

WAR AND THE WEIRD

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Minor typographical errors have been corrected without note. Punctuation has been normalised. Dialect spellings have been retained.

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INTRODUCTION

BY FORBES PHILLIPS

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I

THE UNCANNY UNDER FIRE

"Do you think there is anything in it?" He was a clean-set six-foot specimen of English manhood, an officer of the R.F.A. wounded at Mons, who spoke. "I mean I haven't studied these subjects much—in fact, I haven't studied them at all. Sport is more in my line than spiritualism and that kind of thing, but when you have experiences brought under your very nose again and again, you cannot help thinking there must be something in such things." He had just told me that in the last few minutes' sleep he managed to get on the march to Mons he dreamt that he was unable to sit his horse. The next day he was wounded inside his right knee, not seriously, but sufficient to stop him riding for a week or two. "I should never have thought anything more of it—I mean, connecting the dream with the ill-luck—but in the South African campaign there were quite remarkable instances. You see, at such times when you are playing hide-and-seek[12] with shrapnel, officers and men get very chummy when we do get a spell for a talk. The Tommies give us their confidences, and ask us all kinds of strange questions about religious and supernatural things."

Take premonitions, for example. How shall we account for the British soldier's actual versions of the matter? There are countless stories in this war, in every war, of men having a warning, a sub-conscious certainty of death. The battlefield is armed with a full battery of shot, which thrill with human interest and have around them a halo of something uncanny, supernormal. It may be that in the stress and shock of battle the strings—some of the strings—of the human instrument get broken; that poor Tommy, gazing into the night of the long silence, becomes a prey to morbid fancies, which presently are worked up into premonitions. There may be something in this, but the men of inaction are more prone to fancies than men on active service. Another theory suggests that the same power within which questions, supplies an answer. It may be so; but no one is anxious for the answer Death brings. One can only smile at the crass stupidity of most of the explanations given by those who deny the existence of super-natural agencies and powers. The region of spiritual dynamics is destined to be the science of the future.

In a somewhat sceptical age it is worth[13] while noticing that from the earliest dawn of history, under varying forms of government and civilisation with which we are acquainted, the belief in premonitions was unchallenged. The old Greeks and Latins were

the keenest thinkers the world so far has seen; yet they believed in ghosts, omens, and premonitions. (They would smile in lofty scorn at some of the superstitions to-day taught under the Elementary Education Act of 1870.) Unbelief in such things super-natural, therefore, cannot be accepted as a sign of lofty mentality. A journalistic friend was staying with me some few months ago. We were sitting smoking rather late after dinner. "Do you believe in ghosts?" I asked. "Don't be so absurdly foolish!" he cried angrily. "That's all right," I remarked quietly. "Now I know you won't mind sleeping in our haunted room; many foolish people do object." "Great Scott!" he ejaculated, "no haunted room for me!" Nor would he even look at it. He would not face the logical sequence of his dogmatic unbelief. Only a brave man dare express all he believes.

Now it is well known that every advance in scientific knowledge is greeted with mocking laughter. We know the jeers with which even clever men greeted the Marconi claims. It is not so many years ago that a distinguished member of the French Academy of Science rose up amongst his colleagues and^[14] pronounced the Edison phonograph to be nothing more than an acoustical illusion. So we are told that soldiers' visions are optical illusions. That is no answer. Call them optical delusions if you like, then the query arises what causes these optical delusions, of which we have countless instances, which inform a man of the hour, and sometimes the manner, of his death? To call an effect by another name does not dispose of the cause of such effect, nor is it any solution of the mystery.

Few thinkers now, worthy of the name, seriously dispute the existence of super-natural forces and influences. The whole system of Christianity, of belief in all ages, is founded upon such things. To-day front-rank men are investigating in avenues of research where once they sneered. There is much fraud and cheap talk in ordinary life, but not under fire. Men are not cheap then, nor are they paltry. Strange that where death is busiest the evidence of life beyond and above it all should abound. The invisible, full of awe, is also full of teaching, it is pregnant with whispers. The mind, tuned up to a new tension, receives all kinds of Marconi-like messages. What sends such whispers? Is it that in the moment of supreme self-sacrifice and splendid devotion to duty that spiritual perceptions are sharpened? Who shall say? "He was hit, and he rushed forward shouting, 'Why, there's^[15] my——' then he dropped dead, but he saw someone, of that I am sure." So spoke a man of the A.S.C., who saw his comrade die. Deep calls to deep, and if we put our ear to the call we may hear the message. On the battlefield, as in no other place, there is the call of soul to soul, of heart to heart, intensified by all our powers of emotion, which duty calls forth at their best. Tommy Atkins stares more fixedly into the dim future, the greater the gloom the more he searches for the gleam, and sometimes it is vouchsafed to him. There is no doubt that mind calls to mind. After all, time and space are artificial things. They cannot be spiritual barriers. Why should a mother, thinking of her lad at the front in a supreme moment of affection and deep yearning, not be able to do what frequently happens unconsciously among ordinary acquaintances? Often a thought will pass from one mind to another in a moment of silence.

The uncanny under fire must take its place among things to be investigated, the evidence is too convincing to be pooh-poohed. Science and philosophy are now boldly entering the dim regions of the occult in search of its laws; on the battlefield Tommy Atkins is already there thinking over weird things and he comes to conclusions, finding the lights by which he steers.

This chapter could not be complete without mentioning another mystery of the battlefield:[16] it is this—the number of instances in which the Germans have savagely pounded a church with their artillery, only to find on entering the ruin that the cross was still there erect and intact. One Uhlan soldier climbed upon an altar to smash a crucifix, slipped and put his ankle out. That may be a coincidence. Next moment a shell killed him and one of his comrades, the crucifix remained uninjured. Soldiers, French and British, talk of these uncanny things, interpreting them in several ways, but each of these ways is the pathway of the spirit—perhaps part of the altar steps on which men climb up through the darkness to God.

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II

WAR THE REVEALER

WAR is not only the Great Educator, it is the Great Revealer. Its marches and bivouacs, its battles, its commonplaces and surprises, its trials and its triumphs, are a singular school of experience. The various impacts upon man's psychological anatomy produce strange results. They seem like the blows of some Invisible Sculptor, producing out of commonplace material a hero and it may be a demi-god. The opening orchestra of shot and shell braces up the mind of the soldier and attunes it up to receive new sensitiveness. The bullets play strange dirges on the strings of life before they break them, and each dirge has its theme, some song of spiritual things. His gaze is towards the sky line and he sees strange things, a whole battery of lights each of which is in its way a revelation. The battle chorus crying to the night of long silence becomes a prayer, and the response is ever helpful.

The individual amid the thunder of his surroundings in the red surge of battle somehow never allows his soul to become obscured. It is taking impressions which later in the[18] day as he sits by the camp fire cause him to think and to reach conclusions which leave him a different man from what he has been. We see this in the glow of the soldiers' letters to those he loves: he has come within the shadow of the Divine Reality as the wondrous book of Life and Death opens on the battlefield. The result is the Soldier's Gospel. It would cause the devotees of little Bethel to faint with its crude "superstitions" and absence of meaningless and stupid dogma yet its grip of spiritual things and Divine Aid would make the ordinary "go to meeting" Christian gape with astonishment. The soldier's simple faith, his willing endurance, his quiet heroisms, his silent self-sacrifice, though they call for no louder name than duty, are just those chords which link him to the Great Heroism which saw its culmination in Calvary. After all, deeds only are the words of love.

The Soldier's Gospel is a wonderful revelation: the world grows gratefully small as it appreciates its work, worth and effect upon the man. All the lights by which he steers sum up good citizenship rather than sectarianism. We had long ceased to cultivate the former.

"There goes a hospital ship," and a Commander of one of H.M. Patrols pointed out to me a transport full of wounded. We thought in pity of that array of maimed men, of silent suffering, of bandages, slings, crutches and artificial limbs, but suddenly there arose^[19] from the transport a mighty cheer of greeting and salutation to the white ensign. That was the reply of war's wreckage to those who pitied. It is a wonderful Gospel that produces this. But the invisible, while full of awe, does not daunt him, the soldier reaches out towards the rather unknown searching for light and finding it. Under fire means so much, it is filled up with so many experiences, you march through a lifetime in a few seconds, you get new views of the past years from another angle of vision. Shadow and darkness and doubt are lifted, the soldier is frank and honest, he is not hide-bound by petty superstitions, he is willing fairly to consider and weigh all sensations, visions and inner illuminations. He is not blinded with the dogma of either agnosticism or sectarianism, while his sense of humour saves him from many of the errors of the various "Christian" brotherhoods. Curious enough, the people who object to duty, who are unwilling to strike a blow for righteousness, invariably belong to some of the freak sects and are devotees of sectarianism in its narrowest meaning.

No doubt "Vicarious Suffering" the root doctrine of many sects in this country is responsible for the general shirking of duty on the part of so many men to-day. Men look to the ballot box for their meat in due season. They want all the privileges of citizenship without the responsibilities. The^[20] sects of to-day in teaching that the historic Christ took all our sins upon His shoulder have produced a type of sentimental immoralist who creeps under the shelter of the Cross, content that Christ should suffer in his place. So long as the Cross does not offend his eyesight, he is willing to find refuge in its shadow. Where selfishness reigns there is no vision. The gaze is upon gain, personal comfort, things entirely earthly. A man who is always looking at mud thinks in terms of mud. Just as a great naturalist confesses a loss of the finer sense of music, so there is the loss of the spiritual vision, for the spiritual sense is just as real as any other sense, but it can become useless and drop out of our life, if we do not value it and no longer use it. There are people with an artistic sense. There are more without it.

The doctrine of the atonement is used to promote the crude idea that to put our responsibilities upon others is more religious than facing them oneself. Christ's atonement is no isolated fact in history to make men cowards, but a sustained attitude of devotion in which every man and woman is to take a part. Instead of thanking Christ for hanging there upon the Cross in our place we should strive for the same courage, the same endurance, the supreme devotion to duty and the vision of Divine Aid will be ours perhaps in Angel form. To the brave in all ages has come the vision of higher things.

III

THE SOUL'S BOUNDARY LINE

"I NEVER was religious, but this business is changing me and many thousands more," so writes a soldier. From another soldier's letter we get, "War is the most sobering influence I know ... it sobers their every day. They listen more attentively to the religious services. Sometimes I wish for the sake of the morals of our army that we were always at war."

When I was in Northern France I came in contact with many wounded French soldiers, men who had gone to the front as atheists and returned firm believers. "Thank the good God I have really seen. I fell wounded in twenty-three places they tell me. I fell cursing a God I did not believe in: then a cold hand was laid upon my brow. I looked up and saw—ah! my God! how beautiful a Being. Now I do not want, I do not care to live for I want to see that beautiful Being again. I know I shall. Leave me. See to the others." This was a voluntary statement of a French soldier who called me to[22] his side simply to light a cigarette for him. I left him perfectly happy and it was quite true about his number of wounds. He lived only a few hours and he knew that he was dying. Men do not usually tell lies on their death beds.

Wonderful is the warp and woof of life under fire. It is the parade of the living, the dead and those on the borderland. Men go through the whole gamut of emotions. War is an object lesson of laughter and tears playing hide and seek with each other. The tragedy and the comedy follow close on each other's heels. Deep calls not only to deep but to shallow as well, and in the end all notes harmonize. Where the swathe of the scythe is wide men's souls expand in heart qualities. Amidst the wreckage of a battlefield he picks up all kinds of things, every faculty picks up something and they become contributions to soul force. The greater the gloom the more the soldier searches for the gleam. Religion and resolution meet in the soldier and give him deeper vision. He hears his comrade say, "I shall be taken to-day, give this to ——." Examples of this premonition abound. He enters a bombarded village, the only thing standing intact frequently is a figure of Christ crucified, or the Madonna looking down upon a mass of crumbling ruin. These facts are again and again verified by photographs. Often the talk of the camp as the men settle down by the fire is of the weird[23] and the uncanny that has happened during the day; and there are pauses when the soldiers stare into the embers and forget to suck their pipes.

To explain the book of life, one would require the scrolls of eternity. War throws light on some of its stray pages as they flutter for a second on the wings of time and then disappear, but not before it has flung its cressets of light upon the black pall of doubt. Everyone now talks of psychic phenomena. In a paltry generation of superficial thinking the subject was one for jest, but there is far more in it than jesters are likely to discover. Mocking laughter never discovered anything except the vacuous fool. The appearances of spiritual beings give but scant opportunity for examination but serious investigation has now taken the place of cheap sneering. After all religion is founded upon a philosophy of

apparitions. The vision of angels at Mons is no new thing. Catholicism is founded on such visions and no religion worthy of the name is without its story of angels. New aspects of matter have laid many materialistic theories in the dust, the mysterious potencies of matter which the latest science is revealing, the energy of electrons, and radium are giving us a new science of super-sensual physics and with it new vistas of thought.

It is no longer necessary to apologize for the work of psychic research, that is among intelligent people. Light is gaining on the[24] darkness. "I felt another hand assisting me to steer," said a sailor man to me who vainly tried to explain how he kept his boat from what appeared certain destruction. He would scorn to be called a religious man. "There is nothing of the ranter in me—you know sir," and he used uncomplimentary remarks which I omit. "But there sir, it was no skill of mine. All I saw was death and destruction for me and my mates, yet I knew we should pull through all right. There was another that shipped as passenger in the darkness."

The question of immortality and of the existence of spiritual entities which had been relegated to the limits of illusions and dreams in Victorian times by the fumbling amateur philosophers of that day, can now be discussed with quiet in the old philosophic vein which characterized the great age of thought when Greek sages argued in the Gardens of Athens. This fact alone justifies a book of the present character. The bumptious and dull ass who announces "Miracles do not happen," is now seen in true perspective and he cuts a poor figure.

Apparitions, telepathy and clairvoyance are not explanations, but names for facts demanding separate explanations. In regard to such the "ecclesiastical damn" and the "scientific damn" have been freely used. If men have been hypnotized by ghost stories, they certainly have been deluded by stories[25] of unnatural science. To deny activities of life natural and super-natural is rather silly considering no man has solved the life principle. The atoms forming the material of the brain may be proved ultimately to be identical with those that compose a jelly-fish or a jar of margarine, and brain appears to be the organ of mind, but it is mind that grasps things, places things, and thinks. Life is concerned with *thought* as well as atoms. It receives thoughts from all sides, sometimes it claims to detect the thought giver—and that is to have a fuller vision. Men think quickly on the field of battle. They are not constrained by a narrow education and a narrower conventionalism to limit their thoughts to what others think in their own circle.

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IV

THE SPIRITUAL ENTITY

WHY is it that men in all ages, the best of men, the most gifted of men, with the evidence of the senses so strongly against them, have believed that a spiritual personal entity survives death's disaster? That men do so is seen in all literature and witnessed to in all lands. Vedic hymns, 3,500 years old sing of a spiritual body with as clear a vision as S. Paul. We are collecting the evidence that has floated down the ages and examining it with a new criticism. The attitude of "Pooh! Bah!" of Early Victorian times is no longer the mark of superiority. It is now, as it was then, the mark not only of ignorance but stupid dullness. The frame of mind which used to dismiss everything with the word "impossible" is now recognized not as science but ignorance. The researches of a Crookes, of a Sir Oliver Lodge, Myers, Gurney, Rochas, Gabriel Delanne, Lombroso, in the region of the occult command serious attention. Swedenborg communicated messages from people who had long passed to[28] their relatives on matters of fact which were found accurate in every detail.

M. Rochas speaks of an externalized consciousness which feels a touch. Within man is the plant and machinery of all kinds of faculties, one is the perception of the spiritual. Had it been trained like his sense of music, we should no longer be in the dark of despair over our dead. The trend of thought to-day is to show man a spiritual being in a spiritual universe, that death is merely transition. If not, then God is the Cosmic Murderer. The spiritual sense of man is his faculty of response to the spiritual world around him, just as his musical sense is his measure of response and his reception of the world of music around him. By some magic in the red surge of war, this spiritual response is sharpened and quickened as every other sense is, and the soldier sees visions. Man working within time and space is influenced by what is beyond the one and the other, the full significance of this world would seem to be in another scheme of things to which this is only the vestibule. The soul's wave movements have their laws. In that soul is some fine Marconi-like instrument which registers impressions, and from time to time receives spiritual warnings and perceives spiritual beings. Serious men are now boldly investigating. Little help comes from the sectarians who seem to begrudge God his universe; everything has to be cheapened to[29] the worm's-eye view of little Bethel, which steeped in politics has long lost sense of the spiritual. The old Greeks and Latins were acute thinkers, yet they believed in spiritual beings and their appearances. It was only in the days of cheap thinking that it required a special valour to express belief in the super-natural. The fact is, most people are like the devils of scripture who "believe and tremble" without admitting the authority of their belief. It is refreshing to find a writer like Mr. W. S. Lilley in the *Nineteenth Century* professing his absolute belief in ghosts. To man, and it would appear to man alone on this plane, it is given to explore the unknown and to establish the communion of soul with soul.

After all it is a question of evidence. If a man say "I won't believe in anything super-natural whatever the evidence may be," it is best to leave him to his folly. If he will accept the evidence that would pass muster in a court of law, then you have a common ground, you can weigh evidence. To me the evidence for spiritual appearances is overwhelming looking at it from the strictly legal angle of vision.

In years gone by the scientific genius began with the assertion that everything must have had a beginning, and to assert that there was a spiritual Being with no beginning was nonsense. To the dim indistinct crowd such appeared to be clever reasoning. But our[30]

very consciousness insists that there is something which had no beginning, and Reason adds, "else there could be nothing now." For example, Space could not have had a beginning, that Duration could not, that Truth could not, that somehow, somewhere these Three Eternals must have been co-eternal, incomprehensible. And in this Trinity "none is afore or after the other," which recalls the Athanasian Creed.

I cannot prove that Truth had no beginning, yet my consciousness tells me at no period was it laid down as something new, that the shortest distance between two points would be a straight line. No mathematician has ever proved that there is no boundary to space, but something within me tells me that there can be no such boundary. Even Reason tells me that an impassable boundary would only serve to indicate the unlimited extension beyond.

In all ages we have the mystic. Now the mystic is common to all religions. He is the man who has felt the touch of spiritual beings, the call of Heavenly things, and we have to explain him. In seeking to do this we shall realize some of the truth of the things soldiers see which we have called "The Weird in War."

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V

ANGELS

THE evidence for the existence and the appearance of angels does not rest on the testimony merely of men who fought at Mons. But even that evidence which is accepted by the talented author of *The Bowmen* requires some explaining away and he admits that there is a difficulty in ignoring it. But there is the accumulating evidence of the ages. When we have explained away the soldiers' delusions, we have to confront those of the world's wisest sons—giants in thought. We have to confront the fact that all great religions have the theory of angels.

After all, every good thought may be the whisper of an angel, every beautiful prospect may be but the glint of the wing, every ray of light and heat but the waving of the robes of those higher spiritual intelligences which rush hither and thither on God's service, whose faces see God in Heaven. Such a belief is just as sound, and far more philosophical than any of the guesses I have read[32] so far, given us as "explanation" of such phenomena.

I am in hearty agreement with much that Mr. Arthur Machen writes in his book *The Bowmen*. It is a book everyone should read. That splendid story of failure and triumph, the Retreat from Mons, prompted him to write a story on an Angelic Host coming to the aid of the British force. He wrote it after the manner of the journalist who is an eye-witness of the event. Many people still believe what they read in the newspapers; and

many people believed his story. But he is altogether wrong when he imagines that he is the author of the belief in Angelic visions. I was in France hearing stories of angelic intervention long before Mr. Machen wrote his delightful yarn. A frog might as well imagine that his croak is responsible for the whole world of music, as to postulate that his story gave rise to the theory of Angels. Men had visions of such long before the first stone of our venerable shrine at Westminster was laid, before the Romans built their first mud huts in the valley of the Tiber, before the Pyramids raised their terrific greatness to the heavens. So Mr. Machen need not concern himself on that score.

The Anglican Church has failed dismally to keep before people the teaching of the Church in regard to Angels and Angelic intervention in the affairs of men. There I am in entire agreement with Mr. Machen.[33] Soldiers tell their stories of angels and a few bishops cackle; but not one of them dares to speak of the fuller belief of the Church in angels and the soul-inspiring mystery of the Communion of Saints, the inter-relationship between those on the earth-plane and those who have passed to the higher life. The hardworking priest in the slums fearlessly proclaims this one sacrament of life with the Divine Life, his belief in angels and their help, in saints and their prayers, and because he believes he is able to work under conditions which make life for a cultured man almost intolerable. But he works, thankful to be left alone by his bishop: for war has declared a close time for ritualistic curates. But the soldier whose patriotism he has nurtured writes home to him telling frankly his experiences, his dreams, his visions. I have seen many of these letters. The writers are not liars nor are they hysterical subjects, but fine specimens of healthy manhood. Here and there a dissenting divine has raised his voice to declare there may be something in these stories of angels, but the dissenting pulpit is under the despotism of the pew and cry of "Rome" is enough. "Honest doubt" is always sure of a sympathetic audience, "honest belief" is greeted with the cry of superstition or the cuckoo cry of "Popery."

A soldier sees something super-natural. Some one says I know a hundred or a thousand soldiers who did not see it. A man may[34] witness a murder. His evidence is accepted in the law courts. They do not call the hundred thousand people who did not see it in proof that no murder was perpetrated. Few people know the fundamental principles of evidence. More people misuse it.

