can't be sure, though."

"Well," said the sergeant in a resigned tone, "what did 'e do, any'ow?"

"'E took the book," resumed the romancer. "An' 'e said 'e'd like to read it. So I lent it to 'im, an' 'e promised to let me 'ave it back next time 'e was back restin'—stop me if I go too fast, Mr. Collins—an' as it 'appened I never seed 'im again."

"What 'appened to 'im?"

"I dunno for certain. But I did 'ear a rumor as 'ow 'e got nabbed, poor chap."

"Captured?"

"Yes. The Boche come over when 'is battalion was in the line."

"An' 'ow about the book?"

Bill considered a moment. The general consensus of opinion throughout the country insisted on regarding the Denmore Manor affair as the work of German spies. In Bill's eyes this was an exceedingly satisfactory opinion for the country to hold. He decided to give the country a little assistance.

"The book?" he repeated innocently. "I s'pose the Boche captured that, too."

Both policemen fell into the trap. Their eyes met in a stare full of meaning.

"The Boche!" exclaimed the sergeant. "Then it *was* a spy as...." He paused, remembering his orders not to divulge to his victim the object of his questions.

"Look 'ere," said Bill, who was beginning to enjoy himself. "What's this all about, any'ow? Where did you get the book from, an' what's it got to do with the police?"

"This chap Smith, now," resumed the sergeant blandly, ignoring Bill's questions. "What sort of a lookin' feller might 'e be, now?"

Bill pondered.

"Mind you," he said, with the air of an honest man who does not want to mislead his audience, "I can't be sure 'is name *was* Smith. Might 'a been Brown—or Thompson. One o' them common names, any'ow. 'E was one o' them middlin' chaps, not exactly dark, you know—an' yet I don't know as I should call 'im fair. 'E 'ad blue eyes, an' 'e said 'e come from Lambeth. P'raps they'll know 'im there."

"We might ask the recruiting office," said the sergeant to the painstaking Collins, now laboriously engaged in taking down Bill's minute description of Mr. "Conky" Smith (or Brown or Thompson) of Lambeth.

"You might," agreed Bill. "But o' course," he went on helpfully, "'e might not 'ave been in Lambeth when 'e joined up. P'raps 'e 'listed in Scotland, seein' 'e was in a Jocks regiment."

The sergeant rose to his feet with a sigh. He had started out with high hopes, but now he felt that he was not very much further forward than before with the Manor Mystery.

"Well," he said. "If that's all you knows, I'll be getting along. Good afternoon, mum. Sorry to 'ave troubled you."

Mrs. Grant gave a grunt, and looked anything but pleasant. She followed her visitors to the door with the sourest of faces. But on the doorstep her demeanor changed with startling suddenness. She became positively effusive, making one or two little jokes at which the sergeant, puzzled, but relieved at her change of attitude, roared appreciatively. Finally she insisted on shaking hands with both officers, and as they tramped off down the street she stood at her door, waving her hand at their unconscious backs. Having thus appeased the curiosity and disappointed the hopes of all the dear friends and neighbors who had been waiting in ghoulish joy to find out the nature of the police visit to her house, she returned to her son, who, very pleased with himself, was smiling at his reflection in the mirror.

"An' now," she said briskly, "what's all this about, eh? What's all this talk about books, an' spies, an' Mr. Bloomin' Conky o' Lambeth, eh?"

"You 'eard what I told 'im," said Bill.

"Yes, an' I knows enough about you, Bill Grant, to tell when you're lyin'. I didn't meet yer this week for the first time. Now let's 'ave the truth. What d'you mean by bringin' the police into a respectable 'ouse, eh?"

Bill looked round him in hunted fashion. Then, obeying his lifelong instinct that in dealing with his mother, discretion was the better part of valor, he picked up his cap and backed to the door. He mumbled something about—"Step out an' 'ave a look round"—and was gone.