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VI

FELLOWSHIP WITH THE UNSEEN

RELIGION is man's fellowship with the Unseen, and it would seem that bishops and various crank divines are determined that such a belief shall be discouraged. Man's nature has upon it the Hall Marks of Heaven. Woven into man's anatomical texture we find

faculties that transcend this world, that are for ever intent upon the waves that beat upon us from another shore. He sees the coastline of another world to which he commits his dead. We call such people Mystics, Catholics, Seers, etc. They are the people who have had touch with the Unseen. After all, the people with actual personal experience of spiritual power, who shape their lives by their experience are the real assets of belief.

Man may or may not be sprung from the beast, he may or may not have been raised from slime. Man's spirit did not arise in slime, that at all events came from a race of flame. Dust will not account for everything.

The Church in its greatest office of all, the Communion Service, claims to worship in[36] union with "Angels and Archangels and with *all* the Company of Heaven." Having proclaimed this tremendous fact the Church, for the most part leaves it, and bishops view any further annunciation of the fact with suspicion and sometimes with threats.

On one solemn day in the year the Church invokes S. Michael and all Angels. S. Michael's Mass as it is still called. The old teaching of the Church bids us lift our eyes to behold those more intimate intelligences which stand nearer the Great and Central Mystery. When a soldier stumbles by chance upon one of those higher beings he is regarded as the victim of hallucination, of superstition or drink or all of them. A chaplain with dull German Protestantism obscuring his view of spiritual things treats him as some unclean thing. Dissent in England for years has been synonymous with pro-Germanism. It has been at war with the historic creed of Christendom. It was better for their aims that angels should not exist.

Before dull German Protestantism with its gross materialism raised the plentiful crop of sects in England, our country was known through Europe as "Merrie England." Our people loved the festival of S. Michael. S. Michael's Mass was a red letter day. The Communion and Inter-Communion of earth with heaven was emphasized. Families met that day to pray and feast, lovers plighted their troth, gatherings of relatives and friends[37] was the rule, joy was the key-note. Then dissent raised its ugly head, dissent that had its birth in Germany. These kill-joys got the upper hand. The recognition of the Christ-Mass, Christmas and the Michael-Mass, Michaelmas, was put down by law. Dissent has never hesitated to use compulsion when it lay ready to hand to enforce materialism. So belief in angels well nigh ceased to exist. To-day the revival comes from actual experience rather than from church teaching. The antagonism to such belief amounts to unreasonable heights of folly. Luther has so long occupied the place of Christ that dissent has forgotten what Christ taught us in regard to angels. We ignore the fact that He claimed to have seen angels, and to have had their help and ministrations. When politics mix with religion, spirituality dies, there is no vision, for there is little belief and less sincerity. No wonder the soldier's vision of angels strikes them as something altogether beyond the pale of belief.

It is time that our "spiritual fathers" and other stepfathers began to give us a lead in spiritual things. We are burdened with bishops who play to the gallery and the cheaper press, who would rather take a confirmation service in a coal-pit than in a consecrated shrine of prayer, for the simple reason that "Confirmation in a Coal-pit" gets a flaming advertisement in every paper. Their vision is set on notoriety: the spiritual[38] vision

recedes. How can they have sympathy with those who pierce the boundary line that separates this world from a higher plane?

Men who have spent their lives on office seeking can never be seers or priests. Parsons who beat the political drum may rise to power political, never to the power spiritual. The vision glorious is to those who face duty, self-sacrifice, and see in them the Divine Call, who believe in the sacrifice of the Gospel rather than its comfort. The charlatan must not dominate the Christian in our spiritual pastors, if it do, then such are not qualified to minister in spiritual things.

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VII

THE WHITE COMRADE

THE story that angels fought on the side of the Allies in the battle of Mons must rest upon evidence, coupled with experience. If we begin by assuming that there can be no intelligences in the universe unless they are clothed in the regulated fashion, then no amount of evidence will suffice. It is a worm's-eye view that regards man as the last word in mind.

Meanwhile France is pursuing the evidence for another story exclusively of French origin and vouched for by men to whom the belief in spiritual beings is repugnant, viz., the apparition of "Le Camarade Blanc," of whom at Nancy, in the Argonne, at Soissons and Ypres men talked with hushed voices but with the quiet assurance of men who had seen. It must be something arresting which changes an atheist into a mystic. Again and again the French wounded speak of a man in white bending over them as they lay on the field helpless, and ministering relief. The mysterious one whom our allies call the "Comrade in White" appears simultaneously on[40] different parts of the battlefield. His mission ever is one of mercy.

The Living Church reprints from *Work and Life* an article giving a full account of "The White Comrade," furnished by a wounded soldier. All accounts agree in the main facts. He is generally observed after "severe fighting," he appears where "death is busiest," he "ignores shot and shell," he is ever "calm, collected," and brings with him an atmosphere of peace. Men of the 87th and 128th French Infantry who have been fighting in the Argonne, have seen him, and on several occasions he has been seen in the trenches.

The soldier's account which appeared in *The Living Church* is worth reading. It is not conclusive evidence, but the number of such experiences has value on the great subject of Spiritual Intervention. Religion pledges itself to such a belief. This is the soldier's story, one of many similar stories:

"It was the next day. At noon we got word to take the trenches in front of us. They were two hundred yards away, and we weren't well started till we knew that the big guns had failed in their work of preparation. We had advanced 150 yards when we found it was no good. Our captain called to us to take cover, and just then I was shot through both legs.

"I fell into a hole of some sort. I suppose I fainted, for when I opened my eyes I was all alone. The pain was horrible, but I didn't[41] dare to move lest the Germans should see me, for they were only fifty yards away, and I did not expect mercy. I was glad when the twilight came. There were men in my own company who would run any risk in the darkness if they thought a comrade was still alive.

"The night fell, and soon I heard a step, not stealthy, as I expected, but quiet and firm, as if neither darkness nor death could check those untroubled feet. So little did I guess what was coming that, even when I saw the gleam of white in the darkness I thought it was a peasant in a white smock, or perhaps a woman deranged. Suddenly I guessed that it was 'The Comrade in White.'

"At that very moment the German rifles began to shoot. The bullets could scarcely miss such a target, for he flung out his arms as though in entreaty, and then drew them back till he stood like one of those wayside crosses that we saw so often as we marched through France. And he spoke. The words sounded familiar, but all I remember was the beginning, 'If thou hadst known,' and the ending, 'but now they are hid from thine eyes.' And then he stooped and gathered me into his arms—me, the biggest man in the regiment—and carried me as if I had been a child.

"I must have fainted again, for I awoke to consciousness in a little cave by a stream, and 'The Comrade in White' was washing[42] my wounds and binding them up. I wanted to know what I could do for my friend to help him or to serve him. He was looking toward the stream and his hands were clasped in prayer; and then I saw that he, too, had been wounded. I could see, as it were, a shot-wound in his hand, and as he prayed a drop of blood gathered and fell to the ground. I cried out. I could not help it, for that wound of his seemed to be a more awful thing than any that bitter war had shown me. 'You are wounded, too,' I said. Perhaps he heard me, perhaps it was the look on my face, but he answered gently: 'This is an old wound, but it has troubled me of late.' And then I noticed sorrowfully that the same cruel mark was on his feet. You will wonder that I did not know sooner. I wonder myself. But it was only when I saw his feet that I knew him."

An incident which left a great impression upon me occurred at a hospital in North West France in September 1914 quite early in the war. I was visiting some wounded English and French soldiers. One poor fellow, a Parisian, called me to his side. "Come close, monsieur, for I would talk in a whisper. You are English—yes: and you English are common sense, practical—tell me—do you believe in God and angels, such things as priests teach children and women?"

"My measure of experience in life has compelled my belief in angels or spiritual[43] beings, and common sense demands my belief in a Supreme Mind which I call God, the one Basic Fact," I replied.

"Monsieur I would talk with you. Do you believe that this God has priests to reveal such things to us?"

"The Great Supreme Mind has priests, leaders, prophets, in all departments of knowledge, music, mathematics, chemistry, navigation or engineering—why should He not have chosen instruments to reveal theological truth?"

He lay some time quiet, then he said, "It is good; now I feel I can tell you, for you will not smile. For years, ever since I could think, I have been an atheist. I went into this war an atheist. A few days ago a shell burst near me and I was wounded in twenty-nine places." (This statement was subsequently substantiated by the doctor and a nursing sister of mercy.) "Monsieur, I was in great pain: then suddenly a kind face was looking into mine, something touched my brow, the awful pain ceased. 'You called me,' a soft voice said. Then I remembered that when I was wounded I had cried, 'Oh, my God!' and I laughed, monsieur, for I was an atheist. Then I lost consciousness with that kind face still bending over me. Now I lie and think of that kind face. The doctors say maybe I shall recover, and the sisters here say to me that it is all in the Good God's hands and I am content. I say it is all in the[44] Good God's hands. When that kind face was looking into mine I cried out 'I am an atheist,' and he just smiled and said 'But you called me.'"

I offered to get a priest for the poor fellow, but he shook his head. "No, monsieur. I have been an enemy of priests all my life—an enemy of religion—the Church. To offer the remaining days of my wreckage to God—no—I have but a few hours to live, and I would think of that kind face, and when I think of it the pain ceases. Ah, monsieur, I had wonderful arguments to show that there was no God, and that the clerics are the people's enemies—yet when I was struck down I called 'Oh, my God!' It is comical. That is why the kind face smiled."

Another wounded French soldier said to me: "When I go back to Toulon I shall have something to say to my comrades. I always thought priests were only half men, but my God! I have seen them fight. It is magnificent. A priest led us when we hesitated, I got my two wounds following him—a priest. Oh! it is truly unbelievable to think that I should follow a priest. He led us to triumph. He led me to something more. That day I knew religion was true. I saw something in his face. I saw it again when he fell wounded, and I was wounded but I could only think of him. Ah, life is droll—Now I go back to Toulon with two bad wounds and a religion. Priests—I have seen them fight, and I lie and[45] laugh at myself and my comrades as fools for we thought of them as mere amusements for women and children. I saw priests go forward where my noble comrades held back—my noble comrades who sneer at priests. It is droll."

[47]

FIVE SKETCHES

[49]

I

OMBOS

WE were talking at the club about spirit manifestations, and retailing the usual second or third-hand accounts of family spooks and deceased aunts showing themselves to their sorrowing relatives.

"It is strange the tricks which our brains will sometimes play us," said Barton. "I remember once seeing a ghost myself, and I can tell you that the sensation is a very curious one. It was a good many years ago, when I was out in Bombay in the National Indian Bank, and I had been sitting up until the early hours trying to trace some fraudulent entries in the bank's books by one of our clerks who had absconded with a considerable sum of money.

"Everybody in the bank building had long since gone home or to bed, where I ought to have been myself, so I was vastly astonished when I looked up from the ledger to see somebody sitting at the desk where I myself had been writing a few moments before. I felt quite upset for a moment,[50] until I recognised the intruder. He was nebulous, but I could see plainly enough who it was."

"A member of your family in England?" asked Duckford, who was a firm believer in the good old-fashioned second sight of the Scotch Highlanders. Barton answered in his peculiarly quiet way.

"No, it was myself. The appearance of seeing an image of one's self is not altogether unusual, I believe. But, of course, such a thing is really all nonsense ... a matter of nerves."

"Now, I do not think it is fair of you to put all such things down to nerves," said Captain Crabbe, who had returned wounded from France after being in the field since the outbreak of the Great War. "If one cannot always explain, one need not therefore ridicule." Crabbe made this remark with a gravity that was somewhat unusual with him.

"Bless my soul, boy, you haven't been seeing the Angels of Mons or the Agincourt Bowmen over there in Flanders, have you?" asked Duckford, regarding Crabbe with a keen eye, and scenting something savouring of the mysterious, the super-natural. "Do you believe in these stories? I mean—superstitions?"

Captain Crabbe shook his head. "Not greatly," he said smiling. "But I am not one of those who thoughtlessly laugh at that which is out of the common, merely because[51] it

cannot be explained on ordinary grounds. Not since I have spent nearly twelve months over in France, at any rate. Are you interested in the weird?"

"I'd be a fool if I wasn't," said Duckford, selecting a cigar from his case. "What's your story about—I see you have one to tell. I am not inquisitive as a rule; but, somehow your manner has warned me that you have something singularly interesting to tell."

Crabbe remained silent a short time. Then, looking at Duckford very earnestly, he answered:

"Well, perhaps I may tell you my story, though I would not tell it to all these heretics around me. Indeed, only two or three other people have ever heard it. I hate—ah! more than I can convey to any living soul—even to think about it. But to you it may be of special interest."

"You know that I look upon all such things from the point of a simple, unbiassed inquirer," returned Duckford. "Come along, Crabbe."

"A good cigar in front of the card room fire, and your story, eh?" Duckford led the way up to the snug card room where a cheerful fire was blazing. "Sit down. Where is that dashed waiter? Oh, you there, Griggs. Come along with some whisky and soda."

Crabbe sat down in a deep chair by the fire, and stretched his feet to the flame. Duckford[52] said nothing; only pulled at his cigar and patiently waited for what he knew was soon coming.

"Do you know—but, no, of course you don't," he began presently. "But can you imagine how it can be that a man could pass all his force into a bronze statue and make it live.... You've heard these literary men and artists talk about putting their souls into their work, Duckford?" Duckford pursed his lips. "Everything lives—even a bronze statue," he said seriously. "If it was not so it would atrophy, it would crumble and disappear. Look at the case of——"

"That's just what old Ombos said. And if he didn't understand all about those things, I should jolly well like to be led to the man who did. Ombos told me hundreds of times that a man walked about this earth throwing his force into everything he came in contact with—scattering some kind of power; and of course that power is picked up by stones and houses and ... statues, or anything. Ombos misused it; that was disastrous. It seems to me that it is safe to use this god-energy only in its own proper sphere. You have very likely heard of men who have tried to pass themselves into inanimate objects? Well, what would you say if I tell you that *I* even *I*—who sit now so soberly before you, whom before the war you knew to be ordinarily, a quiet, peaceably-disposed, sport-loving English fellow—had once been under[53] the spell of a bronze statue that somebody had passed clean into?"

"You were under the hypnotic influence of your friend Ombos, probably," I suggested.

"You may think so, *now*; but you just wait till I have told you all about Ombos, and the bronze statue. Then you'll be able to decide if it was trickery.... It would be different if you could have seen the statue."

Then Crabbe proceeded to unfold his strange tale.

"You know that when the war first broke out I was attached to the Loamshires, and we were one of the first British Regiments to start for the land across the water. After six months' fighting, during which every day was crowded with enough incident to provide a three-reel thriller for a cinema-man, I found myself quartered at Ypres. Have you ever been to Ypres? If you have, it will act as a kind of antidote to those wretched picture post-cards which show it in its last phase—a heap of senseless wreckage. The 'Coal Boxes,' 'Jack Johnsons' and other varied presents from Krupp's had not fallen on the town with such lavishness at the time my regiment found shelter there. It was a June afternoon when I first found my way there. A mellow drowsiness hung over the Cloth Hall and Cathedral. It was indeed a very pleasant little town. The old houses of the square, the Prior's Gate, the noble trees, the stretch of green turf, all shared in the dream-like^[54] repose. In the Rue Bar-le-Duc, as everybody knows, just where it winds around to the fine gateway of the Cathedral, there is a row of little shops with bulging leaded windows, dusty and delightful. The one that took my eye was an antique shop. I had a whole regiment of aunts and uncles at home who in every letter demanded souvenirs, and here was the chance to lodge a shipping order, with about a hundred labels, and leave the old antiquarian fogey to send 'em off. It was inside that I met Ombos for the first time. I selected the souvenirs, and wrote labels; but old Ombos made a devil of a muddle over sending them off, and a very prim maiden aunt received a snuff box adorned with a young French lady in very scanty attire.... By the way, you don't know my aunt Sylvia, do you?"

Crabbe laughed heartily for the first time that evening.

"I spent some hours in the bulging window of that old shop examining the wonderful collection of beautiful old things, and staggering about on piles of andirons and copper warming pans, old Ombos watching me all the time with an amused smile.

"I can still see Ombos standing like a figure carved in old ivory, with one skinny yellow hand resting on the edge of a black oak table.

"I call all this stuff here rubbish; not worth looking at. But people do not understand^[55] real good stuff if I show it to 'em,' he said, and smiled a remotely contemptuous smile. 'Now if you really want to see some choice antiques ...'

"He motioned me to follow, and taking a lighted taper, led the way into a room at the back of his shop. Ombos potted about with the taper on the end of a rod; suddenly a big overhead chandelier burst into light and I stood blinking in amazement.

"It was one of the most gorgeously furnished oak-panelled rooms I have ever seen. The floor was of black polished ebony, and strewn on the floor were priceless leopard skins and Persian rugs. There were heavy Chinese tapestries worked in crimson and gold, Tibetan devil-masks, gold candelabra, armour richly inlaid with precious stones, wondrous black oak furniture.... But I can assure you, I could continue indefinitely describing the contents of that room without giving you any adequate idea of what it was like!

"Hardly what you expected to see, eh?" Ombos said, and there was a faint trace of mockery in his tone.

"I looked around me helplessly.

"No!" I said, sinking into a most luxurious silk-cushioned divan. "Trenches, and this! I suppose I'll wake up soon."

"Would you like to see my bronze statue of Albert of Cologne? It's the gem of my collection, and has a world-wide reputation!"[56]

"It's rather different, you may say." He looked full over my head as I spoke, and following the direction of his eyes, I turned. In a dark recess in that part of the room stood a bronze statue, some six feet in height. It portrayed the great mystic in a long habit fashioned after a monkish cowl, and his hair and face reminded me of a bust of Nero I had once seen in the gallery of the Louvre. Ombos told me that the life of Albert Magnus had been written by Dr. Sighart. This Dominican, *magnus in magia, major in philosophia, maximus in theologia*, was distinguished alike for his knowledge of the black art and his great virtue, for austerity of regimen, and dislike of any form of society. For other details of this philosopher I must refer you to Sighart's excellent monograph and Mr. James Mew's work on *The Black Art* from which we learn that Albert of Cologne was accused by the vulgar of holding illicit commerce with the devil. They believed as a matter of course that he was aided by Beelzebub. And legends grew about him in wild luxuriance. In particular he is credited with the creation of an android, homunculus, or, as some say, a fair maiden—an idea which Goethe may have copied in his celebrated play—able, according to some, to say only 'Salve,' but, according to others, to predict with the unerring accuracy of a Zadkiel a change of government, or the advent of a pestilence, a royal marriage or a royal death.[57] But all agree that this automaton was smashed by his pupil Thomas Aquinas, who ought to have known better than to believe it a device of the Evil One. This story of the speaking statue may go with those other marvels of his vision of the Holy Virgin to encourage him in theological study, and his stupendous garden of flowers and birds and fountains in mid-winter for William of Holland, and that gracious scent which arose after a longer time than four days out of his sacred sepulchre, and his vision of St. Dominic, who himself revealed to him the secret of the stone, whereby he discharged all the debts of his bishopric.

"These bald facts about our friend Magnus must suffice. Old Ombos had a splendid edition of his works, lately published in Paris under the direction of a certain August Borguet; twenty large folios on all imaginable subjects. They included chapters on hawks and adhering to God, on meteors and the mystery of the Mass, on the healing of the leper and the *eau de vie*.

"I was a gross Philistine in those days—still am, as a matter of fact—and I could not appreciate the statue. A strenuous life with my Regiment had stifled what little appreciation for such things a more leisured existence might have fostered. I could not appreciate nor understand the things that Ombos was saying about the bronze statue and the strange Master of the Masters it portrayed.[58]

"Old Ombos—you could not help but think that he had grown very much like the statue himself; or had the statue grown like him?—held up a candelabra which threw the details of the bronze figure into relief and cast flickering reflections on the dark oak panelling of the recess.

"It's an exquisite thing,' said Ombos. 'See how he rears himself on his black granite plinth. A noble pile of mellow bronze, irregular yet graceful.' Ombos regarded it smilingly, yet with one of his queer, sinister looks. It would have been hard to know what he was thinking. He was one of those tall, emaciated chaps, that make us men of ordinary stature feel dwarfish; and as I looked at his skull-like face I wondered at first where his eyes were hidden ... they seemed so far back in the dark hollows on each side of his nose.

"I placed myself before Albert of Cologne—to try and appreciate it, you know. Well, I didn't think a great deal of it, but of course I was a Philistine. I had seen many great, heavy bronzes in the British Museum, and they hadn't even stirred my heart, so it is not surprising that this one failed to affect me. I told Ombos, merely to please him, that I thought it was an extraordinary piece of work. But he very soon saw that I was not able to appreciate old Magnus, and he drew a heavy plush curtain back in front of him.[59]

"Come back! Come away!' he said. 'You have not yet the understanding. Oh, it's big! It's a big god, I tell you.'

"Ombos was very patient with me, but as he walked up and down the room kicking the leopard skin rugs I knew he was thinking what an idiot I was, and I just waited.

"You have not yet the understanding,' he muttered. 'It may come to you one day ... the doors of life and death are left ajar from time to time, and the light of Al Tughrai's lamp of wisdom shines out upon us for a moment between the opening and closing.' The carved ivory face of old Ombos seemed softer when he said that.

"Did my brother care for the old bronze? Did he love it as I do, every curve in the lean and corded neck ...'

"And then all of a sudden he walked over to me! 'Come!' he said, putting his hand on my shoulder and speaking in a voice which he had the trick of making wonderfully amiable. 'Dear me, dear me! How I must bore you with my old relics. You want some tea and muffins or something of the kind, eh? Will you do me the honour of taking tea with me?' he said, leading me through a door in a recess and a wilderness of corridors to a small room, where a charming French girl presided over a steaming tea-pot of massive silver.