His mother glared furiously at the door. If only she had thought to lock it when the policemen went! But she wasted no time in useless regrets. When Bill came back to supper she'd get it all out of him. Meanwhile it might be as well to go out and explain to one or two neighbors how her two cousins in the police force had been to see her. She put on her bonnet and went.

Bill, skulking at the corner of the street, waited till she was out of sight. Then, slipping into the house, he collected his kit and his rifle, and went to a Y.M.C.A. at Victoria, and there he spent the night. Mrs. Grant did not see her son again before he departed for the front; she was thus free to invent her own reasons for his visit from the police. But she never connected Bill with the statement which appeared subsequently in the less dignified newspapers.

"The Denmore Manor Mystery still continues to baffle the most acute intellects of the police force. It is, however, certain, from evidence of the most unimpeachable nature, that the whole affair is a plot of German intrigue and the Hidden Hand. When will the Government ...? Etc., etc."

Bill, on the steamer crossing from England to France, read this passage aloud to Alf, to whom he had already recounted the story of "Conky."

"You *are* a one, Bill," said Higgins, quite in his ancient vein of fervent admiration.

Bill merely looked self-conscious. He felt that the tribute was no more than his due.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FATE OF THE BUTTON

Neither of the two friends could have said with truth that he was sorry to see France once more.

Alf had a feeling that now, at any rate, his disastrous venture into high life and the public eye was really behind him. He could slip back thankfully into his old routine as an unconsidered cog in an enormous machine, and be lost in the friendly obscurity. The Button still hung from its string round his neck. He determined that it should continue to hang there; he was afraid to dispose of it, in case it should fall into the hands of some other man and be used for unimaginable evil. He had an almost fanatical determination that he himself should never again test the Button's supernatural powers; but in addition, he felt that he had a sacred charge to prevent anybody else from doing so. When he had left the Base and was already in the leave train and bound for the line, he realized that his best course would have been to drop the Button into the sea on his way across. But the idea came to him—as ideas generally came to Alf—too late.

Bill's feeling towards France was different. He had no love for the place in itself; but considered as a mere means to his great end, it had its uses. Now that he and Alf were back in the grip of the military life, where no man can avoid his neighbor without that neighbor's connivance—and sometimes not even then—he hoped and believed that he would find an early opportunity of obtaining the Button from its unappreciative owner; and then—good by forever to France and all that it stood for.

No reference to the Button was ever allowed to creep into his conversation now. The simple-minded Alf, if he noticed this at all, thought it meant that Bill had forgotten about it. But Bill had not forgotten. He was merely biding his time.

The battalion was in billets when the two men rejoined it. They reported themselves to C.S.M. French, who directed them to their own platoon.

"Ullo," said Sergeant Lees, when they appeared before him. "So you're back, are yer? Well, just you be'ave yerselves, see? I got as much on me 'ands as I can blinkin' well stand without 'avin' any trouble from you."

They found their own section installed in a small barn. Corporal Greenstock, like his superior, greeted them without enthusiasm. They settled down amid the straw.

"Well, and how is Blighty?" asked Private Denham.

"All right. I ain't sorry to be back," replied Bill. There were cries of incredulity from the section.

"Easy enough to talk," Walls remarked.

"Well, it's true."

"It won't stay true long, anyhow."

"Why not?"

"We're off up the line in a few days. Into a lively bit, too."

"Ah!" commented Bill. "I thought the sergeant seemed to 'ave something on 'is mind."

"But that's not all. We got a new officer."

"The devil we 'ave. What's 'e like?"

"Wait an' see. You will, fast enough."

Alf, who had so far had a listening part only, made a remark.

"Cap'en Richards back?" he asked.

"A week ago," said the corporal. "But they've took Donaldson away to be O.C. 'A' Company. 'E's a captain now."

Alf was much relieved at this information. He had a great admiration for Donaldson, but was afraid of that officer's exceedingly sharp eye and his habit of asking awkward questions. Bill also felt that this latest move of the Powers that were, augured well for his scheme.

"Shun!" yelled Corporal Greenstock suddenly. The section rose to its feet in the straw as Sergeant Lees entered, followed by the platoon commander.

Second-Lieutenant Stockley was a man of about forty years of age, as his grizzled hair testified. He was a big man, with a splendid pair of well-drilled shoulders, and a broad chest which showed up to the best advantage an imposing row of medal-ribbons. Altogether he looked, to the casual glance, far more like a distinguished colonel than a junior subaltern. He was, in fact, an ex-sergeant-major, promoted for gallantry in the field.

His inspection of the section billet was carried out with a thoroughness hitherto unheard of. He directed Corporal Greenstock's attention to a hole in the roof with an air of faint reproof which suggested that a really efficient N.C.O. would have remedied such defects without being told; after which the usually imperturbable corporal, losing his nerve entirely, followed his platoon commander round the billet agitatedly explaining away defects before the officer had time to criticise. Sergeant Lees, who was accustomed with the ordinary subaltern to act as spokesman and master of the ceremonies, hung about anxiously in the offing. Even he was plainly feeling the strain of living up to this super-efficient new officer. Bill began to understand why he had seemed to have "something on his mind."

As Mr. Stockley concluded his examination and turned to go, his eye rested on Alf and Bill.

"Two men here I don't know, sergeant," he said. "Names, please."

"Higgins and Grant, sir."

"Where from?"

"Leave, sir."

"Umph! Corporal!!"

"Sir!"

Corporal Greenstock's attitude of attention might well have been photographed and used as a model for recruits.

"See those two get cleaned up before I see them again. May do for Blighty, won't do for me."

Bill looked after the officer's retreating form.

"Lumme!" he commented. "'Ot stuff, eh?"

"You bet," said the corporal. "An' arter what 'e said you'd better be 'ot stuff too, my lad, by to-morrow, or 'e'll be biting you in the neck—an' me, too."

"'As 'e been in the line yet?" asked Alf.

"Not with us, 'e 'asn't. But 'e was a fair terror with 'is old battalion, they say. 'E's killed nigh on fifty Fritzes 'imself, first an' last, an' on'y for a bit o' bad luck 'e'd 'ave 'ad the V.C. Some soldier!"

"I expect," put in a gloomy voice, "as 'ow 'e's one o' these 'ere interferin' fellers as can't let well alone. When 'e gets into the trenches 'e'll never be satisfied with a quiet life, you'll see."

Corporal Greenstock grinned.

"Quiet life?" he said. "Not much! This blinkin' platoon'll spend all its time crawlin' about No-Man's Land on its stummick, when it ain't doin' bombing raids into Fritz's trenches. You'll see."

Bill had an instinctive feeling that the corporal was right. Mr. Stockley had the air of a man who did not do things by halves; and the ribbons of the Military Medal, the D.C.M. and the Military Cross (a distinction only rarely conferred on sergeant-majors) testified to his fighting qualities. As to his thoroughness on parade, it was not long before both Higgins and Grant became painfully aware of that. Their long spell of leave had left them rather out of touch with military life, and they fell very far short of their new commander's minimum standard.

"This life ain't what it was, Alf," Bill confided one day, busy with oil-bottle and pull-through on the working parts of his rifle.

Alf said nothing. His temper was ruffled. He was engaged in polishing to a dazzling brightness a bayonet which he considered was already as clean as any reasonable man could desire; he had a constitutional objection to gilding refined gold and to painting lilies—an objection, however, which was not shared by his officer. He continued to polish in morose silence.