"This is Captain Crabbe,' said Ombos introducing me to her. He turned to me.[60] 'This is Margot, my niece,' he said with a smile.

"I made a step forward and bowed slightly; she was very pretty, this girl, as she stood there with the rich red light from the silk lamp shades behind her. She was one of those dark, seductive women that look their best in a warm light; and that evening her face and figure seemed instinct with the joy of youth.

"Never before have I tasted such hot-cakes and sandwiches, and muffins ... there could be nothing like them, nor any hot-cakes to set above them in all Europe. The sinister look

had now quite passed from my host's face as he sat before me stirring tea and munching muffins comfortably; he seemed goodheartedness embodied. On the table were some wonderful lucid china bowls filled with cigarettes, Parascho and *caporal ordinaire*, Egyptian and every imaginable kind. After tea we pushed back our chairs and smoked. His conversation was delightful, and showed me at once that he was a man of brilliant gifts, yet an eccentric. I felt much as Mark Twain must have felt when he first met Rudyard Kipling; Twain has summed up, in that inimitable way of his, the feeling of being in the presence of an overwhelming personality. 'I believed that he knew more than any person I had met before, and I knew that he knew that I knew less than any person he had met before—though he did[61] not say it, and I was not expecting that he would.'... That was exactly how I felt when I was talking tea with Ombos ... his conversation was as exhilarating as wine; his presence diffused a stimulating atmosphere; I felt exalted by his joyous enthusiasm.

"Well (to get on), after I left him at the door of his old shop (which was such a dingy entrance to all the luxury of the interior of the place), and I think we were loth to part, it was agreed between us that, should I remain in the town, we were to meet again. As I walked down the little *pavé* street something I couldn't account for began to sweep over me; it was not merely that the presence of Ombos had fascinated me; there was something else. There was something that stirred in my heart—a thing which you will not understand. If you had known Ombos you might have understood. I wanted to go back and have another look at that bronze statue; I was becoming desperately afraid that I had been too hasty in my inspection of it—that I had under-estimated it. I was very young, heedless, self-esteemed and smug, and had hardly paused to pay a moment's tribute to it. I felt that Albert of Cologne was standing there, absorbed, proud, erect, and defiant, waiting for me to find my *true* eyes.

"Of course, I did see the bronze statue[62] again, or I shouldn't be sitting here wasting your time and patience. Within a few days I went round again to the old shop, and old Ombos was standing there amid his Queen Anne candlesticks and piles of books just as if he had been waiting for me.

"Come in, come in!" he said, speaking in a voice that made me feel honestly welcome. 'Dear me, dear me! I am very glad you have not forgotten me.'

"No," I said. 'Not forgotten you or the bronze statue. It was the only thing in your place that did not interest me when I first walked in.'

"I paused, and Ombos prompted me half unconsciously: 'Yes?'

"Now!" I said, meeting his eyes misting my own in doing so, 'it is the only thing I should like to see.'

"Ah!" he said.... 'Well, I told you that he might come over you slowly; but the gods direct rightly whom they will. I tell you that such things as the Keys of Mercy and the Lamps of Wisdom are not gained in one swift breath. What's gained in a few moments is not worth having. All those who have through toil and pain entered into citizenship in the Celestial

City will tell you that. Gods do not grow in one night like mushrooms. Every great masterpiece is an evolution, be it a statue, a poem, a painting, a man—or a god. If it is ever given to you to see my Albert of Cologne as I see him you[63] will understand what I mean.' He turned round to me and I gave a start, I can tell you. Never have I seen such lurid gleams of light as those that danced from those two deep-set eyes! I say 'lurid,' for at times, the colour of them took a blood red hue, and changed quickly again to a glittering green. As I stared at him—it was all over in a few seconds—the baleful glare seemed to grow in intensity, till I felt as though I were enduring the mocking gaze of Albert of Cologne himself; and verily, I half expected any moment to see Ombos change into a mighty bronze demon or some appalling, devilish shape from the under-world.

"Er—shall we go and have a look at the statue?" I said, with a half-conscious determination to see whether it really ever had existed (I was beginning to think that Ombos had been using a kind of hypnotic influence on me, thus inducing me to see visions); and also, as I believe, with some vague wish to shut out the sight of those rolling, glittering eyes. For the first time I felt towards him a fierce anger, and I found myself making a resolution never to return to see him again when once I was free of the place.

"Ah!' he said, 'I thought you'd want to come back and see Albertus Magnus; I want you to have a good look at him this time and tell me if he looks quite as commonplace as he did before. Such things can only trickle slowly into the soul, but presently,[64] ah! they get right hold of one—they permeate one, and then there comes a time ...'

"Ombos snatched at the heavy curtain, and the rings screeched on the brass rod. Clothed in his monkish garb, his face furrowed and seamed; the lustre of his eyes dimmed by the tears of centuries—there stood Albertus. The sunken cheeks spoke of years of study and aspiration, but the swelling muscles of his arms, the deep chest, the wonderful hands—big, bony, horrible hands—spoke of one from whom age has taken little toll. Here was age, wisdom, mysticalness, a subtle sense of pensive melancholy, and a persistence that never tires.

"Well, how do you like my statue this time?' asked Ombos.

"Splendid!' I breathed.

"Yes,' he said looking hard at me. 'The best of it is Albertus asks for nothing. You can neither bribe nor buy him; your flattery will not move him; your approbation or blame alike are vain ... he has the self-sufficiency of the Master of Masters.'

"Yes,' I found myself saying eagerly. 'He is the Master of Masters.'

"Suddenly he turned and threw the curtain back and took me by the arm and led me away. 'My force is all going into Albertus—but I must not overdo it. If I stand too long before him he drains me of all my god-energy, you know ... that leaves me sick and exhausted. You've heard about how Michael[65] Angelo put all his power into his marble statue of Moses? You've read about such things? You know the kind of gush. I met a poor, half-crazed, devil-driven poet-fellow in Paris some years ago who told me he had written a great poem; he had lured the crucified soul of a murderer into his verses.

Confoundedly conceited about it, too, he was ... called it *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Bah! It would have taken him a lifetime to put a murderer's socks into a poem. He was a mountebank ... a posturer! And what is this winged thing men name the soul? And who did make the stars?' Ombos turned demon-like eyes on me, and his whole face seemed lit up with an appalling mirth.

"Believe them not, for they are not miraculous ones. They will be lost for ever; they will die. Their books and statues may live, but they will die, as sure as the grass grows over graves. My force and body and soul is passing into the Master of Masters.... I shall live and be a god, I shall stand oblivious and indifferent to the centuries as they stalk by.'

"You don't mean to tell me ...'

"Ombos looked up, his red-green eyes gleaming as he answered,

"Most certainly I do ... my soul will pass into that bronze statue when I am ready to give it up.'

"The war, Mr. Ombos,' I thought as I[66] looked at his shrivelled fearsome figure, 'has turned your head. There are certainly a few bats in your belfry. You will find your way into an asylum before many weeks have passed.'

"You must understand, I didn't realize what kind of a chap I was dealing with then, I didn't know that he was all cold and calm and apart from life ... very clever and—philosophical, *but not human*.

"Nonsense! How can a man's soul pass into a bronze statue?' I asked rather testily. 'Good heavens, man, do you realize that you're trying to make me believe that which is beyond the pale of all human possibility!'

"Human possibility! What is human possibility? I tell you that all this is fact; simply.' Ombos rose and began to pace to and fro over the Persian rugs like a tiger. 'I'm not given to imagining things.'

"Bah!' he grunted. 'Every child will tell you that the tendency of spirits to return to the old haunts of bodily life is almost universal. The universal laws apply ... there is no escape from the great law, the attraction of environment.'

"The rest is merely every-day knowledge. Have you ever heard of ancient formula by which the grosser factors of the body may be eliminated, leaving the ethereal portions to retain the spirit? Do you not understand that the body may be preserved from absolute disintegration? The old alchemists all knew[67] that death could be indefinitely deferred in this way. Professor Vaini left among his papers a work of two thousand pages in which he clearly demonstrated that it was possible for a spiritualized body to retain a modified life practically for ever. Any doctor will tell you the hair and nails of a dead person will often grow for years after....'

"Ombos turned his glittering eyes on me a moment inquisitively.

"Oh, tell me all that kind of stuff if you like,' I protested good-humouredly. 'It makes no impression on me. I'm a normal man, Ombos, and I object to having my free imagination

harrowed over things that don't count. Behind that curtain is a bronze statue, and it never can or will be anything else but a bronze statue, and that's about the sum and total of it all.'

"I was merely telling you a few cold and scientific facts,' returned Ombos argumentatively.

"Now, if I wished to impress you it would be easy enough. I would like to test that sensitiveness which you boast that you don't possess. I think I could give you a severe shaking-up! And I will begin by telling you that I will employ mere vulgar trickery ... the trickery of any mountebank who fools people at a country fair!"

"He looked at me with that slow smile of his—the smile of the mystic—mocking, mysterious.[68]

"I answered him with a weak laugh. 'You may try some of your tricks, wizard; but you will fail to impress me, I think!'

"I make it a habit not to fail.'

"His keen eyes flamed, and his brow was dark and hot. He started up and walked over to the small oak escritoire. Bending down he produced a small glass lamp, and put a light to it. It burnt with the imperceptible flame of pure spirit of wine. He took it and vanished a moment. When he returned, and set it before me, it gave out a keen white glare and heavily-scented smoke. He took me by the arm and pointed to the black velvet curtain which hid the bronze statue. 'See, there: behind—through the curtain. Who is that?'

"While I looked, Ombos gave a strange rasping sound. Then, in a tone of weird intensity: 'See! See!' and he laid his hand on mine ... the curtain was no longer there, and some vague thing gathered—the statue was dim behind it—the form of a man.

"The veil is drawn,' said the voice of Ombos. 'Master, the veil is drawn. See, if you will. See!'

"In a fluid light the form darkened. I saw Ombos seated before a table with his head bowed down over a folio volume, quiet and still. The head was ill to look at, and I knew he was dead.... All grew misty and faded into light again.[69]

"The veil is drawn,' he droned. 'Look again!'

"Again a film gathered in the light and I saw the Albertus Magnus for a moment. Then it changed to Ombos, himself.... A lean and grim form with dim mocking features, and yellow eyes that glittered and flickered....

"And again the vision blurred and faded into light. Then Ombos dashed the lamp aside, and the room was in red darkness ... the silence and darkness seemed to endure for an eternity. I heard the hiss of a quick indrawn breath at last ... it was my own breathing.... I opened my eyes.

"I was in the small room where I had taken tea with Ombos and Margot some weeks before. Supper was laid on a superb octagon table. 'They were good tricks, were they

not?' said Ombos, with an easy laugh. His keen eyes smote keen into mine. 'Now you will in truth be able to go away and tell people how I tricked you, how it was plainly all a cheat.'

"At that moment Margot came in with a big apron tied about her. She greeted me pleasantly, setting a tray down on the table.

"'We do our own work here, Captain Crabbe,' she said. 'Do you want to make yourself useful?'

"I rose promptly. My little adventure into the occult world with Ombos had been rather exhilarating. I was glad when she told me to follow her out, through a long^[70] corridor into the kitchen, where she gave me a can-opener and a tin of sardines.

"'Open those up and turn them into this little dish, please. And if you have any hygienic aversion to tinned things, please forget it. Otherwise you will have to eat some of my hot teacakes.'

"Margot was standing at the table, cleaning a crisp head of celery. The position showed me her profile, with a little wisp of black hair escaping near one ear.

"We sat down to one of the most cheerful meals three people have ever enjoyed. We sat chatting there for nearly an hour. All the while I was trying to reconcile this man Ombos who sat talking boyishly with the student of occultism and black magic I had talked with an hour or so before. If I had felt any resentment of the tricks he had played on me it would have vanished utterly. Afterwards Margot made real Turkish coffee over a dainty spirit lamp ... once—in a critical stage in the coffee-making, too—she looked up and her eyes sought mine; then her red lips parted in a smile. She poured out the coffee deftly, blowing out the lamp, and put the little copper pot on a plate.

"Ombos surveyed his coffee with the air of a connoisseur, his head turned on one side.

"Margot produced the bowls of cigarettes and reached over my shoulder to offer me one. 'You want Egyptian?' she said^[71] smiling. 'You see I have a good memory—you smoked them last time.'

"A warm faint perfume came from her hair.

"It was ten o'clock when I rose to leave, Ombos and Margot came out to the front to say good night: my last glimpse, as I walked down the *pavé* street, was of Margot—a bare-headed figure, with wistful grey eyes, calm with the mysterious wisdom of pure womanhood. She waved her dainty lace handkerchief to me.

"That was the last of Ombos in the flesh. The next day, after German shells had poured on Ypres for six hours without cessation, my regiment left the town, and we went out a mile or two to take over some trenches.

"A month later my duty took me back to Ypres, and I found myself walking up the Rue Bar-le-Duc towards the little antique shop. Overhead the shells whistled without cessation. It was now a city of the dead—one could not realize that it was the same

pleasant little town where I had met with so strange an experience a few weeks back. Men, children and horses were lying dead in every gutter.

"In due course I arrived at the shop. A large hole had been ripped in the *pavé* road before the door, and I had to step over a dead and twisted soldier to gain an entrance. Of course the place was empty. Ombos, Albertus Magnus and all the wonderful[72] contents of the spacious old rooms had disappeared. I made a search of the house, and it was not without a curious sensation in my heart that I entered the room where the Master of Masters had towered in his niche. Silence—only the faint boom of a gun far away in the French trenches—awful, ghastly silence. Then a deafening roar and a falling of masonry as Krupp's marked down another house in the town of sorrow. The horror of it!

"I turned dismally away, out into the Rue Bar-le-Duc, and along the square. A few scattered lights shone feebly through the evening mist, and over towards the Norman bridge the yellow flames from a burning house lit up the sky with a lurid glow. At nearly every street corner little groups of civilians had collected and were talking and gesticulating in a terrified manner. When a big shell came with a hoarse, rattling noise through the air, like a racing motor cycle on the track at Brooklands, they would rush into their homes, panic-smitten. If death winked, and passed them over, out they would creep again. And so they lived in an inferno of shells for weeks on end.

"An ambulance wagon overturned in the middle of the road attracted my attention. I could not repress a shudder as I looked on the shell-shattered wreck.... It was the old type of four-horse ambulance used by the army in South Africa; possibly it had[73] jolted into the shell-swept death-trap of Spion Kop, or carried men into the reeking enteric camps of Ladysmith. Well, it had made its last journey this time! The four dead horses had not been cut away from the traces, and from underneath the huddled and twisted heap stuck out an arm, and in the hand was clutched one of those short, stumpy whips which are used by the lead driver of a gun. I can see that poor chap in my mind thrashing and urging his team of horses into a gallop, for it was not reckoned wise to meander about the streets of Ypres, and then—one blinding crash.

"I swung round with a great desire to get away from the appalling scene, and as I did so, I noticed a girl in a doorway struggling in the grip of a powerful, swarthy-faced man of middle age. In the fading light I caught a glimpse of her face, and I was out of the shadow and by her side like a sky-rocket.

"Let her go!" I said shortly. 'Before I mop out the gutter with you.'

"The man turned on me.

"Who the devil——'

"That's enough!"

"A Red Cap—a corporal in the Military Police—loomed into view, and with an imprecation the rough backed away from the girl, turned, and in a moment was lost in the gloom. I brought my eyes back to the girl who had confronted me in the red light of sunset, and I stood gazing at her dumbly,[74] fascinated, but with never a word to say. She was burning with anger and shame, trembling like an aspen, too.

"It was Margot!"

"The girl glanced up at me, a look that set my heart throbbing. It was my first real sight of her since I had seen her that afternoon with Ombos. I had thought her pretty then, but there is a distinct gap between a pretty woman and a lovely woman, and she was as beautiful as a Greek marble. Indeed, but for the carmine of her lips, and long dark eyelashes, she might have been chiselled out of pellucid stone, for her skin was dead white. She was—or had been—beautifully and expensively dressed, and there was breeding and refinement in every line of her face.

"Don't you know me?" I said.

"The girl looked at me intently.

"I know you, of course," she said.

"I won't waste time in trying to tell you what my thoughts and sensations were. Rather I will tell you instead, what I did.

"It was some minutes later, and already we had started to walk slowly back in the direction of the Rue Bar-le-Duc.

"And now you want to know—" she said.

"Yes—that's it—what's become of Ombos ... and the bronze statue?"

"Margot looked up at me, and a strange melancholy transformed her face.... She was at a loss for words.... 'Poor Ombos—oh,[75] poor, cranky Ombos,' she muttered. 'One morning I found him dead in his room, with all his wonderful, brown, powdery-looking books. He was leaning on a table over an old volume that he was fond of.... And then the doctors came. He had died, they afterwards said, of failure of the heart's action.'

"Dead,' I murmured mechanically....

"Then everything was very uncomfortable. But I saved a good sum of money, and I sent most of the valuable things to Paris to be sold—no living soul coming forward to make any claims. Ombos left everything to me ... bonds, securities, and all. Come this way—I have a little room up the side-street.

"He left me well provided for. He——'

"Yes; but why on earth do you stay in this dead city,' I broke in.

"Sssh!... Don't interrupt unless I ask you questions.

"I'll tell you all about everything. It's extraordinarily difficult....'

"I waited.

"You see,' she picked her words carefully, 'Ombos was so—queer about that horrible Albertus Magnus of his. He had made me promise never to part with it and it seemed to me—stupidly perhaps—that I owed him that—to see that his only wish was carried out to

the letter. Otherwise I should never dare to have stayed here. You couldn't[76] expect me to move about with a gigantic bronze figure without making ample preparations.'

"Ah!'

"This is where I live,' she said in a low voice.

"Margot had halted in front of an alley leading over rough cobbles, into a small square of what appeared to be old oak-fronted houses. A narrow passage-way ran down by one side of the end house.

"Won't you come inside, and—see Albertus? This way,' she said. 'It's rather dark, I'm afraid.'

"In pitch-black darkness, guided by Margot's hand, I stumbled through a doorway into a spacious hall—a mysterious, fusty-smelling cavern of a place—along a passage, and then up a flight of worn stone stairs. It was one of those old houses where one could feel the silence and hear the shadows. The steps came out upon a bare landing with oak-lined walls, lit only by a solitary flickering candle, and Margot, halting before a locked door, opened it and motioned me to enter.

"The room was in darkness, and I knew not what fear, akin to that little grey shadow of a fear, was to be found in the darkness there. At first I hesitated. Then Margot came with the candle, and as it guttered, the flame threw distorted shadows; at one moment lighting up a dark spot with a sudden flash, and then sending queer, erratic reflections chasing across the oak panelling. Then a[77] flicker displayed the unmade bed on which Margot had lain.... She coloured deeply.

"You have stored the bronze statue in some other part of the house,' I said at a venture.

"She looked at me, as I thought, a little uneasily.

"You aren't afraid of that old statue?' she exclaimed. 'We might at least light up the candles,' she added, as I made no reply; and she turned and put a burning taper to the candelabra.

"As Margot spoke the candles flared up, and then, with a sudden start of unexplained dismay, I saw in a corner by the bed stood the bronze figure.

"As I looked at it I felt the horror of nightmare seize me, for it bore a striking resemblance to Ombos. A dreadful exuberance and vitality seemed to shine through the thing, an exuberance wholly malign, a vitality that foamed and frothed with unimaginable evil. Evil beamed from the deep cavernous eyes; it leered in the demon-like mouth.... Ugh!—

"Margot walked up to me and patted my shoulder. 'Well, and are you really afraid of that thing,' she said, pointing to the statue.

"But, don't you see?' said I. 'It's scarcely the face of a bronze figure. It's almost human. No; it isn't even human. It's the face of some devil.' Margot laughed.[78]

"Yes: he isn't very cheerful,' she said. 'Scarcely a boudoir ornament, eh? I'll throw a blanket over Albertus if you like.'

"I really wish you would,' I said, 'I don't care so long as he can't grin at me.'

"Somehow, with the bronze figure covered up, I felt much lighter and happier.

"I think that Margot—that Margot must have been rather overstrained after the struggle with that brute. She seemed to be all nerves—upset: insisted in putting her little white hand on mine in a very solemn way, and thanking me for all sorts of imaginary favours.... Got 'a wheeze' into her head, among other rot, that I had saved her life.

"Look here,' I said. 'I wish you wouldn't talk so jolly silly. I'm not a bit unselfish, I'm a novelist. There was nothin' doin' with my crowd—regiment I mean—and so I came here to look for "copy." That was why I persisted in seeing you home here. It was all just a matter of "copy" to me—at the start.' I paused, and Margot turned her tourmaline eyes full on me. Had you asked me after my first visit to old Ombos what Margot's eyes were like I could not have told you the colour to save my life. If I had been forced to weigh out a guess I might have said they were a shade of grey. Grey? Name of a little dog! Yes, I should have called 'em grey, but that would have been like describing the Pyramids by saying they[79] were stone. However can I describe the wonder that I found ..."

A sort of flush appeared on Crabbe's boyish face. "I—I'm afraid I have run off the track of my story a bit," he stammered, "but I may as well tell you all of it."

"Take a drink of whiskey;" said Duckford slowly, "and take your own time."

"Margot looked at me, her lips quivering. 'You've not found much "copy" I'm afraid,' she answered despondently.

"Now,' I said, meeting her eyes, "'copy" matters not at all ... you are all that matters.'

"It does not in the least concern you or the story to know what manner of a woman Margot is. But I might say that she is in fulness a woman—not a fribble, or one of those pick-me-up-and-carry-me women. So when I said plain words to her she did not pretend to misunderstand.

"Don't let us be conventional,' I went on, 'It wouldn't fit in with these wonderful days a bit. Perhaps I've no right to talk to you like this—but Ombos is dead and you seem to have no friend in the world. We have got caught up, you and I, in one of the marvellous tangles of this great conflict, and God knows how it's all going to end. But it seems to have been written in the book of fate that we should meet, and whether Ombos and his bronze statue haunts me to the end of my days or he doesn't, I'm glad I have met[80] you, and to know for just one swift hour I've used these hands of mine in your service. I wouldn't take back one minute of these great days!'

"Margot was regarding me with her wide eyes, a little startled, but I saw beyond those rounds of tourmaline a soft light.

"How is it?' said Margot calmly. 'A few hours ago you hadn't spoken more than a few words to me ... you don't know me.'

"In times of war,' I reminded her, 'we live a year in a day.'

"Margot rested her chin on her hands. 'What a strange world it is,' she murmured.

"'Confoundedly strange,' I agreed. 'I can't help thinking even now that my meeting with Ombos in that weird den in the Rue Bar-le-Duc was all a dream, and I'm going to wake up soon.'

"'I didn't mean that,' Margot said quietly. 'That didn't seem so strange to me. Perhaps it's because I lived with Ombos for nearly four years.'

"'It was just like a page torn from the *Arabian Nights* to me,' I said. She smiled at me wanly.

"'The only other home I've known was with foster-parents in Paris when I was quite a child,' she said. 'I was brought here straight from a convent school in Brussels. Ombos was my guardian. He'—she hesitated, shivering—'I don't think he was[81] quite—sane, but he was always very kind to me.'

"'Margot,' I stammered as I imprisoned her hands in mine, 'I'm going to take you out of this mudhole of a place.... I'm going to send you over to England. I'll stay here and look after you to-night, and to-morrow I'll see you on your way.'

"She dragged her hands away suddenly.

"'But are you *sure*?' Margot said, half sobbing. 'Please reflect ... you are in too much of a hurry. When an idea comes to you—the idea, that you want me for instance—what do you do? Instead of taking the idea for a long, cool walk, you sit down here to work it up ... it is the eternal boyishness of the Englishman. You must first think of your future.'

"'But do you think that the future holds anything for me now that I wouldn't throw away with both hands for you?' I said, and the passion of my voice whipped the blood up into that alabaster face ... she put out her hands with a little pleading movement.

"'Don't,' she said again.

"'I must,' I said stubbornly. 'There's nothing in the world powerful enough to take you from me ... if you will have me. Margot, you must believe me ... you shall believe me!' I added almost savagely, and my hands closed round her waist as she leaned against the back of a huge old divan. Margot closed her eyes for a moment and her head dropped[82] gently on my shoulder. Her hair brushed my face, and the faint musky scent that came from it is woven into all my after memories of that moment, I drew her closer and she sighed for very happiness, while life drifted past in uncounted minutes or hours.

"It was the next evening that I arranged to have one of the A.S.C. cars,—then running between Ypres and St. Omer,—wait for us outside Margot's rooms. Under cover of darkness I bundled Margot into the motor-lorry, got the bronze statue in, and jumped up on the driver's seat beside her, and sank down with a gasp of relief. One last glimpse of the little bulgy window of the shop as the lorry rounded the corner, and then I turned and looked at the girl. Tears glittered in her eyes, and her lips were quivering. I put my hand out and closed over her ice-cold fingers.

"Margot!" I said, 'I'm taking you to Boulogne and then you will go to England to my home. My people will look after you....'

"But—" she hesitated.

"There are no 'buts,'" I said firmly, 'You are coming with me. You can't stay in this infernal hole, like a rat in a trap.'

"Margot gave a weary little sigh and leaned closer to me, giving herself into my care as trustfully as a child. Until that time she had been just a figure in the great war game that might provide me with something^[83] to 'write up' into a book. That had been my principal thought. Now, all in a few moments, her beauty, the frightened look which had shone in her great grey eyes, her distress made me forget all that, drove all thoughts of traffic with publishers from my mind. I knew only that it was good to help her.

"Then I set about thinking how I could get Margot and Albertus Magnus to England. It was going to be a difficult game. I went carefully over all the good fellows I knew who could help me. There was old Longden of the A.S.C. depôt at St. Omer, there was Captain Chester, the transport officer at Boulogne, and Orgles of ammunition supply at Cassel, which is a small place where the strings of motors from the base unload.

"Well, (to get on,) we arrived late that night at St. Omer, and by a vast amount of bribery and cajolery I got some A.S.C. men to knock up a strong case for the Albertus Magnus and—but enough. It is sufficient to say that an officer who was going home on leave was kind enough to see Margot as far as Boulogne, and in the fullness of time both Albertus Magnus and the girl came safely to England.

"I have endeavoured to give you the facts of my strange story up to this point, without omission or exaggeration. I have been careful not to miss out the slightest items. If I have failed, it must not be put^[84] down to forgetfulness: for I do not think there is a single thing about old Ombos that has not been permanently fixed in my mind. Even now I have but to shut my eyes to see the leering face of Albertus, to stand once more trembling with terror and see that green shadow jump into the dusk with hellish glee and frolicsome skippings and toppings gallop away, to walk into the old library at home and see poor Price with his knees drawn up and eyes fixed open in extreme terror—But enough. I do not exaggerate.

"And now I must come to what you'll call the second part of the story—though it was all one long connected nightmare to me. I returned from France, as you know, six months ago, with a bullet in my leg, and thought myself in the best of luck to get a 'blighty' one; I mean a slight wound which necessitated me being sent back to England. I went down to a charming old house at Monk's Ely which my father had lately moved into, and soon drifted into peaceful ways of country life. The trivial little objects and customs of rustic life—those simple things that are best of all—attracted me surprisingly.

"A delightful room full of my books and pictures had been prepared on the ground floor of the house, but I was not often in it. Still, I accorded to my bronze statue a prominent corner in the room, where he frowned upon all my other possessions with^[85] that great look of disinterestedness which only bronze or death can typify.

"A week or two passed without incident, except that again and again a curious feeling that sometimes I was not *alone* was present in my mind. In a way I got used to it, because after being in the trenches and looking in the face of death as a kind of hobby the feeling of release and lightness that comes over one drives all other troubles clean away. But after a while this feeling seemed to be growing in poignancy. In fact at the end of the first fortnight I mentioned it to my father.

"'Strange you should have felt like that,' he said one night after dinner, 'because for the last day or so, the same sensation has been creeping over me. When is it that you have your ghostly visitor? Have you any feeling now of such a thing, for instance?'

"We were having a smoke on the lawn ... it was a beautiful evening of stars, and as he spoke I felt the unseen presence with terrific intensity. At that moment the door that led from the library quietly swung open, and just as quietly closed again, as if someone had passed out into the garden.

"'Did you see that?' I said. 'There is not a breath of wind stirring: odd thing that a door should play those kind of tricks.'

"My father was silent a moment.

"'You felt it then,' he said.

"'Frightfully!' I breathed.[86]

"'Let's get back to the dining-room,' my father urged.

"Just as we got up to the house door (not the library door which opened on the path), I saw, as I thought, a figure move in the bushes near the library. Perhaps it would be better to describe it as a shadow ... but I could swear that it was of a greenish colour. For one moment, from sheer terror of the unseen, I stood frozen to the doorstep, and then my father touched my arm and we walked in together.

"That evening, my friend Price, after his wont, dropped in. I had just run the car round to the front door and was about to run into the village to bring the vicar back to stay with us over the week-end—besides I badly wanted to get away from those infernal gusts of depression that swept the place. I did not scruple to keep to my arrangements and told Price to make himself comfortable in the library till my return. 'You'll find cigars, spirits—and *the* spirit,' I said jokingly. He nodded and laughed, and I jumped into the car, and quickly put a mile between myself and—the bronze statue, for I was convinced that Albertus of Cologne was connected in some unearthly way with the face of Fear that often turned full on me.

"A half-hour afterwards I had pulled up at the vicarage, and was hanging on to the bell which gave forth a mighty clamour. I was impatient to get inside for a moment and[87] behold the good genial face of the vicar. Somehow, wherever the vicar went, he had a wonderful way of cheering things up; his presence diffused an atmosphere of merriment. The door suddenly opened and I was face to face with him:

"'My dear boy,' cried the vicar, 'I am glad to see you.'

"Then he stared at me in amazement. 'What have you done to yourself? You have aged years since I saw you last week.'

"'Ah, I have things to tell you,' I said, 'Things that will make you think I am off my head, but I shall convince you——'

"The vicar took my arm and walked me up to his sanctum, a fine spacious chamber, beautified with that simplicity which throws a wonderful dignity over all, and tends to show how in omission so much more refinement is to be discovered than in ornament. Touches of the vicar's keen discernment of those things which are worthy and noble were revealed on every hand—knowledge of this sort is older than ten thousand years. The room received one like a friend. The alcoves were filled with well-bound books, there was a superb Persian carpet, old gate-legged tables—oak was there everywhere; in the beams and the shelves and the mighty writing desk. The servant had brought in a small table with syphons and spirits, and had set a lamp upon it. 'Help yourself,' said the vicar.[88]

"I poured out a dose of whisky and was lifting it for a squirt of soda when all at once I saw Fear; not apprehension, not foreboding, but FEAR—the glass fell from my hand and my fingers sagged on the handle of the syphon. I saw my reflection in a long glass, and my face was bleached to an unhealthy dull whiteness.

"Suddenly like a shot, right in the middle of things, I found myself wondering about poor Price. And I wasn't only wondering somehow I was horribly uneasy about him. It came to me that I had been heartless to leave him all alone with the statue. At last I couldn't stand the strain any longer. I got up.

"'Vicar,' I said, 'I'm going back to see if Price is all right. It will sound quite mad to you, I expect, but if you want to know the sober truth, I will tell you that I have just seen him in a vision: he was in trouble, I know. But come, let us get into the car. I have never told anyone my whole story yet, but I shall like to tell you about Ombos and his statue. I will tell you on the way back to Abbot's Ely. It is about time, in fact, that I tried to classify what I have learned.'

"I then briefly related the story of Ombos and our acquaintance. I concealed nothing, dwelling on the irresistible alluring influence of the bronze statue. I described the depression, the despair, the overpowering moral[89] weakness which seemed to follow me since the Albertus Magnus had become one of my possessions. In short, I lifted the curtain, for the first time, and showed the vicar a true picture of the strange world I had moved in for the last few weeks.

"When we had returned and backed the car into the coach house we walked across the lawn to the back door. Here we met Clayton, the butler. He appeared to be frightened, and told me that he had heard a kind of quivering, sobbing voice coming from the library. He thought Mr. Price was ill. We went to the door. It was locked, and an application of a spare key proved that the other key had been left in the lock inside. We knocked loudly, and called. There was no reply. Clayton's conviction that 'something had happened' worked on my nerves frightfully, and in the end the vicar and I forced open the door with some gardening tools.

"Something *had* happened.

"The room was in complete darkness, and at first nothing could be discerned at all. A slight wind had got up in the last half an hour; and it rustled the trailers of ivy against the opened windows. The heavy curtains moved carelessly in the draught, and the trees creaked faintly. But beyond these inevitable noises, the room was quiet. Then gradually, the outline of the room became visible and the framework of the[90] window began to shape itself dimly before my eyes. In the hazy light from the glass doors, and the vague light of a lamp in the hall, I saw that the chesterfield in the window bay where Price so often lounged was tenanted. A gleam of his light tweed suit showed there and across that.... Oh, I fully expected to see the other thing! Across that there was an obscure greenish shadow.

"I walked towards it, when suddenly the shadow shot upwards and was lost to sight. Then the springs of the chesterfield creaked and wheezed, the same as they will when suddenly released from pressure. Clayton came in at that moment holding a candelabra aloft and the feeble flames disclosed poor old Price. He was on his back, his knees slightly drawn up. The face was not the face of a man at all—it was a horrible mask of contorted terror. His eyes were opened and fixed; the mouth was twisted in a gape of fearful wonder.

"Run, Clayton,' said I; 'a doctor and a policeman!' Clayton placed the candelabra on the table and bounced out and down the front steps.

"Price was dead without a doubt. He had been strangled, the doctor thought from the greenish-black marks on his neck and other circumstances. The savage deed had been accomplished with frightful ferociousness and strength. Soon the room was in the possession of the police, and the vicar and I turned out.[91] There was little evidence at the inquest. The cries of poor Price had been heard by my man, the body had been found—that was the practical summing-up of the whole matter. The doctor gave his evidence as to the probability of murder, and the police evidence tended in the same direction. It was affirmed that (some would say) he had been baffled by Price in an attempt to rob the house, had sacrificed the poor fellow to the fury of his checked greed, and had afterwards escaped by the window. The jury found that Price had died by the hand of some person unknown.

"Well, vicar,' I asked afterwards, 'what do you think of the verdict?'

"He told me that from *his* point of view it seemed to be the most reasonable one that could be given; and to agree with the laws of common-sense.

"Yes,' I replied, 'perhaps you are right from the common-sense point of view. Nevertheless, I know that Price did not die by any human agency. It is too ghastly; I can still see that green shadow hovering above his body on the couch. The huge shadow, the Elemental, the spirit of Ombos—whatever you like to call it—was there in that room with Price. It was there in a form that could be seen and felt. It is something more substantial than an ordinary shadow ... it is a thing of hellish terror, and it comes from that infernal bronze statue.'[92]

"Thence forward, as day followed day, the ghastly memory of the murder of Price seemed to recede from my mind. I neither heard nor saw anything, nor did that sense of the unseen presence lurking about the house, come to me. I was beginning to hope that the spell of the bronze statue had passed away for good. But one night after this interval I again felt fear looking whitely on me again. If I were to describe all the incidents of the next few days in their order my story would never come to an end, and your patience would be exhausted. Wherever I went after dark had fallen the shadow of the unseen followed me. I had a passion for inviting people to stay with me, and I longed for companionship of my kind which I had never known before; I was eager to throw myself into the realities of life. The sense of a certain kind of separateness is hell! Just you ask anybody who knows. I called on people, lived in my car, and dined out on the slightest provocation. I remember I spent one evening, (after my desperate efforts to find some good Samaritan to bear me company), with a party of road-menders; I helped them break up the stones and all that kind of thing. But after they had packed up their tools and tea cans and bid me 'thanks and good night,' I met fear on the homeward road—a shadow among shadows. It would be almost impossible to describe the swerves that my mind took^[93] from that time till the end. The presence of the Albertus Magnus filled me by turns with dread, blind fear, an overshadowed sort of pleasure, and utter hopelessness. I dare not have it taken away; and I knew that its presence was driving me mad. The vicar told me that if I could make up my mind to have the statue removed or destroyed, it might dispel all my troubles. I ought to make an application to the authority on bronzes at the British Museum, who would be only too pleased to accept it. An application to escape the company of Albertus Magnus! A request that the British Museum would graciously take over a bronze statue, the soul of departed Ombos, and a blind terror that walked at twilight! The vicar's proposal sent me into a paroxysm of hysterical laughter.

"I'd gone into the library one afternoon about four, as I had heavy arrears of letter-writing to make up. It was surprising that I should choose that room where Albertus Magnus towered in his corner—and (I don't know why) I felt vaguely unhappy when I had been separated too long from him. By half past six I had finished. I went to the door to ring for Clayton to post my letters, and turned to light up the candelabra (I forgot to say that it was a fad of my father's all through his life to use candelabra in preference to electric light or gas), when I heard, I thought I heard a chuckle behind me—low,^[94] faint, but unmistakably malicious. The fate of poor Price flashed into my mind, and at the same time, I myself was watching myself fight on that same chesterfield with something horrible, unclean, intangible. I turned round instantaneously, feeling that the Albertus Magnus was at his hellish game again. With sudden horror I saw where the chuckle had come from. The statue had changed from the bronze-green to a fleshy-green. It was alive, and the great muscles were twitching and quivering. To my unutterable horror, I perceived it was not Albertus Magnus.... *It was Ombos!* His breath came in horrid little flutters, with seconds between each one, as if he had just come to life and was not quite used to it. A dreadful viciousness and vitality shone from his green eyes, and his demon-like mouth was twisted into a grin of unimaginable evil.

"'Gods don't grow in one night like mushrooms,' he said with a leer. (There was no mistake about his voice—it was Ombos; the words rang through my brain as if they had

been shouted.) 'You can't expect a statue to turn into a god in a breath, or to come down and skip about ... it takes time and faith.'

"At that moment I must have gone mad. I snatched the heavy candelabra and with a howl of rage I hurled it with all my force at his narrow leering eyes. It struck the solid bronze with a terrific crash and fell at the^[95] base of the pedestal whereon Ombos had stood a moment before.

"Clayton rushed in at this juncture, and we went into the sitting-room. I saw him wipe his forehead with the back of his hand.

"'He's been here again, sir,' he said. 'I was standing on the gravel path by the library, a minute ago, when I saw him close by me in the bushes. He came across the water-meadow, I think. And any way he made off back that way when I shouted at him. Begad, though, it'll be worth a trifle to see who this rascal is, sir. I wonder what he's after. Not the common kind of assassin. What?'

"This was the climax; I felt that another such encounter would drive me raving mad. Somewhere there must be a natural explanation; it was only a question of finding it. Among other things it occurred to me that someone, for reason unknown, might be playing a series of practical jokes upon me, but it was hard to believe a hoax of such malignant and serious intent. Besides, it did not explain the death of Price which, I felt more and more convinced, was in some way connected with the bronze statue. I felt it would be my own fault if I did not get some part of the mystery cleared up soon. It was plain, too, that I must virtually act alone. The first thing was to find a helper, and after casting about me I thought of a member of my company, John Travers, who^[96] had lost two fingers at Charleroi at the first stage of the war. He was a giant in stature, his muscular force would have warranted him in contesting a fall or two with a full-grown lion.

"I wrote to Travers the same evening and his answer came a couple of days later, saying that he would be down by the first train that he could catch. I said nothing in my letter about the bronze statue, but merely mentioned that I feared a gang of thieves had marked my house down, and I wanted his help to guard the place for a week or so.

"Well, Travers arrived. Armed with two new service rifles, we each in turn kept watch over the statue, agreeing that a shot out of the window should warn the other, were any sudden danger to arise.

"On the second night of our vigil I retired to bed hugely sleepy. I had left Travers on guard in the library. He was seated in an armchair under my Albertus Magnus, with his rifle over his knees. I did not take off my clothes, but threw myself, dressed as I was, upon the bed. Determining to make sure of some rest I took a stiff glass of hot brandy. I slept—I could scarcely help sleeping—but not for long, for I suddenly awoke from a tumultuous dream, my limbs atremble, and my forehead sticky with cold sweat. It seemed as though somebody was calling my name from a vast distance. The room was^[97] full of whisperings and moanings and strange uncanny things. Something was evidently at work

in my sub-consciousness. Nothing was wrong with Travers or I should have heard the report of his rifle. Yet something *was* wrong! The conviction grew stronger and stronger within me. Then came the faint sound of rattling at the brass knob, and with sudden horror I saw the door open a couple of inches. A pause of some seconds and it was pushed open still farther. For a space of five seconds my heart seemed to stop beating, and then the worst came. You will think I was beside myself; but as the door was pushed open a face peeped round behind it, and I saw two green eyes looking at me! I had at once recognised the face, and the face was that of Ombos! He appeared to smile at me, but it was a leer of inscrutable evil and malevolence, and I took up my rifle and fired at a venture. A howl of pain, hoarse with anger, rent the air, and the face vanished.... I rushed downstairs and into the library. As I entered, the body of Travers came twisting across the room like a penny whirligig. His head struck the marble fire-place with a frightful dull thud, and he fell a motionless heap on the floor. I struck straight in front of me with a rifle—and hit something—something that pushed past me. Then the front door opened and shut with a deafening clang. A sudden qualm of real fear took hold of my heart, but,[98] mastering it as best I could, I opened the front door and tore madly down the drive. I looked down the hushed street. Past the lamp-posts, skipping from the gloom into the light and from light into shadow, with a series of bounds, sped a horrible apish form. It bounded along with incredible fleetness, and was soon lost to view in the distant gloom. Just at that moment Clayton came down the drive. I could not speak. I pointed to the library.... I beckoned him to follow. On the floor lay the dead body of John Travers. The statue of Albertus Magnus had vanished!

"And there the story ends. I can give no explanation whatever, beyond what I have related. The bronze figure has never, so far as I know, been seen again, nor has the restless spirit of poor Ombos walked again in our garden and library. But, taking the circumstances into consideration, the whole train of events points to the fact that Ombos *had* in some occult way passed his ethereal body into that statue, and for that very reason he was unable to rest quietly in his grave."

"You will continue to live in the house at Abbot's Ely, of course," said Duckford.

Crabbe shook his head. "Never! I wrote a week ago putting it in the agent's hands for sale. There may be nothing in it, but I hardly want to make any new experiments now. The bronze statue has disappeared. I should like to think it was stolen by a gang of[99] burglars. But I remember that chuckle—the malicious mirth of some unearthly thing, it seemed. And I remember ... let us leave it at that. I want to forget, to walk in the Sunshine, in the crowded Strand, away from the darknesses and silences. As I say, there the story ends.... I have told you all of it."

But Captain Crabbe did not tell it all. The best part was "strictly private." He married Margot at half-past ten on the following Saturday morning but one, at St. George's, Hart Street, Bloomsbury.