Bill fell into a brown study. The more he saw of Mr. Stockley the more he admired him and the more bitterly he cursed the fate that had thrown them together. Stories of Stockley's dare-devil deeds and hairbreadth escapes were circulating freely about the battalion, and the more Grant heard the less he liked the prospect of venturing into the line under the leadership of such a firebrand. Bill was by nature a peaceable person, who considered his duty to his country was done so long as he helped to man the front line from time to time, and also occasionally, in a decent, well-ordered manner, went over the top. He regarded the energetic dare-devilry by which Stockley interpreted the word "warfare" as he would have regarded big-game hunting—an amusement to be restricted entirely to such lunatics as liked it. The thought of spending his time crawling about No-Man's Land filled him with forebodings, and gave him a new and powerful reason for attempting to obtain the Button from Alf at the earliest possible moment.

He began to watch the unconscious Alf and to shadow him after the manner of the lynx-eyed detective of fiction; but somehow time slipped away without giving him the opportunity he sought. One thing was certain; he must make quite sure of the success of any scheme before he put it into execution. One false

step—one bungled attempt would ruin all his hopes; Bill was confident that if once Alf's suspicions were roused, he would get rid of the talisman altogether—possibly, for instance, by burying it. The problem was in consequence not an easy one, and Bill was no nearer its solution when, on the third day following their return, the brigade received its marching order for the forward area.

Time was growing short; but fate played into Bill's hands, granting him at any rate a brief respite. The 5th Battalion was to be in Reserve to begin with.

"Huh!" said Alf. "Workin' parties for us. 'Ow very nice!"

Sergeant Lees, who happened to be present, caught this remark, and turned to the speaker in well-simulated surprise.

"Why, 'Iggins," he said, "I wonder at yer. On'y a month ago, before you went on leave, you was that fond o' workin' parties there was no keepin' you off 'em."

Alf, who had learnt by experience the curious nature of his sergeant's sense of humor, gave a sickly smile and said nothing. The section sniggered sycophantically.

On the march next day, both the friends found to their cost that a sybaritic life in the lap of luxury is not the best preparation for an active-service route march. The first halt saw them not only badly blown and streaming with sweat, but also beginning to be footsore.

"Umph!" said the sergeant caustically. "It's easy to see 'ow some people spend their leave. What you two want is a little 'ard P.T. 'Owever, some o' these working parties you're so fond of 'll soon put you right."

Sergeant Lees was an economical humorist.

Soon a whistle blew, and the column fell in again. At every step the poor condition of Privates Higgins and Grant became more noticeable, and the rest of the section, swinging along in fine style, only showed them up more plainly. The weight of their packs began to increase steadily and relentlessly, until it seemed that something must break soon. A dull pain began to make itself felt across their shoulders, increasing little by little until it became a raging torment like a toothache. They set their teeth and plodded on; the battalion was proud of its marching. At last, when the pain was wellnigh unbearable, the blessed sound of the whistle was heard. The battalion fell out for another ten minutes' halt.

The expression "fell out" was true in its most literal sense of Alf and Bill. They lay side by side, every aching muscle relaxed, determined to make good use of every second of their rest.

It was at this auspicious moment that Mr. Stockley chose to notice them.

He himself seemed as fresh as when he started out, despite the fact that he had been carrying two men's rifles in addition to his own kit. He came swinging along the road during the halt with a jaunty step and an air of physical well-being which it made Alf and Bill feel faint to look upon.

He stopped and regarded the collapsed forms of the two friends with a disapproving air.

"Very out of condition," he commented. They made convulsive efforts to rise, but he waved them back. "No, no!" he said. "Lie still. Need a rest. But warn you—won't do. Going into the line; every man must be fit for anything. Must sweat off that fat."

He went off, leaving the two men more conscious of their flabbiness than ever.

"Makes me tired, 'e do," complained Bill. "I don't b'lieve I can march another step. I've a good mind not to fall in at all."

But at this moment a welcome message reached them from the head of the column. Their destination, it appeared, was now only half an hour's march away; and as they were now entering the forward area, platoons would march from here at intervals of a hundred yards. As the companies were marching in alphabetical order, this meant that "C" Company would have a further rest while "A" and "B" were getting under way. Alf and Bill, giving much thanks for this relief, lay down again; and when at last No. 9 Platoon moved on again they were able to move with it in comparative comfort.