II

THE DE GAMELYN TRADITIONS

HE was just an Irish soldier's son; a real boy in real life, and his name was Tim, and that was the only name he had besides his surname which was Gamelyn. And somehow he was perfectly happy. But one day he found an old book and read about a boy whose name was Victor; and the more he read about Victor the more ardent was his wish to be like Victor, and he wished that he had been called Victor—for Victor was a genius and a gentleman, and all things which Victor put his hands to were crowned with success. But Tim's name *was* Tim Gamelyn, which was unfortunate; and when he went to an English school at Margate they called him, because his hair was red, "Carrots" which was heartbreaking.

In the book nobody had ever jeered at Victor or called him nicknames; they would have been dealt with very severely, besides they would not have dared; he was far too heroic. So Tim became very furious when the other fellows called him "Carrots." [102] But the more he showed his dislike for this name the more the boys made use of it, also when they had time to spare—they warmed their hands in the imaginary heat radiated by his ruddy hair. It was impossible to uphold any dignity under the circumstances, and he began to wonder what Victor would have done in a like predicament. But then Victor's hair was rich and brown and curly, and no one could have said a word against it; Tim's was red and of the kind that fate keeps in stock of the humble and low, and it made a little lump come up in his throat when he realized it. Then the football season on, Victor, Tim well remembered, had gone in for every kind of athletic sport. When he had first arrived at a strange boarding school he had refused, with a heedless laugh, to say whether he could play or not. Victor did not even deign to go near the football field for a month. But ten minutes before the Match of the year commenced he suddenly made up his mind to play. During the first half of the game Victor had "laid low"; he was waiting. Then his eyes flashed, and his lithe, active figure flashed up the field sending the ball into the posts like a shot from a gun, thus scoring the first and only goal. He had then fainted away; and a beautiful girl had exclaimed "A-a-a-a-h," and had hurried to him with a smelling-bottle and much sympathy. When he recovered, he sat up and made an apology for stopping the game and [103] was loudly cheered by both teams. This was the model which Tim had to keep in his mind's eye. In one or two ways he succeeded, and in others he failed—failed dismally.

When Tim came to ask questions about football at Thetford Grammar School he found it was quite another thing. In the first place the boys all spoke to him in that specially offensive you're-only-a-little-kid sort of way. They also took it for granted that he had never seen a football in his life. He found it impossible to refuse (with a careless laugh) to say whether he had ever kicked a ball before. He was told that he would have to play in the next school practice match, and that if he could kick a ball, he might be allowed to play in a *real* match one fine day. When the first practice game commenced, Tim

remembered that an enthusiastic crowd had run by Victor's side, shouting wildly: "Hurrah! hurrah for Victor." It is true that a few of the smaller boys shouted at him. But what they shouted was: "Put a bit of life into it, old Carrots!" and "Go it, Rufus! You'll never score a goal if you kick the ball in that mother-may-I-have-an-orange style." During the first part of the game Tim was rather quiet—he was waiting for a golden opportunity, just as Victor had waited. It came when the forwards were in full movement, and the ball came travelling neatly along the line on the right wing. It finally came to rest at Tim's[104] feet, and he, avoiding a man who darted at him, raced forward a few yards. Then something, which came through the air like a Whitehead Torpedo, sent him spinning backwards on the grass. Amidst roars of laughter from the other fellows, the Whitehead Torpedo, (who was a boy and smaller than Tim), spun round, ran the ball a few dozen yards, and sent it soaring away with a vent kick straight for the goal. There was a moment of silence. The ball pitched fair and square on the top bar, and then trickled gently between the posts.

A howl of joy went up from the small fry who had been "ragging" Tim all the time.

Tim sat up and looked about him. He had not fainted, but he felt very sick and dizzy, and nobody sympathised with him. A small freckle-faced boy was standing over him.

"The ground *is* slippery to-day," he grinned, extending a hand to the unfortunate Tim, who lay on the sludgy, squidgy mud gasping like a recently-landed trout.

Tim accepted, and scrambled painfully to his feet. The pomp of battle had departed from him.

A few weeks afterwards, as Tim was walking across the water meadows, he saw a youth of serious and agricultural appearance throwing a poor, defenceless little terrier into the mill stream. Every time the miserable little animal crawled up on to the river bank the[105] youth hurled it into the deep water again. Now, that was the kind of thing that Victor was very down on. In every chapter Victor punished people for cruelty to animals. Victor's blood always boiled at such a sight—moreover, his strong arm always shot out, his eyes always flashed, and the great hulking coward *always* lay prone at his feet begging for mercy with clasped hands. So Tim gathered together his recollections of Victor's stock phrases, and advanced on the stolid youth:

"You cowardly ruffian! Have you no feelings that you ill-treat a man's best friend in that way?"

The stolid-looking youth seemed slightly astonished. He thrust his face forward and shook his fist under Tim's nose. "Not your blooming business," he said. "You shift."

"You've got no right," began Tim.

"Right!" The youth's note was fierce. Then he took poor Tim by the scruff of his neck, and observed that he had been teaching the pup to swim because he was water-shy, and that it was good for all kinds of pups to know how to swim. Then he pushed Tim into the water after the pup in order to teach him to keep his mouth shut and mind his own business.

Tim went away with the idea (perfectly correct) that the stolid-looking youth's hands that had gripped his neck and the seat of his[106] knickers were very strong, and another impression that even Victor would not have stood an earthly chance against such a fellow. And it was just then that he was aware of a little grey idea floating in the background of his mind that Victor was a bit of a prig—also a fraud. It annoyed him that any such notion should occur to him that the glory of his hero was an illusion, and he shook his head to get rid of it. Then his brain sent a "wireless" that Victor might be all right in a little toy world of his own, peopled entirely by heroes and scoundrels, and with all the scoundrels physically contemptible; but that he would have done less brilliantly in the mixed-up old world that we have got at present.

Suddenly, as from a clear sky, came a bolt of common-sense to Tim, and he realized he had been a fond and foolish jay. And that was why, when he had finished prep that evening, he exchanged a copy, bound in calf, of *Victor the Valiant* for two oranges and a catapult.

Of course, the reaction set in. Tim was sent up to the station to bring home a new bicycle for the head master, and he was especially warned *not* to ride it—just to walk it. Of course he tried to ride it down Castle Hill, and collided violently with a milk cart. He returned with what had been a new machine. So the Head made him write out one hundred times[107]:

And since he cannot spend or use aright
The little time here given in his trust;
But wasteth it in weary underlight
Of foolish toil and trouble, strife and lust,
He naturally clamours to inherit
The Everlasting Future that his merit
May have full scope—as surely is most just.

And Tim muttered, "All right, keep your hair on, Ben!"

"H'm;" said the Head, overhearing Tim. "Write it out *two* hundred times for your insolent conduct."

That was the start of his demoralisation. According to the laws of the Medes and Persians, and the laws of Victor the Valiant, disaster and dishonour would be the end of *this!* It was not at all the way Victor would have behaved. As a matter of fact on one occasion when a master had been idiotic enough to give Victor a hundred lines, the valiant one had replied: "Pardon me, sir, but if I may be so presumptuous I think I can call your attention to the fact that you—unintentionally, of course—are treating me too severely." And the master had at once seen the error of his ways and relieved Victor of the imposition.

Tim failed to get the verse written out in the stipulated time and the imposition was trebled. Also he gathered up another hundred lines for "failure to attend prayers" and this placed him in a state of hopeless bankruptcy.

When he wrote home to his mother. Here is what he said:[108]

"DEAREST MOTHER:

"I got two hundred lines for breaking the Head's bicycle yesterday. Give my love to Dad. I got another hundred lines to-day for not being present at prayers. But don't you worry—I am not really bad—God has forgotten me, that is all.

"Your loving Son,
TIM."

And Tim—such was his natural depravity—did not much care. So callous and indifferent did he become that he ceased to be hurt when the boys called him "Carrots." In fact he laughed. And as he no longer objected when he was called "Carrots" the boys dropped that name, and the shortest one survived. The boys started to call him "Tims" and in a few months he had won their affection from the lowest fag to the highest lad in the school.

Two years afterwards, by dint of practice and pluck he had so far advanced that he ran second in the quarter-mile at the Sports. Of course this was not very heroic. He was rewarded for this feat of strength with a patent egg-boiler, which was of no sort of use to him, and, as he discovered afterwards, of no use to anybody else. But he was exceedingly proud of the thing and also exceedingly careful to conceal this fact from the other boys.

He became, to sum up his attitude, less[109] and less like Victor. But it is not to be presumed that he was sinking into mental nothingness. He was not perhaps quite so refined in his language as he might have been, he used slang, and sometimes was inclined to hang his hat on the floor and talk back. He was rather untidy in his dress. But certain compensating qualities of the highest value were appearing in Tim. He had gathered to himself a plentiful supply of gumption—genius is all right, but if it comes to a slow-down gumption is better. His hatred of "swank" reached the point of unreasoning prejudice. He made many mistakes; but depend upon this: the man who has never made a mistake has never made anything else worth having.

And Tim never became a great soldier, or a great sailor, or anything great. But he had good spirits, and he concealed about his person a heart of gold; and after he left Thetford Grammar School, boys found that somehow the games in the old playground seemed flat and spiritless. They said that things weren't as they used to be in Tim's time.

I have told the reader that Tim Gamelyn's father was a retired non-commissioned officer who lived near Dublin on a small private income and a pension. It will be seen that Tim's people did not roll in wealth any to speak of. They owned a small farm with five cows, twenty pigs and a flock of hens.[110] There was beer always in the cellar, bacon hanging up in the kitchen and a bucket of soft soap in the out-house. In the top lean-to room where Tim slept, in the winter time the rain and sleet drifted cheerily in through the cracks and covered the army blankets which covered him. But he didn't lie awake thinking about it—boys like Tim who help on farms start playing shut-eye as soon as they hit the pillow.

Old Sergeant Gamelyn came of an ancestry which, somebody or other of distinction once said—and very truly—is the backbone of the British Army. To put it briefly, if not gracefully, "what old Gamelyn didn't know about soldiering weren't worth knowin'!" He had the ten thousand and ten commandments of the King's Regulations always at his finger tips, and he and his people had served in the same battalion, under the same officers or descendants for generations. There was Michael Gamelyn who fell at Malplaquet; there was another Gamelyn who had served at Minden; four Gamelyns served through the Peninsular. But only one came through to Waterloo. Balaclava, the

Indian Mutiny and Spion Kop each claimed a Gamelyn, and when the British troops returned from Lhasa in 1904 they left one Sergeant Royden Gamelyn—resting in peace ten paces to the rear of the Pargo Keeling Gate. Of course Tim Gamelyn grew up in the shadow of these things. There was an old book in his father's[111] oak kit box which Tim loved. In it he read about forgotten drill and manual exercises, the uncomfortable and graceless manoeuvres of the rigid but redoubtable men who fought at Waterloo. Also there were pictures in colour of warriors in three-cornered hats, high stocks and powdered wigs. These men Tim worshipped. He had by heart the quaint words of command in which Wellington's men were told to charge a musket with powder and ball. And I doubt not that he could have taken a brigade and marched them to the attack with the best of the old-time sergeants.

Then in August 1914 came the great war, and when Tim suggested going into Dublin to see Colonel Arbuthnot about joining up to that battalion through which all the best of the Gamelyn men had passed, his mother tried to laugh. But Tim saw the tears running down her cheeks, as she threw her apron over her head and went out to bring the clothes in off the line. His father then flung out his hand to him and said:

"Good boy, I thought 'twas in you. Good luck."

But when Tim joined his regiment soldiering had taken many new turns. The modern rifle would not allow men to march into battle with colours flying and bands playing: the old brave way was impossible in the face of machine guns. The pomp and pageantry of battle had departed and there was nothing[112] left but for the attacking party to crawl in a most inelegant fashion upon the ground.

"Down!" cried the sergeant-instructor to poor Tim, who started his lessons in field training with some vague idea about marching on the foe with "head and eyes erect" and with "pace unfaltering and slow." "When you get out to Flanders you will have to get right down on your belly if you want to *live* a little longer than ten minutes. Extend to five-six-ten paces and get as close to old mother earth as possible and hide your bloomin' selves!"

"Hide yourselves!" thought Tim. "Not thus is it written in my father's book of drill! It plainly said therein that the duty of a soldier was to learn how to die, not to hide from death."

Crushed and dejected he returned that morning to breakfast to wolf a chunk of bread and butter, washed down by dishwater, misnamed tea.

After breakfast he retired to a corner and thought it all out. The words of the Sergeant came back to him: "*Hide yourself if yer want to live!*"

These words stuck in his memory, as words which bring a new light on an outlook will. That was the start of his demoralisation. He was the first of all his line who had been told to hide himself from death. No more the worsted bravery, the pipeclay, lace and scarlet. No more the old military swagger.[113] No more the drummer boy with a waist like a French dancing girl, wrists like Bombardier Wells, and shoulders like a wooden man out of a Noah's Ark. No more the throbbing and growling of the drums; the staccato

detonations and the insolent crescendoes of the drums. No more the wild music that the bands played to the men who fought at Minden, Malplaquet and Wynendael. No more the brushing of a comrade's arm one's own, inspiring boldness; no more a thousand red coats marching on the enemy with slow and unfaltering pace. Tim could see the men of his dreams now, in his mind's eye, marching with heads and eyes erect ... see, too, the smoke of continuous volleys bursting out along the steady lines as they fired by sections and companies on their foes. Well, it was all a thing of the past now. It was plainly his duty not to be reckless. "Do not be dashing, do not expose yourself, do not cheer and make a noise," they said; "creep along like a worm in the grass; be crafty, be wary—and fall down on the face before death."

It did not stop there. Lastly and worst they took away the officers of his dreams. They even dressed them like privates and some were armed with rifles. There were no flashing swords to follow. Not once did he see an officer anything like his father's picture of the Duke of Wellington on the white horse pointing a curly sword to the skies and waving[114] a cocked hat. Then there came the day when Tim made his first acquaintance with field training, and beheld a loose and disorderly scramble which men called an advance. To him it seemed just a mob of masterless men, crawling and crouching on the grass, firing as they passed, and bowing cringingly before death. It was a sight he could hardly endure—an exhibition offensive to any soldier whose forbears had learnt to achieve the impossible as a matter of routine and had held firm for half a day at Quatre Bras with never so much as the flicker of an eye-lid. Gad! there could only be one end to this kow-towing to death, and that would be disaster and disgrace.

The long dull plains of northern Europe stretched before Tim's gaze—great undulations of hard, hot earth and waving grass. He'd been marching all day, and it was hot. Hot!... ye Gods!... On those plains it was like a Turkish bath. Then "down" came the order, and the battalion flung itself to the ground. Oh, but it was good to rest! Towards sunset the clouds piled up blacker and blacker, and some hung frothy over the ridge in the distance. As the sun dropped, the west turned red—all blood red—and he heard the order to march. He heard the word passed down the line in half whispers, and the impressive sound of regiments getting[115] under arms came to his ears. Another five miles they marched and halted for tea. Then all the men became very silent—and while they rested they talked in whispers as they watched the awful sky. When it grew dark the flick-flack of lightening played across the sky and it showed the men's faces white and drawn. Presently Tim's Company lieutenant came up with the news that they would not be able to rest until morning as they had anticipated. There could be no stopping, for the regiment had to reach the rendezvous at daybreak. As the storm rolled nearer, the wind got up, in puffs—first warm and then cold, and a few drops of rain fell—great drops that fell flop-flop-flop—on Tim's face. With a flash that leapt crackling over the plain, the storm loosed itself. The lightning turned the rain into sheets of glittering silver, and the hot ground fairly boiled. Tim, with a thousand others drenched, and blinded, struggled over the slippery turf. That was a storm. Tim could have seen to read; and the thunder wrestled in the low churning clouds like a million devils, and through it all ran the chorus of wind and lashing rain. Presently the storm lessened and died away, and the rain settled to pour

down on them for an hour or so. The squelch-squelch of soaking boots and the creaking of leather equipment was all he heard. They halted for breakfast, and Tim chewed his rations sitting on the sodden ground in sodden[116] clothes; and as he sipped his lukewarm coffee, he shivered in the coming dawn.

Almost immediately they went on again.

Right before them, at the head of a valley, rose a ridge. In the creepy light it looked miles high and a million spitting points of fire flashed from it. The British guns in the woods at the back then began, and they seemed to have no relation to the unvarying plumes of smoke bursting above the long lines of fresh-turned earth two thousand yards away—no connection with the screeching of the shells overhead. "Extended order!" came the command, and Tim with his regiment stumbled forward. His breath came and went in little painful gasps. From the right came a curious gasping choke, and looking, he saw the man next to him throw up his arms and pitch forward on his face. Suddenly he became aware of a peculiar wailing above him, as if the air itself was in torture. Again a long line of fire flashed out ahead of him and again came the wailing sound. A Boche machine-gun loosed a few belts of cartridges in the spasmodic style of her kind. There was no mistake about it this time—massed infantry were sweeping the plain with rifle fire, and the quick-firers were feeling for an opening.

Another man was hit—close to Tim. He squealed like a girl; and a fellow near turned a dirty white, stumbled, with a clatter fell in a fainting fit. Tardily the men advanced,[117] and any acute observer would have seen they had little heart in the business. Some hung behind almost unconsciously, and had to be hurried up by the sergeants. The bullets became more thick. A man started to blubber behind. "Gawd 'ave mercy! I ... I can't stand it! I won't go on!" he whined. It turned out to be a sergeant, who had broken down too. He'd had little rest, poor chap, through shepherding his company ... and now he had knocked under. The company swayed and hesitated. Some of them faced round. It was touch and go. "Steady there! Steady! Come on, men;" said Stansfield, the little company lieutenant, as the men wavered on the grey edge of collapse. "Steady that company; what in hell's the matter with 'em. Keep your men up and going, Sir!" shouted a captain rushing over. But the company had gone all to pieces. The fire of battle had departed from them, and it flung itself on the ground. And soon the whole battalion was taking cover in the same way. A captain called on Tim's company to advance. Two men obeyed and one of them was Tim. But the enemy's fire redoubled and the other man was shot, and so Tim at once took cover again. The saying of his sergeant-instructor in England came to his mind, that a man must lie down and hide if he wished to live, and he felt quite justified in hugging the earth. Tim ached in every inch of his body. Surely[118] something was snapping in his brain, for those dusty khaki figures on the ground, the sky, the earth all seemed to be dancing madly about him. It was not yet light and Tim strained his eyes to pierce the darkness. Then he made a discovery. A dark mass, like some prehistoric monster, was gradually approaching. Tim spoke to a man next to him who was softly swearing and bandaging a shattered hand. He peered through the light and half-light of dawn, and then started to laugh in a nervous way. "Hell, mate;" he said, "the whole German race are advancing against us; it's all up with us. Look, they are coming on like a solid wall ... springing out of the earth just solid ... no end to 'em."

It was just about that time that Tim observed a light mist rising in front of him. It seemed to scintillate and sparkle as it rose, and curled in a sort of pillar or spiral. "Great Heaven!" he whispered to himself, "the thing is taking shape."

And true enough, in a very few moments he saw standing erect in front of him a tall man—and he was dressed in shining armour; that was the strange thing about him. A strange-looking fellow this! He was more like a Spaniard than an Englishman, with black eyes and olive complexion. His expression was lofty and noble, and his tall lithe figure was in strict accordance with British traditions. So were the bold features,[119] which were rather marred by a white scar which stretched from his left nostril to the angle of his jaw. But the jet-black hair and the eyes—the deep, dark, challenging eyes—were those of Seville. A straight sword by his side and a painted long-bow at his shoulder proclaimed him a bowman. A white surcoat with the red lion of St. George upon it covered his broad chest, while a sprig of new-plucked furze at the side of his steel cap gave a touch of gaiety to his grim war-worn clothes.

No sooner had Tim looked up than a deep rich voice exclaimed:

"*Corpus Domini!* do you need a leader?"

Tim was not a man to be easily startled, and with the bullets whining and ping-thudding all around him, it was no manner of a time to be easily startled. But the voice, on account of its unearthly sound, fairly made him jump. He picked up his rifle, and stood upright. "Come along! Come along!" the voice went on. "Why dost stand there, De Gamelyn?"

"Oh, my God! I ... I can't stand it! The loss of blood and the marching has done for me!"

"So! coming into the fight like a lion, you go out like a lamb. By Saint Paul! this is not in accordance with the De Gamelyn traditions. Take up thy arms! Come along!" said the stranger tapping him on the shoulder[120] with a barbed shaft trimmed with grey goose feather.

"Oh! please ... please.... I'm so tired!" said Tim, like a child speaking to its nurse.

The bowman saw that the boy's lips and tongue were black with thirst, and his eyes were blood-shot. And when Tim staggered over to him all his body heaved and trembled like an overdriven horse. Sick and dizzy with pain, he cast himself to earth again, and waited for death. "Why don't they hit me?... I've tried,—oh, so hard!" he sobbed.

"Steady there! Steady, De Gamelyn! Take this," said the bowman, and drew something from his side and handed it to him. It was a sword, if swords be made of fire, of lightning, of dazzling lights; and the moment Tim grasped it all his pain and dizziness fell from him.

"What is this?" he asked.

"The Sword of Life and Death," said the bowman.

"Who the blazes are you?" Tim asked sceptically.

It was with a touch of the Irish brogue that a cheery voice answered. "A friend to a friend," said the bowman, "and the devil to a foe."

"Irish?" Tim questioned.

"Citizen of the world in time past ... now a citizen of heaven." [121]

Tim gazed at the strange man in earnest scrutiny. He appeared quite at his ease with bullets whining around him and he unslung a jack of wine and drank.

"May a parched man claim a drink of your wine?" Tim cried.

"Give what you have, ask what you need. That is the De Gamelyn code of law," said the man, and handed Tim the flagon.

"You are cheerful, sir," said Tim, his blood somewhat warmed by the wine. "In the name of the devil, who are you, and of what country?"

"My name is Nigel De Gamelyn. My Mother, dear soul, was French. My father was wise enough to be an Irishman. So much for my blood, which unites happily the practical and the dreamer fluids. I am of no country but I know all places from the King's tombs at Rome to the old inns that stand about the upper Arun. I have marched with armies over this territory aforesaid. There is no shadow, I believe, on my soul, has such strength in him as I, and I rest content to be nothing to myself and all things to every man. That being bliss."

As the bowman spoke, a bullet kicked up a cloud of dust at his feet.

"Holà, by my hilt! it is time that we were stirring," he said. "Leave these fellows to grovel and remove yourself. Follow: who follows Nigel de Gamelyn?" He hitched up his belt and strode forward with his great [122] bow, and Tim saw him send a shaft with a twanging noise five hundred and thirty paces. One of the German officers, towering above the other men, stood out distinctly, and then he dropped.

"I'd like to take a look at that knave," the bowman remarked, drawing a fresh arrow from his sheaf. "By the twang of string! I'll swear I drilled him clean between his eyes."

The enemy were getting closer now, and from the men lying around them broke a violent fusillade. It was quite useless, but it relieved their nerves. Some were discharging their shots into the turf a few yards in front of them. Others were shooting at aeroplanes.

Then suddenly there came upon Tim a great anger. A bullet striking him brought him to his senses, and he saw the men sprawling belly-flat about him. This was not war, this ignominious crawling, this grovelling in the soil, this halting! The spirit of his fathers spoke to him. He remembered one of his father's favourite sayings: "The duty of a man of the line is to fight, and if needs be, die, not to avoid dying." His anger grew—"damn them for a pack of cringing, footling cowards: he, Tim Gamelyn, descendant of the De Gamelyns who fought in a hundred battles, would teach them how men of his father's house went into battle."

A senior officer called on those nearest to Tim to advance. And men rose up. [123]

"D. Company, fix bayonets! Close in!" came the order. Tim gripped his sword and strode over to the Bowman. Then the advancing Germans poured a blasting volley on them.

"The Old Battalion—*charge!*" came the stentorian voice of a senior. The men scrambled to their feet, and Tim following the Bowman sprang ahead of the Battalion. The men leapt across the blood-smearred grass after them with the speed of a winged fury, but they struck the Germans a dozen yards ahead of the battalion. The Bowman had hurled aside his long bow and was using a short battle mace with terrific effect. As for Tim: all he wanted to do was to slash; stab and slash again with that wonderful sword. There followed a nightmare of drawn, grinning faces, of fierce yells and groans. The mud-stained grey figures struck at him wildly, futilely. On and on Tim went, his glittering blade now at a white face, now at a throat, now at a chest, still stabbing and thrusting to pass through the wall of men which barred his way.

The man with the bow ranged up alongside him: "On, man, on, in the name of God, march forward.... By St. George and Our Lady! we are breaking up their front;" he muttered.

"Strike me crimson!" bellowed a man near to Tim, "but you're a blooming marvel! Those German beggars are going down for[124] twenty yards around your (decorated) sword without being hit at all. Look! Look! there goes another Hun down. Let me come over near you, mate!"

But Tim knew that De Gamelyn the Bowman had summoned to their help the armies of the unconquered dead. They came, the De Gamelyns of all generations from Crécy to Waterloo: they fought by his side, and the machine gun bullets, which fell upon the dusty earth like tropical rain, hurt them not.

Again and again the Bowman's mace smashed and lashed out before him, and Tim thrust, and thrust yet again with his sword. He heard the deep-throated roar of the Bowman's singing "The Song of the Bow."

What of the shaft?The shaft was cut in England:A long shaft, a strong shaft,Barbed and trim and true;So we'll drink all togetherTo the grey goose featherAnd the land where the grey goose flew.

Suddenly a yell, horrible and fierce, arose from the soldiers, and he heard the Bowman's voice no more.

"They're on the run, by Gawd, they've got it right in the neck this journey," bellowed a soldier as the German infantry broke and tailed away. Then something took Tim in the chest, something wet and red, that went through him.[125]

The man next to Tim saw the long bayonet stand out beyond his back, saw Tim sway, laughing, and snap the steel short as he fell upon it.

A body of kilted men suddenly swept from the right of the hard-pressed battalion, swept by in silence, and in silence swept the remaining Boches up one side of the ridge and down the other into eternity.

Two days later Colonel Arbuthnot inquired after the welfare of Private Tim Gamelyn at the field hospital.

"He was admitted suffering from sunstroke, and a terrible bayonet wound. He died early in the morning," said the doctor.

"Is it true that he saved the battalion by urging our fellows on at the critical moment?"

"Yes," said Colonel Arbuthnot, "but do you happen to know if he had an officer's sword with him by chance when he was carried in here? All my men speak of a 'sword of flame' with which he drove the Huns before him. Even hardened soldiers who have been through many campaigns have been babbling all sorts of nonsense of ghostly regiments of bowmen who helped to turn the German attack!"

The doctor walked over to a shelf, and, taking down a rusty old sword, placed it on the table.

"Perhaps that is what you refer to, Colonel," he said. "Where the fellow picked it up is [126] a mystery to me. It must be some hundreds of years old."

Colonel Arbuthnot took it in his hands and read this inscription on the blade:

NIGEL DE GAMELYN

... ADSUM ...

[127]

III

THE MILLS OF GOD

THEY were putting little Boudru to bed—the R.H.A. and the Corps of Royal Engineers and Stansfield, the big fat Infantry Sergeant. His little sister, already tucked up in bed, was nearly asleep. Boudru had been allowed to stay up till Sergeant Stansfield had come in from duty. The special privilege had been accorded to the little French boy on this, the last night that the British troops were to spend in the village. Boudru's home was in a portion of our line in which the defence trenches were of the semi-detached type—they did not join up with the other part of the line, and at times the place was distinctly unhealthy. Sometimes it was in the hands of the Huns, sometimes the British rushed it, and held on for a few weeks; there had been times when it had been occupied by both, at other times it was written on the squared official maps as no man's land. It was a spot in which there was always a feeling of something dreadful being close at hand; there was an air of expectancy about it and [128] one felt there was a marked atmosphere of nerves about. You might be sniped from the house opposite, or blown out of the windows by a

seventeen-inch shell. You never know. The man who sold you tobacco the day before might be lying stiff in the gutter next day, or more probably still, he might be dining with the German Staff a mile and a half away. All this uncertainty, coupled with the fact that the place was full of spies, and that valuable information had been finding its way through to the German lines, made the General decide to withdraw his troops and take up some trenches behind it.

Boudru sat on the big armchair and swung his white bare legs defiantly. Perhaps it had better be explained that my lord Boudru was five years old. "Boudru going to shut eye?" said the fat infantry sergeant suggestively.

"The cots are down and the beds unrolled," said the R.H.A. man falling into the diction of the barrack-room.

"No," said Boudru. "You must tell me for the last time the story about the wicked German baby killer who was turned into a pig. The man of the guns must tell it, and the fat man of the infantry shall hide beneath the bed and make pig shrieks—many pig shrieks—at the time when he is killed."

"But we shall disturb little sister Elise," said the fat sergeant with visions of a dismal[129] ten minutes wedged beneath the small cot and the floor.

"Elise is not bye-o yet," piped a thin voice from where two eyes were sparkling elfishly from a tangle of golden locks.

"Go on, my English man—There was once a big fat baby killer who lived in Potsdam ..."

Then the R.H.A. man (a journalist by profession, a duke by inclination, and now by destiny a very clever gunner) began the famous story. Never before had the telling of that tale been given with such splendour of effect. The fat sergeant had made pig-noises with multitudinous yells in at least fifteen different keys, and the little cross-eyed driver of the Engineers had dressed up in a real Hun helmet and grey coat. The grand finale in which the Engineer had turned into a pig on all fours and had been mercilessly put to death with the fat sergeant's bayonet, had filled Boudru's soul with joy. He reflected and gloated on the scene far into the night. Then he fell fast asleep and met with most dazzling adventures with a German soldier who had been hiding in the Jacobean oak chest with the fleur-de-lis carved on the side, which stands beneath the bulgy leaded window.

As a grey and wretched dawn came in with a cold and dispiriting rain there came to the ears of little Boudru the steady champing of marching feet in the street below. Slush, slush, slush went all those feet, beating[130] the muddy road, and then the noise of metal on metal woke the silent village streets as the guns went by.

"The soldiers! The soldiers!" exclaimed Boudru as he bounded over and jumped on to the Jacobean chest to watch them pass. It was fated that they were the last English soldiers that Boudru would ever see.

Some weeks later Boudru's mother was busy with odd jobs in the kitchen garden and the children were playing in the front room, there was a ring at the door and the sound of a butt-end of a rifle, as it "grounded" on the cobble stones. When Boudru on tiptoe lifted

the latch, the door swung open, and a big man in a greenish uniform stood before him. There was no sign of cap-badge or title on his shoulder straps, and he was horribly dirty. He carried two English ration bags, besides his own rucksack, and they were all filled to bursting with loot. Evil beamed from his narrow, leering eyes; and when he smiled at Boudru it twirled his demon-like mouth into a grotesque shape. He looked both depraved and suspicious, a disreputable scoundrel with a gun, and that, you will find in the fullness of time, was just what he was.

"Let us shut the door," said Elise. "This is not a pretty man." But the man from Stettin pushed past.

"Brat;" said he, "drink."

Boudru's mother had hurried up to the^[131] door as fast as her bulk and her stout legs would permit.

Every day she had expected a visit from the Huns. It was useless to argue with such a man, so she took the German in.

"Brandy," said the man.

"There is only a little left ... it is over there, on the sideboard."

The soldier walked over, finished half a bottle, and announced that it was like water.

"More," he ordered, "Shoot you if no find."

The woman at last managed to unearth a bottle of good Burgundy and another bottle of brandy.

He drank both the bottles, and when he had finished, he asked for more like every other Boche will do. Then he chose the front bedroom and threw himself down on the bed in a drunken sleep.

When the next morning broke the French woman went to awaken the thief and while the latter was making his toilet little Boudru entered. He regarded the Hun with gravity for at least five minutes and then delivered himself of his opinion.

"I don't like you," he said slowly, regarding the Hun, with his elfish eyes. "I don't like you. I think you may be like the man in the English soldiers' story, who turned into a pig—a baby killer perhaps. It is because of your red hair that I think you may turn ..."

The man from Stettin who had been trying^[132] to drag a comb through his horrible beard and hair, turned, and he looked like a big red devil, the sun being on his head, and red beard and all.

"What's that?" he said, as he lurched ominously across the room. He had swallowed the contents of a flask of Benedictine which he had taken from his rucksack, and the repeated drinks were taking effect.

"I'll sweep the house, so there isn't a bug in a blanket left—you damned brat!" He was bellowing like a bull, chewing his red beard and muttering to himself. As he passed a

table, he knocked the empty flask on the floor. It did not break, and he viciously stamped his feet on it, smashing it to pieces. He began to go mad from that moment. As he kicked the wreckage about the room, his glance fell upon his rifle with the fixed bayonet. And then the swine-dog ran amok. Boudru stood with his back to the door: the blood froze in his veins, and his little body stiffened into absolute rigidity.

"Turn into a pig!" shrieked the Hun. "What did you say? Turn into ..."

The bayonet flashed, and little Boudru—but what followed shall not be printed. It would be passing the decent bounds of descriptive writing to put it in black and white. It is sufficient to say that some minutes later the Hun prised the floor-boards up with his bayonet, and Boudru, from that moment, without warning, or leaving any[133] trace, disappeared from the world. He returned in the fullness of time. And this was the way of it.

For the hundredth time that day, the Hun had gone into the bedroom to look out of the bulgy bedroom window. Fear began to come over him without any warning, and he was thinking of little Boudru down there in the dark. The thing within him that served him for a heart was beating queer rhythms ... the beating sounded like a regiment of British Infantry on the march.

"Look," said he to the housewife, "look out on the road. Do you see soldiers?"

The good woman, distraught between suspense and hope for her little one, who had been missing for six long hours, blinked away a tear on her lashes and peered through the diamond panes.

No one was to be seen. But between three and four in the morning the first faint champing of marching feet could be heard and the Hun came down from the bedroom looking as pale as death. He opened the door and stood there listening. The insolent crunch, crunch, crunch of heavy nail-studded service boots came nearer, and a khaki column appeared on the winding road. The housewife, whose aching eyes had searched the road for Boudru all day, saw them too.

"Look," she cried, "look! The English soldiers are coming. Do you see?"

They were coming![134]

The man from Stettin rushed up to the bedroom, and jumped into the oak chest.

"Not tell the English! Not tell!"

Fifteen or twenty soldiers were to be heard grounding rifles and throwing off their equipment in front of the house.

Entered here Sergeant Stansfield, and shouted gaily to the housewife, but the moment he looked into her pale and worn face he understood that some sorrow had befallen her. Before he could hold her she had slid silently down on the floor, at his feet, and covered her face. "Ah,—ah,—ah! O God, help and pity me! They have taken my little son," she cried.

At this moment a soldier rushed in at the door. "I think there is a man who looks like a Boche trying to get out of the bedroom window!" he said. "Will you come, Sergeant? Quick!"

The sergeant went quickly, and returned with some men with fixed bayonets and led them up to the bedroom: He told them to break in. The man was on his knees, with his horrible hands lifted up in supplication. The soldiers kicked the man up and made him go downstairs into the front room.

"See!" said a soldier, who held his bayonet ready, "there is blood on his sleeve." The Hun cursed within his heart.

"It was none of my shedding," he whimpered.[135]

"I had not said so," returned the sergeant quietly.

"We are here to find that out. Perhaps you know something about the lost child?"

"I had no hand in it, God strike me dead!" the Hun answered fervently.

At that moment there was a sort of earthquake upstairs, a clash of falling bricks and slates, a crashing pandemonium that sent everyone's heart to his mouth. A shell had struck the roof. Then the ceiling above bulged like a stuffed sack and burst in a cloud of pink-yellow dust. Something dropped with a dead thud fair and square in the centre of the fine oak refectory table. Sergeant Stansfield bent forward, looked, and then started back. He gave a cry and turned sickly white. On the table lay *the little huddled form of Boudru*. The morning sun that had been paling the candles in the sconces, struck the golden hair and staring eyes, that had a few hours before, held all the spring-time; struck, too, a heavy scarlet patch on the little overall, as the sergeant tenderly turned the little body over....

"Oh! God of Mercy!... How horrible! A bayonet through his heart ..." he muttered. The Hun's sleeve spotted with blood came back to his mind, and filled him with blind, unreasoning rage.

"You swine," he said. "I'll——"

The man from Stettin suddenly felt his heart stop beating. He stood petrified for[136] a moment; then he clutched the table with one feverish movement; and when he saw the pale cherub face, he became covered at once with perspiration. Then the terror, which had paralyzed him a second or so, gave way to the wild instinct of self-preservation. He hit out wildly with both arms, kicking out at the same moment. In a second he was out in the hall, and had locked the door behind him. A door opened somewhere outside, and they heard him running down the garden. Some of the men snatched their rifles, rushed to the window, and threw it open. Four or five shots rang out simultaneously, and the stench of cordite was wafted back on the sharp morning air as the man from Stettin fell in a crumpled heap, his face buried in a clump of violets. The sergeant went into the garden.

"Hum!" he remarked after an instant, "dead, did you say? He's as dead as a doornail ... anyway, it's nothing to do with us! If ever a soul went straight to hell," he muttered to himself, "it was that red devil's."

[137]

IV

THE STORY OF A SPY

DONALD MCNAB, private (and distinguished ornament) of the London Regiment, leaned his elbows on the little oak table in the bar of the "Three Nuns," and eyed me with withering contempt. From a corner of the settle I stared—with a wholly unsuccessful attempt to look unconcerned—at a quaint old painting of Sergeant Broughton who first taught Englishmen to box scientifically. When the great are really wrathful it ill becomes pigmy people to jabber or argue. So I waited with bent head and respectful silence to which the passing moods of such an erratic genius are entitled.

When McNab and I had met an hour or so before we had been on the most friendly terms. We had both ordered our pint of beer, filled our pipes, and retired to a corner in the bar parlour feeling at peace with the world—barring of course the German Empire and their allied forces. Everything, in fact, made for peace and goodwill between us; yet, because I had spoken with some levity about[138] our incomplete spy system, McNab's wrath had come down on my head like the proverbial "hundred of bricks."

"It seems strange," I had remarked to him, "that the Huns can always forestall our most carefully-prepared plans through their almost perfect spy system. Our fellows must be dead stupid at the game. Why aren't these German vipers ever nabbed?"

"Dead stupid!" McNab had exclaimed, after gazing at me for a minute in dazed stupefaction at my unspeakable temerity in challenging the proficiency of the British Army. "Get under your Blanco pot!"

Now, when McNab used this picturesque term to me I knew that there was a storm brewing. He only used the expression when he wished to be particularly "cutting," and I received his reproof with, I hope, a correct realisation of my own insignificance.

The old world had rolled along for another twenty minutes ere McNab shifted his legs, cleared his throat, and interfered with what was left in his tankard.

"I wonder," he said musingly to himself, "if these poor yobs over here will ever know the true 'istory of this bloomin' war?" Then back came a smile to his face and he shook his head, indicating, perhaps, that he had answered the question to his complete satisfaction. The joyousness at the thought of some of those unrecorded slices of military history caused my friend to drop again into[139] a contemplative mood, and he started humming a little tune under his breath:

Hello! Hello! who's your lady friend?Who's the little girlie by your side?I've seen you with a girl or two,Oh, oh, oh, I AM surprised at you!Hello! Hello! what's your little

game? Don't you think it's time your ways to mend? That's not the gal I saw you with at Brighton, Oh, oh, oh, who's your lady friend?

"If it is not a rude question," I ventured, after another few moments, "did you ever see the capture of a German spy over in France, Mr. McNab?"

"Who are you getting at ... trying to pull my leg?" he demanded, with increased suspicion.

"Come, come," I laughed, "let us agree to differ about our—er—inferior spy system."

"Superior," he insisted.

I surrendered before the gleam of his eye. Fool that I had been, ever to have imagined that I could conquer McNab's steely glance!

"Superior then, if you prefer it."

McNab's eyes, which had glared with indignation, lost their fire and assumed their normal expression of calm and relentless despotism, and the red flag of agitated displeasure disappeared from his tanned face. He seized with alacrity the olive branch (also another tankard of beer) which I held out to him.[140]

"The history of the British Army," he observed as he blew at his ale "minds me of a married soldier's letter to his wife. The most interesting parts are all left out ... do you get me?"

McNab tilted his hat at a perilous angle on one side of his head, and thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

"Touching upon some of those unwritten exploits of the Army," I darkly hinted: "I'll bet I can find a brilliant historiographer not a hundred miles away from the 'Three Nuns' who could dictate a few of 'em that would fairly make the *Daily Mail* turn green with envy—eh, McNab?"

"I know the brilliant bloke you mean," my friend conceded modestly, "though calling me 'orrible names like that would brand you as a swanker or a gentleman wot had left his manners in the hall in any barrack room from here to Hindustan. When we were resting at Quality Street near Loos, for example"—he paused a moment, and with a playful dig from his banana-like thumb nearly knocked me on the floor—"why, name of a dog! There you have a case in point!"

"A case of a swanker?"

"A case of one of those spies. We caught the perisher. Begad, we did!"

McNab put the red-hot end of a cigarette into his mouth, stammered with wrath in a medley of international profanity at the unexpected warmth, and would not be comforted[141] till his favourite barmaid had placed a slice of cooling lemon on his tongue.

"My first introduction to the entertaining sport of spy tracking," he mumbled, "was at Loos, where I was sent with several hundred other chaps to help push the Huns out of the Hohenzollern Redoubt. At the present moment, as you know (or ought to by this time), I am a military genius 'ighly thought of at the War Office, a strategist Kitchener has his eye on, and a model soldier quoted every day by my colonel as a shining light to the regiment. But of course you must remember that a few months ago I was practically a job at the game, and now of the fame (and the extreme shyness that seems to come with it) of my later avatar.

"We took over some temporary billets at a shady little spot not far behind the British trenches which was then known as 'Quality Street,'" he continued, "and, as I not unreasonably supposed that the smartest and most intelligent bloke in the regiment would be sent to 'elp the colonel, I requested the Dog's Leg (Anglice—lance-corporal) to point out his abode to me.

"'Ask the Quarter Bloke over along in the end cottage, old sport,' he said with a grin, 'he'll be most 'appy, I've no doubt to personally conduct to the old pot-an-pan, and while you're there just ask him to let you have that jug of defaulters' extra milk for me.' It was a 'wheeze' among the boys to[142] send a poor innocent bloke off for this milk. The point of the 'wheeze' is in the fact that as defaulters are chaps doing jankers (Anglice—punishment) they are hardly likely to get any extra milk dished out to them. I did not see the joke at first; but on application to that autocratic beggar—Quartermaster King was his tally—he fully explained things to me in that witheringly sarcastic manner peculiar to sergeant-majors and quarter-blokes.

"'Defaulter's milk?' echoed he. 'Why, you lop-eared leper, you've got corpuscular fool wrote as plain as a motor lorry number all over your ugly face. If I wasn't sure that you was not more of a born idiot than a ruddy knave, etc., etc., etc., I would have you slick in mush before your feet could touch the ground!'