That night, when every occupant of his dug-out had at long last dropped off to sleep, Bill lay awake, tingling with excitement. Striking a match with the utmost caution, he fished out from his tunic pocket an enormous clasp-knife, which he opened. Then he lit a piece of candle-end and, shading it carefully with his hand, he leant over the sleeping form of his mate; but all he could see was a tightly rolled and shapeless cocoon. Alf's method of using his blanket left Bill no possible chance of getting at the string which bore the Button.

One of the men stirred in his sleep, and Bill, extinguishing his light, gave himself up to slumber in a very disturbed state of mind. Come what might, by some means or other he must get that Button in time to prevent No. 9 Platoon from being let into the front line by its present commander.

Next day, things became worse than ever. Mr. Stockley was detailed to take out a working-party consisting of his own platoon and to dig a length of trench behind the British lines. He took this opportunity of beginning the process of sweating the fat off Alf and Bill. He himself, with his coat off and his immense arms bare to the elbow, was doing two men's work; and he made it his personal duty to see that Higgins and Grant did at least two men's work between them.

At the end of the day's work both men were stiffer than they had dreamt possible; they went through a pantomime expressive of acute agony, which Stockley saw—as he was intended to.

He laughed.

"Thank me later," he said. "Stiff time coming in front line. Must be fit. May save your lives."

And he fell his party in and marched it back to the lines.

The position was fast becoming impossible. Bill's determination not to trust himself in the line under Stockley's command had become a raging obsession, and yet he could see no way of getting the Button. That night he morosely watched his unconscious friend making himself into a chrysalis for the night.

"Alf," he said with guile, "don't you feel it 'orrid 'ot these nights, rolled up in a great thick blanket like that?"

"I likes to be warm at night," answered a muffled voice from within the folds.

"But it's so un'ealthy," urged Bill.

Alf's tousled head and astonished face appeared at one end of the cocoon.

"Ho!" he said suspiciously. "And since when 'ave you been troubling your 'ed about my 'ealth, eh?"

Bill abandoned the topic, feeling very annoyed. If the simple Alf was beginning so readily to question the

purity of his motives, he foresaw that he would have to take desperate risks. He would have to lure his friend into a remote spot and extract the Button from him by the old "Stand-and-Deliver" method. But this method had the disadvantage that Bill was not at all sure that, man to man, Alf was not the stronger of the two. He must rely on the essence of strategy—surprise. But how? And when?... He passed a disturbed night; and the sounds of peaceful slumber proceeding from the apparently hermetically sealed bundle at his side failed to soothe him in any way.

Next morning, Sergeant Lees appeared in the dug-out with the exasperatingly superior air he always assumed when he had important or interesting news to tell. After his custom at such times, he distributed trivial orders and asked unimportant questions until the men about him were on the verge of apoplexy from sheer irritation and excitement. Then he produced an item of news.

"We move up into support to-morrow, relievin' the 4th," he stated. "Front line four days later."

There was a general movement of disappointment. Most of the men would quite certainly have preferred to move straight up into the line and get their tour of duty therein finished. There was a general impression abroad that things were gradually blowing up to a storm, and that the brigade's last four days in the front trenches would be the worst. The pessimists were unanimously of opinion that the 5th Battalion had been allotted these four days owing to malice aforethought on the part of the Higher Command.

"It'll be a thick time," said somebody.

"Yes," agreed somebody else. "Especially with 'im in charge."

Then Sergeant Lees, with the air of a careful dramatist who is congratulating himself that he has succeeded in keeping his big thrill till the very end of his play, added his second piece of news.

"Lootenant Stockley is leavin' us to-day, for to undergo a course at one of these 'ere schools, or something."

"Lumme!" said an awed voice. "What the 'ell do they think they can teach *'im*?"