"Much crest-fallen, and terribly mortified, I returned to the cottage which had been selected to shelter me noble self, only to be met there with a volley of derisive laughter, repeated demands for the jug of Defaulter's milk, and questions about the quarter bloke's health.

"'A cat may look at a *King*,' said the Dog's Leg, and fell backwards out of the open window at his own joke, breaking 'is collar bone. One should never forget, at every time, as the Scriptures say, that pride allus goes before a fall, and that all the King's 'orses and all the King's men can't not even pick 'im up again!'"[143]

My murmured compliments on his amazing aptness in the knowledge of Holy Writ were checked by a sudden discovery that my best silver cigarette case had vanished from the table.

"Which of you civilians has stole the gentleman's silver case?"

This question, uttered not in the friendliest possible terms, was addressed to a young gentleman with a very pimply face, and kaleidoscopic coloured socks, of the genus

Slacker, who had suddenly found the painting of Sergeant Broughton an object of absorbing interest.

This inquiry meeting with no response from the Slimy Slacker, (to use McNab's expressive name for him), he gave utterance to a sigh of resignation.

"I believe, sir," suggested an old gentleman who was warming his toes at the fire, "that you deposited the gentleman's cigarette case—er—inadvertently in your own pocket!"

"Why, strike me crimson!" cried McNab, diving his beef-steakish hands into his tunic pockets. "Why, so I did! I'm the biggest giddy fool at that kind of wheeze that ever lived. It's a knock-out, ain't it? Never mind—'*honi soit qui mal y eighteen pence*,' as the French poet bloke said!

"It so happened that on the very next day our old man's servant went sick, and in spite of my extreme youth and innocence, I was selected from the crowd to fill the[144] vacant billet. And then it was that the Colonel realised that fate had dropped a heaven-sent blessing on his knees in the shape of a—well, in the shape of an ingenious bloke like me. He lifted up his voice in thanksgiving for that the British Army held warriors so wise, and then looked up his whiskey and cigars.

"At one end of Quality Street there stood a Y.M.C.A. hut. On the next day when I pushed the door of this Bun-Wallah's paradise open, the first person I saw was old Tommy—Tommy wot had fought up and down the Godforsaken veldt with me for three years on end, Tommy who had always the knack of droppin' out of the blue from nowhere.

"Well, 'ere's a go!' he cried dropping half a cup of boiling coffee down another chap's neck, as 'is smile broadened, 'it's a 'ell of a time since I struck you.'

"I saw the dawn of recognition on his ugly mug; and I could have guessed to a word the joyful expressions of welcome that were springing to his lips."

McNab paused.

"Quite so," I prompted, seeing the change that took place in my friend's face.

"I am afraid I should have guessed dead wrong," continued McNab with his eyes downcast. "However, what he did spit out was: 'strike me up a gum-tree if it ain't the bloke what borrowed 'alf a crown off me when I was quartered at the "Shot" in '98.' [145]

"I was pretty well worked up at this remark; but I said to him with quiet dignity: 'I believe, Tommy, that I sent it back by post.'

"You sent me back a threepenny bit,' he says, with a very naughty word, 'and told me it was my 'alf crown worn down.'

"Come, come, old chum!" I laughed, 'let us forget all about that, such a thing is really only "very small beer" indeed.'

"Humph!" grunted Tommy. 'It was a blighted small 'alf crown, too.'

"'Sit down,' he continued, clutching me by the wrist and dragging me into a vacant chair. It was not in champagne, of course, that we drank each other's health. But you can always trust old Tommy to have a little pig's ear hidden somewhere. 'What's the matter with a bottle of Bass?' says he to me. 'Tis against ole Kitchener's wishes,' says I. 'Of course it is,' says Tommy; 'and wot is more, it's the ruin of dear ole England—God bless it!' 'Rot yar innards—let's go and 'ave some,' I says bein' always one to reason out matters to a logical conclusion.

"There is a large slag heap in the neighbourhood of Quality Street where the French and Germans met early in the war. They wanted each other's company exclusive on this here heap. Well, they met, and fell to arguin' whether the French should 'ave it as a mounting for a few machine-guns or the Germans should keep it for sniping purposes.[146] Hence the air was soon clouded with shells, shrapnel, and all other deadly diseases. Seeing the children had got over their shyness in this little fright and had really played quite a good game, this particular slag heap was bearing abundant fruit in the way of trophies. Furthermore, Tommy suggested that it would be indeed nice if we could make our way there one evening and collect a few German helmets, bayonets, and other curiosities for the old people at home.

"As a result of our confabulation we found ourselves about ten that night crawling up a hedge towards the slag heap in question. When we did get there we went and lost our blighted selves. How long we were crawling and twisting about that Gawd-forsaken heap or which way our lines lay I'd no means of knowing. But poor old Tommy rolled down a bank with an armful of German helmets and other trophies, making a noise like a fire engine galloping up the Mile End Road. Then suddenly one of those German flares fell on the ground about a hundred yards away, and all things, including Tommy and I, shone out in their naked splendour. Then you can take it from me we *did* see where we were.

"I thought Tommy was having a bad attack of epileptic fits for a moment, till it transpired that he had flumped down on a dead Boche in endeavouring to escape the searching glare of the flare. After the thing[147] had burnt its giddy self out Tommy crawled crab-fashion over into the providential cutting in which I had taken shelter. He was wiping his forehead with the back of his hand, and he looked very solemn and rather frightened. 'Did you spot that chap crouching in that V-shaped cutting down there?' he said. 'I thought he was one of our old crowd at first, but what with that cursed light and the excitement I could not be certain.'

"'I saw nothing.'

"'Just before the flare went up I noticed a flash lamp; one of those things used to give signals with. I got an awful turn then.'

"'Rot,' I said: 'I don't believe a word of it.'

"'Do you mind coming over this way then?' said Tommy.

"In the pitch-black darkness, guided by Tommy, I stumbled up a path which I'll swear was all of a one in three gradient. We came out upon a little ledge overlooking what we

now knew to be the German lines. Tommy motioned me to keep my eye on the V-shaped cutting in the slag below us.

"I think the beggar is down in the extreme angle of the V,' he whispered as he crawled beside me.

"Then I overbalanced, fell over the ridge, and dropped clean on to something soft and yielding below. Red specks dotted the blackness before my eyes for a few moments as I bounced on the hard stones. I jumped up^[148] with a jerk and spun round to find, blocking my path, a menacing figure regarding me over the barrel of a Browning pistol. In the other hand he held an electric torch.

"Don't move,' he said in good English.

"His tone was quiet and crisp, an' his face showed me that 'e was out for blood.

"I have it in my mind almost to be sorry for you, British Tommy,' he said calmly, 'You know too much. I am going to decide on the best way to dis——'

"He got as far as 'dis'—when something leaped out of the shadows and he was hurled back with a sudden rush. It was Tommy, and he swung his heavy Boche rifle and stove the man down with terrific force. There was a dreadful half-choked, whimper and then silence.

"Tommy stood regarding the still form with a bleached face. He then bent over him, but without touching, looked up at me.

"Saved a firing party the trouble,' he said. 'He's dead all right.'

"He straightened himself up.

"What the devil shall we do with it, McNab?"

"'Tis a spy he was,' I answered, 'and it's ten to one that he has a code or some kind of papers tucked away on him. Just run through his pockets before we leave him.'

"No, no,' Tommy said, 'I can't touch him he'll haunt me, sure.'

"The man was quite dead when I rolled^[149] him over. I took from his pockets a leather bound code book, English, French and German bank notes, and a gold stop watch.

"No good stayin' here,' said Tommy, 'I vote we crawl back and talk it over. This is a crummy old place.'

"When we got back to billets and examined our loot, it was a sure enough German spy's code book, and it contained a rough sketch of all our trenches and what not, quite sufficient to use in conjunction with the squared map he carried. The book was printed in German.

"You know,' said Tommy, 'we must report this to the Colonel as soon as we can.'

"An' be collared for being out at night without a pass first thing? Not much,' said I.

"We must hide this loot. They may search us when they find him out there,' said Tommy, looking to the future.

"Hide away, then,' I said, but my mind was elsewhere, for all of a sudden, I had been hit in the eye with a brilliant inspiration.

"The following morning, when I took our ole man his early tea, I found 'im sitting up in bed sucking a fat cigar and bewilderin' himself with the brigade orders.

"I beg your pardon, sir!' I says, 'but may I have a word with you?'

"You know, McNab,' he says, screwing his eye-glass into his eye with a smile—'you know that I am at any hour of the day or[150] night glad to have a talk to a man of understanding like yourself.'

"That's good of you, Colonel,' I says, 'to meet me with such kindness. But I think, as you say, that I have just a little more than the usual share of intellec' under my hat, but what I have come to lay before your notice is this: I have discovered why the Boche guns always register on our artillery positions the moment they are taken up, and the source of the leakage of information.'

"Oh, you have, have you?' says he.

"'Tis a spy, sir,' says I, 'and it's signalling to the Huns he was when I caught him.'

"Another blessed spy legend,' he yawned, 'I really thought that you, McNab, would be the last man to become afflicted with the spy craze. I have arrested half a dozen so-called spies this week already only to find they were harmless rustics—'

"I beg your pardon, Colonel,' I returns, with that chilling dignity which has at times even made generals falter, 'but there is no legend about Private McNab's spy.'

"Then trot out your spy,' he says, 'and I'll come and look 'im over.'

"I not only caught him red-handed at his nefarious trafficking (them was the very words I used) ... I not only caught the blighter, but I put his light out.'

"What?' he shouts, clutching my arm, 'you killed the poor brute.[151]

"We did—me and Tommy, and we found this here code in his fob,' said I.

"With that I threw the little code book on the bed, and the old man, after looking through it carefully (he could read German, our old man), got out of bed and started dressing in a businesslike way.

"Shut that door, McNab,' says he, 'and let me have the benefit of your invaluable advice.'

"All of a sudden I was struck with a brilliant inspiration, and I let the old Colonel have it for what it was worth.

"As it happened the old man thought a mighty lot of it—such a lot, in fact, that by one o'clock that day he started to imagine the inspiration had come from his own fertile brain. He liked to think that it was his, and, Lord bless 'im, I don't grudge him the glory.

"After laying our heads together, the Colonel went back to the artillery lines and spent three hours talking to the Battery Major, and I looted a dozen three-pounder rockets of var-i-ous colours out of the stores. In the afternoon the Colonel called all his officers together, and kept the blighted motorcycle dispatch riders busy buzzing up and down the line with messages, till late in the evening.

"I have called you gentlemen together,' he says to his officer, 'in order to ask you to corporate with me. I shall fire some rockets[152] from the slag heap to-night about ten o'clock. On the first of these signals the Germans will open a very heavy cannonade on our trenches. I'll trouble you to have your men all in the dug-outs, and under cover at a quarter to ten!"

"That night, soon after the Colonel, Tommy and I started off for the slag heap in the dark, taking with us a bundle of rockets. My idea was at last going to be tested—what do you think it was, Sir?"

I discreetly pretended my utter inability to guess.

"Why, nothing more or less than to hoist these German blokes with their own petard, so to speak. We were going to fool them by giving them signals in their own code. Well, after stumbling and groping about for half an hour," McNab continued, "we arrived at the spot near where we had overlooked the spy.

"I think this is the ledge from which I fell,' Tommy whispered as we crawled on. The next instant the Colonel disappeared, and the little procession came to an abrupt standstill. A crashing noise was heard as the old man with a quarter of a ton of slag went tobogganing down the stone-shod slope.

"This *is* the spot,' Tommy said tersely. And up to us came hoarse whispered curses as our ole man tongue-lashed us for a full minute in gross and detail.

"Lie quite still, Colonel,' I whispered,[153] 'the Hun swine-dogs may send up a flare if they hear us.'

"But no flare flared, and no sniper sniped.

"This game gives me the blooming creeps,' old Tommy muttered shudderingly, thinking of Huns and guns three miles deep all round. After that the Colonel struggled clear of the 'alf ton of slag atop o' him. Tommy and I wandered a little more until we got down to the old man. Here we halted. 'Here's the place where we left the dead spy,' said Tommy, his eyes peering into the darkness of the V-shaped cutting. 'I can still see Fritz lying in the corner. We had better get right over *this* side. Come on!"

"I see,' said the Colonel. 'This is the key of the position. It overlooks the German trenches and when the spy was using his flash lamp he could not be observed by the men in our lines.'

"'Good thing we short-circuited his little game,' reflected Tommy hugging an arm full of rockets.

"'Ah!' says he, fingering the electric torch. 'How this game of war makes one think. My horizon has indeed broadened. Just to think that a few flashes from this little chap will mean more than all those glittering stars above to the German fellows in the trenches over there. It's simply ridiculous to waste our little concert on a few Huns in the trenches to-night. We must socialise the whole blooming show.[154] We must get the head up of all the Huns for miles around. Let us consult the code book,' he said, and then opening it he read out some of the rocket codes. They all seemed simple enough. But he had some difficulty in finding the one he wanted, having first of all of course to translate them into English; but presently he seized upon the one he wanted, he repeated it over with delight:

"Two green rockets in rapid succession mean: "Enemy making active preparations for offensive movement" and when followed after a suitable interval by a single red rocket, mean: "Enemy will attack without delay."

"'Touch off two green rockets, McNab, if you please,' said the Colonel with a tremor in his voice.

"I touched off two three-pounders which rose several thousand yards, and burst into bunches of gorgeous stars. A faint clattering noise came to us from the Hun trenches, and we all hugged the earth fairly closely as a rapid fusillade broke out from all quarters. Rifles cracked all around us to the extent of thousands, and with that a most impressive humming noise, which I had never had the pleasure of hearing before, because being a soldier I had always formed a part of it—the noise of whole armies turning out to meet an attack.

"'Colonel,' I says, 'it may have escaped you that the angry and 'ighly intelligent Boche on our front will soon be sending up[155] *their* rockets to confuse our own men. Might I recommend a red rocket before they open their part of the ball, and bend the lights! That will spell to 'em: Enemy will attack without delay, and it will also expedite their artillery just a leetle.'

"The Colonel laid his hand on my shoulder.

"'McNab,' says he, 'there's worse blokes than you sitting on thrones. They shall 'ave that red rocket. None the less,' he remarked, 'the situation is undeniably getting a bit feverish. Trot out Red Rufus!'

"I rightly took the command to read:

"'Send up a red rocket.' Rufus soared up into the sky and burst into a red glare that simply shouted: 'Here they come after you' to the Huns.

"'Oh-h-h-h-h!' exclaimed old Tommy as the twirly-whirly red stars fell through the sky.

"'Silence!' said the old man. 'This is the sanguinary British Expeditionary Force, not a (decorated) Brock's Benefit at the Crystal Palace. What in Hong-Kong are you jumping about like a richly decorated organ-grinder's monkey for?'

"The Huns grasped the meaning of their dead spy's signal as soon as it showed in the heavens, so to speak. We lay belly-flat and held our breaths for a moment or so in silence, but we were about the only silent things for a hundred miles. Flares went up by the thousand and searchlights cut up the sky in[156] every direction. All kinds of mysterious guns got into action and all the batteries for a hundred miles must have let drive as well. From then on, for at least two hours, the shells poured excruciating-wise into our deserted trenches without cessation,—shrapnel, high explosive, six inch, twelve inch—thousands of pounds the Huns wasted that night.

"I wish you could have seen Tommy bowing to right and left of the German trenches acknowledging the applause which the Huns would have given him if they'd known the facts. On the other hand, as the Colonel observed, they might 'ave killed him.

"They'll have to pull up their socks at Krupp's to replace the shells they have blazed away in this little pantomime,' said Tommy pressing his hands to his sides. 'Star programme—heap big star programme! Phew! Oh, I wish I could stop laughing, I ain't 'ad such a laugh for years!'

"And in this little code book here,' said the old man, a hand on each of our shoulders, 'there are hundreds of little love messages we can be getting ready to surprise 'em with. Presently we'll begin to send 'em instructions to concentrate their fire on empty houses—tell 'em they are chock-full of British troops. Then they'll fairly let loose the bow-yows of war. Damme, how their gunners will gun! Oblige me by thinking of four hundred guns, pumping val-u-able shells into an empty house.'[157]

"The exquisite humour of it brought us down screaming with laughter in a tangle on the slag-heap. A searchlight broke out from the back of the Hun trenches and began searching our lines.

"They're looking for our attacking party, or the Angels of Mons,' panted the old man, his knees in a shell hole and his face in the grass. 'Well, let's get our things packed and hurry back. I think they have sent back for a fresh supply of shells. The sooner we get out of it the better. Sufficient unto the day—or night, perhaps one should say.'

"Well, it's dry work talking," said McNab, wistfully surveying the interior of his empty mug.

I took measures—pint measures—to allay his thirst.

"Let me see now," he said; "let me see."

"And did you do any signalling with the flash lamp the next night?" I timidly hinted, "I believe you mentioned that it was your intention."

"Yes, we did have some fun, I can tell you, and 'twas better still next night. Once more we returned, to the slag-heap, then," McNab swept on, "we started to flash a few messages over to the German lines. They soon picked up our signals and after a brief interrogation they replied. Then they started to ask questions. 'At which part of the British line would it be wise to launch an attack?' they flashed.[158]

"And our old man flashed back a trench that was fairly bristly with machine guns. Then they asked other questions, but we did not reply. We laid low and said nothing, for you can take it from me, mister, that a real spy is a man of few words, and playing with a flashlight in enemy lines is not exactly a healthy game.

"Had we have signalled too freely the Huns would have soon become suspicious, for, mark you, the flares that we had popped off at 'em the night before had left 'em with an uncomfortable feeling that their spy was taking quite unreasonable risks. It is of course most unusual for a spy to make use of rocket signals. Do I make myself comprehensible?"

"Perfectly. Did the Huns attack?" I asked.

McNab nodded. "They attacked us three days afterwards at five o'clock in the morning. It was like a nightmare. The Germans came on, evidently thinking they were on a soft job, and you can realize what a wonderful target they made for the gunners who had been waiting for 'em. Such a target that gunners dream about but never see. We had some eighteen-and-a-half-pounders not five hundred yards away, and they let go right into the thick of 'em. And each case shot with its four hundred bullets swept and tore their ranks. With a mighty gasp and something like a groan the Huns staggered, recovered, and with wild yells came charging[159] on to a hundred machine guns. And all the time the shells came over at them and tore wide swathes in their closely-packed ranks. Then our boys got into 'em and swept the remaining Huns into eternity!"

"Unless this story had come from such a highly-reliable fountain-head, McNab," I murmured, after a moment or so, "I would never have believed that the whole thing was not a fabrication."

McNab removed his pot of beer on one side, and leaned across the table. I moved my chair back quickly, just missing another vigorous stab from his huge index-finger.

"The history of this war," he observed impressively, "will be interwoven with extraordinary things like this 'ere tale I have been telling you. And you may lay to it, mister, that the most extraordinary things of all will never see the light of day in the printed page."

"I can *quite* understand that," I said pointedly; "for, although a student of military history of this war myself, I cannot recall a single reference to any of the remarkable events which occurred in the trenches during the eight months you were with your regiment over there!"

McNab regarded me for a full minute with rapidly-rising choler. Then he shifted his stare from me to an old gentleman who was warming his toes at the fire.

"The yarn I have told you is as true as[160] the drill book, though you need not believe it if you have conscientious objections. I have been recounting real slices of history. Leastways, when I say history I may be wrong, because they will never appear in history. But they '*appened*, Mister—'appened as surely as I am sitting here with an empty pot in front o' me. An'—an'——" McNab stammered in his excitement—"if any bloke says they didn't, be jabbers, I'll—I'll drink his beer!"

But neither the old gentleman nor any member of the company wished to disagree with him, and he rose up from the chair with a mug to order his final half-pint. He returned (a trifle unsteadily, perhaps) with his beer and a particularly vile cigar in his mouth. Whether it was the effect of the heat or the—er—beer I cannot say, but he blundered over my legs, causing me a sharp twinge of pain.

"What an awkward beggar you are that you can't see to walk straight," I said.

McNab looked down at my legs after giving them another stirring up with his foot. "Why, Go' bless my soul," he said, "it's quite true, I am an awkward devil. I certainly should have seen *those* feet. However did you get 'em into the bar?"

[161]

V

THROUGH THE FURNACE

Give us our rest, O Father, in thine own appointed time and of thy gracious olden fashion. Lay thy annulling seal upon the o'erlabored heart: drop thy healing nepenthe into the weary brain. Teach us not to fear that which brings us nearer to Thee. Suffer us to go to sleep with no more consciousness than the flowers that take no care for their awakening. Give us this last and best of all thy gifts—Parva domus, magna quies!

HILAIRE O'HAGAN sat in the September sunshine on the grass that skirted the roadside. For some time he had been examining with a stare of melancholy interest the worn toes of his boots. On his head was a dingy straw hat; to his form and limbs there hung a faded and creased coat and a pair of shiny black trousers;—he held in his hand five shillings which had been thrust into his hand when the prison gates had opened to him that morning. He had taken the money and swaggered out with a parting gibe at the constable who closed the doors behind him.

O'Hagan was an incorrigible rascal. Some years before, when he stood in the Assize Court, a venerable judge had told him so.[162] "O'Hagan," said the judge grimly, "you are what I should term an incorrigible rogue, and I shall send you to prison for two years with hard labour. You have run across my path many times before. When you gain your liberty it will be very much to your advantage if you keep out of my way for good and all."

O'Hagan had received the sentence with the same impertinent smirk on his face as he had received many similar sentences.