Bill, when he heard the sergeant's news, felt like a condemned criminal who is reprieved just as the hangman is fitting the rope round his neck. He was now sure of getting the two things he had lacked so far for the fulfillment of his scheme—time and opportunity. Time, because Mr. Stockley would now not be in charge of the platoon; opportunity, because in the support lines Alf would no longer enjoy the protection of his beloved blanket.

In fact, orders for their immediate collection and delivery to the quartermaster were even now on their way round the battalion by the hands of "runners." Bill had a vision of Alf sleeping with open tunic and bare neck, and he realized that to a patient and watchful conspirator the Rape of the Button could only be a matter of days—perhaps of hours. And once the Button had changed hands, the fearful souls who had prophesied that the 5th Battalion's next tour in the trenches would be full of battle, murder and sudden death, might take fresh courage. That tour of duty would never come. The War would be over—or if not over, it would have devolved into a route-march. And then....

Bill never allowed his imagination to tempt him beyond this point. Sufficient for the day was the miracle thereof. Let him once get hold of the Button and he and Eustace would not be at any loss what to do. Only, behind and beyond his earth-shaking schemes for the good of his country was one very definite and private project closely connected with his vanished handmaid Lucy and his interrupted supply of beer. But this idea was never allowed to encroach upon his mind too much; he never forgot that before he could realize it, broader issues were to be dealt with.

On the following day the battalion moved up into the support line and settled down into its new dug-outs with the speed that only comes with experience. During the relief there was a certain amount of shelling going on, but there were no casualties. "C" Company was distributed to its dug-outs without undue fuss. Captain Richards, going the round of his company, gave a word of advice.

"Get what sleep you can, you men," he said. "They're very jumpy to-night in the front line, and you may have to tumble out at any minute. Keep your equipment by you and your boots on."

Bill and Alf were allotted with four others to a small dug-out. Bill, whose mind was still bent on his

single aim, piloted his friend into a recess in which there was room for two only; and all six loosening their tunics and the belts of their equipment, settled themselves to sleep. Bill, who had determined to lie awake watching his chance, was the first man to go to sleep; and, as the irony of fate would have it, Alf selected this time of all others to turn upon his back and remain in that position. His opened tunic fell away from his neck, and the talisman lay in the little hollow between his collar-bones—the easiest of preys for the patient and watchful conspirator aforesaid. A couple of hours passed in which nothing could be heard in the dugout but a nasal sextet of harmony and power, to which the guns far above supplied a desultory obbligato.

At length a cautious footfall sounded on the stair, and Sergeant Lees appeared. He flashed his electric torch round the dug-out, then he went to each of the recumbent forms on the floor and shook them.

"You four," he whispered, careful not to wake the two in the recess, of whom he could see nothing but boot-soles. "Come up to Company H.Q. at once. The Captain's got a job for you. Quiet, now."

But quiet as they were, they woke Bill. He sat up dazedly, wondering where the others had gone. He was seized with a wild panic. Had they missed him out by accident? Ought he to follow? Then he realized that he was not quite alone. Alf, who had taken the bass part in the recent sextet, was maintaining it as a solo with undiminished vigor.

Grant struck a match and held it above his head, and realized that here at last was his opportunity. He was alone with Alf in the dug-out—and there, before his eyes, was the longed-for Button. Trembling with excitement, he fished out his haversack and produced an ancient and depressed-looking piece of candle, lit it, and stuck it on a beam. Then he drew his bayonet, and leant over his friend. Cautiously, not daring to breathe, he inserted the point of his weapon beneath the string that bore the talisman. One sharp cut, and the Button would be his. His hand shook on the handle of the bayonet so violently that the point rattled on Alf's collar-bone; and Alf's eyes opened.

It must have been sufficiently terrifying to him, awaking from a deep sleep, to find a grimy man kneeling over him in the eerie light of a sputtering candle-end, and holding a naked bayonet to his throat. He lay as still as death, and his round blue eyes widened until they seemed to protrude from their sockets.