Now he was a free man. He was powerful, full of health, and—lazy. He reflected aloud, with evident enjoyment (and in the speech of a lettered gentleman), "This is indeed one of those days when it is good to be alive!"

"O'Hagan!" came a sudden voice, harsh and authoritative, from behind him: He rose to his feet and faced about. In the roadway appeared the constable to whom he had addressed some not over polite remarks on his way out of prison.

"Well?" said O'Hagan.

The constable snorted. "Didn't you hear me tell you to move on? We don't want any habitual criminals hanging about here."

O'Hagan dived his hands deep into the pockets of his shiny trousers and slouched along towards the next village. About a mile ahead was an inn he knew of where he might enjoy a great refreshment, and drink the waters of Lethe. He jingled the silver[163] in his pocket and reflected that for one night at least he could eat strongly, and drink largely, and sleep deeply.

Outside a house screened by a mysterious ten foot wall full of the plain dignity of unpretending age, a long grey motor car was standing. O'Hagan turned and surveyed it, and his quick eye rested upon a leather hand case on a rug beneath the seat. It did not take him a moment to snatch it and hide it swiftly beneath his coat. For a second or so he stood back against the wall. At that moment a girl came out of the house, in company with an elderly gentleman, and walked towards the car. O'Hagan looked at the girl swiftly. At the same time she glanced at him, and their eyes met. Things looked unhealthy for O'Hagan. But fate was altogether with him, and the motor moved off and left him standing there with the case under his coat. No glorious figure, this man, but one of those whom specialists now place amongst the doomed as cursed with the criminal instinct, with the vices that require lavish means to feed them—a man who only feels a thrill in life when he is preying on his fellows, or eluding the hand of justice.

O'Hagan walked down the road a little[164] way with his hand resting lovingly on the leather case. He turned a corner, cut through the hedge, and took a track across a field. In the shelter of a clump of bushes he sat leisurely on the grass and went over the contents. Among the various odds and ends was a leather purse. He opened it with trembling fingers. There was a sovereign, five one pound notes folded up, eight shillings in silver, and a small silver cross hanging on a black silk riband. He dropped the silver with a sigh of satisfaction into his trousers pocket, and the notes he stored in the lining of his hat. He took up the little cross and was about to thrust it into the thick grass, when he paused for a moment, and was aware of an oppressive feeling.

On a sudden, in the midst of men and day,
And while he sat and looked around, He
seemed to be in a bygone age,
And feel himself the shadow of a dream.

O'Hagan felt that his body was decreasing, sinking under the green turf, falling down, down, down, and yet "He" was still above, gazing, wondering, open-eyed, open-mouthed, as it were. Gradually, but none the less surely, he was being crowded round by many moving "'s" which never seemed to grow distinct. He seemed to know at once he was back in the days long past. He shut his eyes against a burning that felt like tears. When he opened them again he was looking at his^[165] own name, fairly carved in on the silver cross in quaint old English letters:

Hilaire D'Hagan

The clump of bushes before him was now obscured by a thin white cloud. As he watched he was aware of a figure that stood out distinctly before him. He was a man of his own height, thick-set, serious-looking, in a monk's mantle and hood. O'Hagan gave a hurried glance, and as hurriedly turned his head away again. The face of the man exactly resembled his own. But it was an honest face, without the look of dissipation, and the secret furtive air, which he knew marred his own features. He also thought he could see a faint nimbus round his head—but this may have been illusion. O'Hagan moved away as if he had no wish to see him; but the stranger was not to be put off by any such trick. He touched O'Hagan's arm, and brought him to a standstill.

"Brother!" he said in a gentle voice.

O'Hagan pulled himself up sharply. For a moment it seemed as if he would have refused to stay, but the next he realized that it would be of no use.

"What do you want with me?" he began. "I know I'm a thief and a drunkard. Do you want to hand me a Sunday School tract? If so get it over."

The stranger's hand tightened on his arm,^[166] and he began to speak in a calm but strangely thrilling voice. "It is written there: '*men do not despise a thief, if he steal to satisfy his soul when he is hungry.*'"

"Well?" said O'Hagan, trying to hold a countenance of little concern.

"Well?" said the stranger, "for why did you steal?"

O'Hagan coughed and held down his head.

"A man without scruple and without heart," the stranger remarked to himself.

O'Hagan looked up with a start. "Look here," he began. "You've no right to——"

Then of a sudden the mist began to rise from the clump of bushes and the stranger vanished. O'Hagan was back in the flesh. He stood there dazed for the moment, with the little cross clutched in his hand. He sat down again and *tried* to force his spirit back to the other scene, but in vain. He felt that he had been thrilled through and through. The oppression, however, unlike the stern-faced monk, did not vanish, it deepened. A throbbing headache came on, which refused to be shaken off, and eventually sent O'Hagan to the "Bell Inn" to drink still deeper of the waters of oblivion.

The day was already falling when he walked, jingling his silver, into the sanded bar of the "Bell Inn," and an hour or so later, when it began to fill with drovers and country folk, O'Hagan had looked much on the good brown ale. He was in fact becoming very noisy.[167] Seated in a corner, he sang "Nell and Roger at the Wake" in a hoarse voice. The country folk grinned and looked at him curiously.

"Shut your gab, old sport," said a rough-looking drover at last, "that song is not fit for decent folk to hear."

O'Hagan swore like any trooper, and reached his hand out to a large spirit bottle at his elbow, and for a moment the drover thought he would get it thrown at his head. However, O'Hagan rose to his feet, made a bow to the company, and made an apology to the drover. He stood there, a blackguard on the face of him, but a gentleman in spite of that undefinable and vaguely repulsive smirk which played about his straight and refined mouth. He slunk away into the night.

As O'Hagan walked the night deepened in throbs of gathering darkness. The sense of uneasiness that had been with him ever since the priest in the cassock had appeared to him was not to be easily thrown off. He set himself to argue down the uneasiness for which there was no more foundation than a bad attack of "nerves" after the gloomy life in prison. He told himself, till he believed it, that a man—just a human man—had been crossing the fields, and that being smitten with religious fervour he had quoted the Scripture aloud, as he had often heard such people do. He told himself it was mere fancy that was the cause of the belief that[168] something was *shining* around the man's head. As he argued these things away, and banished the face of his visitor, a certain sort of reason usurped his place. But he did not feel comfortable, however, he fell short of any form of fear.

It was O'Hagan's whole business to find desolate corners, where he could sleep without the fear of interruption by the police; and hence being in a part of the country that he knew well, he bethought himself suddenly of the great barn next to the mansion house at Tilney St. Lawrence. It was always full of good hay, as large as a barrack and no thoroughfare passed within a quarter of a mile of it. In such a place, and with the scent of the hay to lull him, O'Hagan threw his tired body down, and soon lost all the cares of the world in complete repose.

All his life O'Hagan had been a habitual dreamer; the nights were few, that is to say, when on awakening he did not find that some mental traffics and discoveries had been his, and at times, the whole night through he would meet with most dazzling adventures. In prison his dreams had been a great solace to him, and each night he had settled down to devote the dark hours to the cultivation of joyous dreams. He was one of those men who went to sleep fair and square, and looked for dreams. But as O'Hagan stretched in the hay, things were revealed to him that were beyond all dreams, and of course he[169] could not keep the strange priest out of the vision. It opened with finding himself in front of the doors of an old church, where, he understood, he was going to hide from someone who wanted to kill him. He knocked on the door and the man who opened the door was the very priest he had seen in the afternoon. He asked him to step in and instantly turned round and walked up the dimly lit aisle, and O'Hagan understood that he had to follow. In

silence they passed through a small arch in the chancel and mounted a narrow oak staircase with many corners and tortuous turns and arrived at a small landing with a studded door set in it. Quite inexplicably O'Hagan's heart sank at the sight of it. However, the priest unlocked and opened it, and held it open for him to enter, and without coming in himself, closed it. It was a small oak room with a stone floor, and a curious smell at once attracted his notice. It was there—there, close to him—under his very nose—the strong, acrid odour of decay—the nauseating smell of the grave. Looking about he saw the floor was paved with grave stones. In one corner stood a fine seventeenth century lead coffin. A curious greyish light shone from it. O'Hagan's conjecture had been right: there was something awful in the room, and with the terror of nightmare seizing him swiftly by the throat and throttling him, he awoke in a spasm of terror. O'Hagan was sitting bolt upright with the impression that[170] someone had flashed a lantern in his face, though the barn was absolutely pitch dark. "I've had a most diabolical nightmare. It was the drink," he said to himself, and decided to go to sleep again. But the excessive heat of the barn would let him rest no longer. The atmosphere seemed to be hot and pungent, and he groped about and opened the door to let in some air. Almost at the same moment someone cried "Fire!" and shapes of things began to define in a soft grey glimmering;—and the gloom was broken up by a red and angry spurt of flame from a wing of the old manor house. Again cries of "Fire!" came to his ears, and grew and multiplied. O'Hagan was fully awake in an instant, and running at top speed towards the old mansion. When he reached it the whole sky about was illuminated by a red and angry light. Almost at the moment of his arrival a tower of smoke arose in front of the porch window, and with a tingling report, a pane fell outwards at his feet. A crowd of cowed and white-faced country folk drew back when he rushed up. Then he looked up at the porch window and saw what it was that made the people go. He saw a girl's terrified face at the window. "The girl I lifted the bag from," he said aloud. "She'll be burnt to death."

The heavy hall doors were surrounded by the inmates of the house who had escaped and O'Hagan pushed through them, and sprang up the broad stairway mid choking volumes[171] of smoke. When reached the room above the porch the heat was fierce, and the roaring of the fire filled his ears, and he had scarce carried the terrified girl out of the room when a side door fell in, and a branch of flame shot brandishing through the aperture, and the head of the stairs became lit up with a dreadful and fluctuating glare. He carried her swiftly down the stairs, he feared every moment that they would crumple and fall in. But he fought his way grimly, and his jerky swear words were lost in the roaring of the fire. Another moment and they were in the open. Firelight and moonlight illuminating the country around with confused and violent lustre, and banked against the stars and the sky they could see a glowing track of smoke.

"That was a near thing, Miss."

"I thought my end had come!" she said, the colour returning slowly to her face. "There would have been no chance at all if you had not come up for me, as I was then almost suffocated. It was a very brave act!" She did not thank him—she couldn't have spoken plain words of thanks to save her life—but O'Hagan knew what she thought—"Don't say any more about it, Miss, I am really a coward at heart."

"I'm sure I owe my life to you," she said earnestly. "I know there are some things for which thanks are an insult, but you will not mind if I offer you a little token of gratitude?"[172]

O'Hagan's hand was resting on a small silver cross in his pocket, and in another moment he solemnly handed the girl the money and notes he had stolen. "Why, whatever is this?" asked the girl, staring at O'Hagan in bewildered amazement.

"That's yours," he said by way of assistance.

"But I don't understand!" she cried, greatly puzzled.

"Well, Miss, I suppose it does require some elucidation," O'Hagan replied somewhat nervously. "You see, it's only a return of stolen goods. You remember visiting a house in the big grey motor car yesterday, Miss?"

"Yes."

"Well, I stole your bag from under the seat. I have given you back again all that I have left. But I will take this little cross as a token." He dangled the little silver charm before her face, and before she had time to take in the situation O'Hagan had disappeared.

The long plains of Northern Europe stretched before the gaze of a regiment of British infantry—great undulations of sodden earth left by the winter rains and thaws. There, in the piercing cold that froze the feet, they waited the signal to advance. Stray bullets whined and pinged as they struck[173] the wire and sand bags on the top of the trenches; occasionally a man fell on his face; and the ghastly change in the faces of the troops bore testimony to the effects. Hilaire O'Hagan lay stretched upon his face, occasionally looking towards his officer. His heart beat like the pulsing of a motor car. His throat felt dry, his cheeks were burning. At times a cold shiver passed right through his frame. He fidgeted and lolled from one side, to the other. It seemed to him that he had waited hours for the signal to get over the trenches. He tried to strike a match for his pipe; his hand was trembling furiously. It occurred to him that after having passed through the gory awfulness of six months' incessant fighting, he was beginning to lose his nerve. He was no longer master of himself. He was afraid. Every man has the instinct that prompts fear, for upon that instinct the whole foundation of life-preservation is founded. But over and above this instinct, common to all of us, O'Hagan had imagination—the graphic, vivid imagination that always lurks in Irish blood. Is not the entire history of the Celt a rejection of the things of this world for the Shadow and the dream? Upon this basis of fear and imagination O'Hagan started to build, building and building until he had created a grand structure of blind terror which yielded a most exquisite torture to his mind.

A whistle sounded and a shudder traversed[174] the men all down the trench. The officer called to his men. He mounted the parapet and jumped over. There was a sound like the rushing of a river as the regiment poured itself over the trench. The men advanced slowly and dazedly. Now any acute observer would note that the men were bewildered and had little heart in the fight. Their faces worked; and they struggled to walk on, but it seemed

useless. The bullets were pattering all around and taking heavy toll. Then a few yards in front a shrapnel shell kicked up the mud. The German guns had found the range. Someone shouted out the fatal words "Lie down." The regiment was soon hugging the earth, which was about the best thing they could have done. Great showers of shrapnel burst over them, and the bullets struck down on them in a continuous shower. Some men rose to their feet, and the shrapnel withered them. Suddenly one shell burst over O'Hagan, blotting out all around him in smoke and dust, and brutally jerking his mind to fullest tension. This shell fire was hell! With the crash imagination and fear began to work together in his overworked brain—both at once in the queerest jumbling manner. In a few moments O'Hagan was on his feet running away—racing as if not merely for his life, but his soul.

When O'Hagan's brain cooled and his sight cleared he found himself in the doorway of a little wrecked church. The German[175] shells had gashed and ripped the sides and roof, so that birds flew in and out at will. Hundreds of sparrows chirped in the oak beams above. The shells had pitted, starred and jerked up the blue flagstones in the porch on which O'Hagan stood. Parts of the old church had been shelled nearly level; little twisted fragments of beautiful leaded windows had been swept up in a pile outside with other wreckage. As O'Hagan walked up the aisle a feeling came over him that he knew much of the old place. A quintessence and distillation of peace and comradeship seemed to inhabit the soft gloam of its chancel. He found himself drifting back to past days and seeing dimly in a thin white cloud faces that seemed familiar and yet were unnameable. Then one face stood out distinctly, and O'Hagan watched it with breathless wonder and fascination. He moved closer up to it; he would have given much not to have done so, but he could not help himself—he looked closer, and it was—the face of the monk who had appeared to him once before. When the cloud had cleared a little, the outline of the monk wearing a hood and cowl became visible. Then was there a voice that he identified at once despite the lapse of two years since he had last heard it. "I have been wanting to speak to you, brother, for many hours, but *something* I cannot explain to mortal man has prevented me." The priest instantly turned round and O'Hagan[176] understood that he meant him to follow. His heart sank at once, and he experienced a sense of dreadful oppression and foreboding, and with a sudden thrill, partly of fear, and partly of curiosity he followed. They passed up the aisle and a perfectly familiar staircase. Then he opened a door, and went in, and at the same moment, sheer unreasoning terror seized him. He was afraid, but did not know why: he was simply afraid. Then like a sudden recollection, when one remembers some trivial adventure of childhood, O'Hagan looked for the old lead coffin. He cast his eyes about with a certain air of proprietorship, and compared the room with the room of his dreams. Nothing had changed. And then, with a sudden start of unexplained dread, he saw that the coffin was in the corner—the same leaden coffin that he knew so well with the same curious greyish light coming from it. There was lettering on the lid.

"What's written there? What's there? Who's there?" he called. He called and continued to call; then another terror, the terror of the sound of his own voice seized him; he did not dare to call again; he whispered. There was something written on the coffin that his mind reeled to entertain. Without quite knowing how he came to be there, O'Hagan found himself bending over the coffin. He read the lettering, and it was:[177]

*Hilaire O'Hagan ob. 1696 aetat 35.
Parva domus, magna quies.*

He sank down on his knees with a childish sob. Sometimes the old church seemed absolutely still, and the only sound to be heard was the sighing of the night breeze below him in the pines, but sometimes the place seemed full of muffled movements, and once O'Hagan could have sworn that the large carved handle of the door turned. Even as he stood there he heard steps just outside, and with a sudden horror, he saw the heavy door slowly open. A priest stood in the open doorway with an inscrutable smile on his lips—the same clean-shaven man with a long aquiline nose and singularly square chin, that he had seen before in his dreams.

"Brother," he said, in a moved voice. "You must go back and help your comrades. There is no peace for you yet. Yes, brother, I know it is written that we shall rest from our labours—but the beginning of our rest is not yet. *We* must go and help them in the firing line yonder——"

"No, no, holy man!" O'Hagan pleaded. "I have had enough.... There is hell over there."

"They are calling us, don't you hear them—the living and the dead——"

O'Hagan could see those great green flashes that burst in the sky so near to him. He could almost hear the angry zipping of high[178] explosive shrapnel close over his head. God! how he hated it all!

"How hard it is, Father, to make these children understand!" came softly from the priest's lips.

O'Hagan's regiment had retired to their trenches in good order. They were some of those trenches round about Ypres, and all the world has read how the Germans battered and delivered terrific infantry attacks on this part of our line without cessation. A certain morning, about six o'clock, the Huns decided to deliver a sharp attack, and there was "considerable artillery activity" on the part of the German guns. Such activity was spoken of in the trenches as "raising the lid off Hell." There was a lull after about an hour's rain of every kind of missile that man has invented to batter his brother with. Then the Huns came on in earnest. Some reached the trenches only to be met with a murderous fire: they fell in little huddled heaps in the blood and the mud and the slime of the trenches. But the whole German race seemed to be flowing in on the British, and they fairly got into the trenches, though they were twice driven out. Yard by yard the battalion retired. The next moment an unearthly, fluorescent light shot and flooded along the trenches. The troops gasped for a moment, and then started back. Standing on a traverse in full view of Germans and Englishmen was a tall man with yellow hair,[179] in a priest's cassock. He was brandishing a sword that flashed like a tongue of flame, and crying "Turn back! turn back! advance!"

Private Hilaire O'Hagan, the deserter, stood beside him holding a massive brass altar cross above his head. From that moment O'Hagan behaved like one possessed. He hurled himself over the traverse into the "green" of the German regiment, and started hacking and stabbing with the pointed end of the cross. The Huns did not like the look of such a

wild apparition and refused to face him. Bit by bit they retired and O'Hagan took advantage of a moment to take a green silk Irish flag, with a crownless harp, from his pocket, and attach it to the spike of the cross. Then, roaring like a lion and brandishing his strange weapon, he fell on them once more—and as they broke he saw the hooded priest driving them before him with his flaming sword. A great joy seemed to burn up in his soul. Men who watched him said he ran amok. His great voice rose high above the chattering machine guns in a beautiful Franciscan chant and the voice of the priest joined in. What O'Hagan, bearing his mighty cross, must have looked like in the eerie dawn mist, Heaven knows. But seeing such an apparition and hearing the strange chant, it is possible the Huns thought the devil had joined in the fight. Then a man in the rear trench pointed to the west,[180] where a great image of the cross was shining against a blood red sky, and a voice cried "Forward." It passed from man to man, and the regiment advanced, howling, with O'Hagan. They drove the Germans before them like chaff before a fan, and fell back, in triumph, to their lost trenches. They saw O'Hagan stagger a little and then turn round to where the regiment boiled with joy in the trenches.

"You are back, my children," he shouted. "It is well, for my poor soul desires rest.... Aye, rest indeed!"

A great peace settled on O'Hagan's face, as he slowly collapsed and lay very still.

Not long after this a country parson received a letter from a hare-brained member of his flock, who for many years had been good enough to keep him in touch with his doings in far lands. The old vicar had heard that the "young scoundrel," as he called him, had joined a volunteer regiment, and was in the thick of the fighting around Ypres. The letter was written in pencil on leaves torn from a note-book. The portion that will interest the reader of this story most is here quoted.

"On Monday I came across an old friend (?) of ours—Hilaire O'Hagan. We had a brush with about five thousand Huns, and we had under-estimated their strength. They rushed us in the dawning—a living, greenish-grey wave rolled over our trenches, shooting[181] and hacking at the heart of what had once been a regiment of British Infantry. When the second wave lapped over, our men were overborne but they were trying, by common instinct, to reach the second line trenches where they could re-form. Then I saw O'Hagan who had dropped from God knows where, standing silhouetted against the red of dawn on the front line trench. He was waving a brass cross and the bullets were pattering around him and making a noise like rats skipping about an empty house. My God! Pluck! I never thought O'Hagan had it in him. I tell you, he hurled himself down on the rifles of a thousand Huns, and 'drove them hence' with his mighty brass cross. Our men were soon rallying on the lost trench. The stragglers clutched at each other, and pointed to where the cross flashed and reeled in the seething mass. Under cover of night our bearer party brought in O'Hagan stone dead with over twenty bullet wounds in him. I know, vicar, when you read this, it will flash into your mind that poor O'Hagan had been drinking again. You may banish any such thought ... there was a different look in O'Hagan's eyes. He had seen the 'immortal light, all young and joyful, million-orbed, million-coloured, as on the first morning.' We carried him and his cross over to an old monastery where we found one of those quaint lead coffins—like the one in the crypt in *our* old church—and laid him at rest[182] beneath the cool blue flagstones outside the chancel door. One of

our men, a stone-mason in times of peace, roughly graved his name on the slab above him. As I walked back to the trenches I turned back to have a last look at the grave. A priest was standing over it with hands outstretched to bless...."

THE END

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