Bill had gone too far now to hesitate or turn back.

"If you move a finger, Alf 'Iggins," he said, in a melodramatic whisper, "it is your last. I'm goin' to 'ave that Button."

The bayonet jerked up as the string snapped, and Bill, reaching out, felt his fingers close at last upon the object of his desires.

Alf's wits came back to him. He sat up.

"Gimme that back," he ordered violently. "'Tain't yours. Gimme it!"

"Not much!" answered Bill. "Now for it! Now for Kaiser Bill and the end o' the war!! What-oh! Now for.... Lumme, what the 'ell's that?"

"That" was a sudden terrific bombardment which broke out overhead, of an intensity which made the dug-out walls quiver. As they stood listening open-mouthed, a thin voice—the voice of Corporal Greenstock—floated down the staircase to them.

"Tumble out there, quickly," it said. "The Boche is comin' over." A pause. "D'you 'ear me?"

"Comin', corp'ril," shouted Bill. All thought of Eustace, the Button, the Kaiser—everything had vanished instantly from his mind. He thrust the precious Button carelessly into a pocket, grabbed his rifle and tore upstairs, followed by Alf. Then they found themselves doubling up a communication trench under the leadership of Lieutenant Shaw. Nobody seemed to know what had happened, or exactly what they were going to do—except that they were going to kill Boches.

The German guns were shelling the communication trenches to prevent the British supports from coming up, and whizz-bangs were bursting all about them. But they had no time to pay attention to details of that kind—the one desire was to get on and into the front line. At last they turned a corner, and plunged into the thick of a hand-to-hand struggle. Neither Alf nor Bill had a very coherent memory of what happened in the next few minutes. They remember heaving and hacking and stabbing at innumerable greasy Huns. Then suddenly the Huns seemed to melt away and disappear; the two men realized dimly that the trench was cleared and the enemy in flight, and they sat down to rest, feeling dizzy and badly winded.

But as soon as the raiding party were clear of the British trenches the guns began again. A whizzbang dropped into the trench where the two friends were sitting, and burst. That was the last thing that Bill Grant knew until he woke some days later to find himself in a Casualty Clearing Station.

A Sister came towards him.

"Awake at last," she said cheerily.

He stared stupidly at her.

"Where am I?" he said. "Where's Alf 'Iggins?"

"Next bed, ole son," said a weak voice. "Leg broke."

Bill pondered this information for a space. Then a thought struck him and he sat up with a jerk. The Sister came over to him.

"You must lie down and keep quiet," she said.

"The Button!" exclaimed Bill fiercely.

The Sister looked anxious.

"There, there!" she said, in a soothing tone. "Just lie down and be quiet. You were knocked silly by a shell, you know, but you're all right now. Lie down at once."

"I want my Button," he reiterated, struggling with her. "Gimme my Button, an' I'll lie down."

The Sister turned to Alf.

"What does he mean?" she asked quietly. "I believe he's wandering."

"No, no!" said Alf. "The Button. It's most important."

"Well," replied the Sister, mystified but relieved that Bill was apparently not raving after all. "Your tunic was in such a mess it was burnt, but I kept your buttons and the things in your pockets. I'll get them, if you'll lie still."

She produced a collection of miscellaneous rubbish. Bill sorted out the buttons and rubbed each one in turn feverishly, forgetful of the probable effect on the Sister if Eustace had suddenly appeared. But he did not.

"Duds, all of 'em," said Bill dismally. "Lumme! What did I do with it.... I know!" He shouted in sudden inspiration. "I put it in me right-'and trouser-pocket. Sister, do please 'ave a look in me trousers. Please!"

The two men waited in a tense silence till she returned.

"Now," she said severely. "No more nonsense, please. You must both lie down and keep quiet. There's nothing in your trousers pockets except a large hole."

THE END

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