V.C.

A Chronicle of Castle Barfield and of the Crimea

by David Christie Murray, 1847-1907

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Table of Contents

Chapter I

The people of Castle Barfield boast that the middle of their High Street is on a level with the cross of St. Paul's Cathedral. The whole country-side is open, and affords a welcome to storm from whatever corner of the compass it may blow. You have to get right away into the Peak district before you can find anything like an eminence of distinction, though the mild slopes of Quarry-moor and Cline, a few miles to the westward, save the prospect from complete monotony. East, and a trifle to the north, rises Beacon Hargate, on the top whereof one of the innumerable bonfires which warned England of the coming of the Armada hung out its flaming banner in the sight of three counties. Topping that high tableland, Beacon Hargate is familiar with wild weather at the proper seasons, and by dint of use takes very little notice of it. But on the evening on which this story has its proper beginning such a storm raged round and over the old Beacon as no man or woman of that region could even remember. It began in the grey of the dawn in wild and fitful gusts, driving thick squalls of rain before them, but long before midday it lost its first waywardness and settled down to business with a steady purpose. It grew in force from hour to hour, and almost from minute to minute, until all living things sought shelter. The disconsolate cattle huddled under the sparse hedgerows, looking down their broad, dripping noses in a meek abandonment to fate. The sheep packed themselves in any hollowed corner they could find, and hugged their soaked fleeces close to each other in uncomplaining patience. The trees fought the blast with impotent arms, and shrieked and groaned their protest against it Flying boughs, like great grotesque birds, went hurtling through the air.

As the brief March day fell towards its close, the storm seemed suddenly to double in fury. Oak and elm went down before it bodily, torn from the stout anchorage of many years, and before the wind had raged itself to rest many scores of patriarchal landmarks were laid low. Roar of tormented woods, howl of wind, crash on crash of breaking boughs or falling trees, blended to one tune, and a plunging rain came down in ropes rather than in lines, driven at a fierce angle.

Night fell, and the pitiless tempest raged on, but with the coming of the darkness one sign of cheer displayed itself. From the windows of the plain old grey-stone mansion on the eastern side of the Beacon Hill lights began to glow, first in this chamber and then in that, until the whole squat edifice seemed charged with warmth and comfort. The tempest poured its full strength against the grey-stone house. It shook the windows with its frantic hand, it shrieked and howled and roared amongst the chimney tops and gables, it strained the hasps of the staunch oaken doors, and the old house faced it with a broadening smile, and shone the brighter by contrast as the night grew blacker.

In the whole roaring region there was but one man to be found abroad, and he was making for the grey-stone house. He was a portly person with a prosperous-looking development about the neighbourhood of the lower waistcoat, and he was sorely tried, though he was as yet on the sheltered side

of the hill. His heavy black broadcloth was soaked through and through, and weighed him down. The icy wet had chilled him, and he breathed hard at every laboured step. One stiff slope of some fifty yards had still to be surmounted before he reached the hill-top. Twenty yards further lay the house, with all windows beaming. It was as yet invisible to him, but in his mind's eye he could see it, and the thought of it gave him courage. He turned his back to the plunging rain, and paused to gather breath before he assaulted the last slope of the hill. He had lost his hat, and the water trickled out of his hair in rivulets.

'I've seen worse weather than any they can brew in the neighbourhood of Beacon Hargate,' he panted to himself, 'but it's one thing to have a good tight craft under your feet, and it's another to be bogged in the dark, over half a mile of rotten plough-land. All right, my lads, you haven't got Jack Jervase under yet. Here goes.'

With this he faced the hill and the rain again, and made his difficult and slippery way upward, impeded by his clinging clothes, and snorting like a grampus. Right at the crown of the hill, most fortunately for the wayfarer, there was a thick coppice of stunted trees, which afforded refuge from the gale and shelter from the rain. He was quite blown by the time he reached it, and he clutched at the nearest sapling as a drowning man clutches at a spar. He stood there perforce for a full minute, panting hard. Then he shook his head doggedly, and muttered a second time:

'All right, my lads. You haven't got Jack Jervase yet.'

And then, helping himself along from hand to hand, he skirted the coppice, until he came to the unsheltered brow of the hill. It was well for him then that he had something to hold on by. Even as it was, he was clean lifted from his feet, and it was only by a prodigious effort that he saved himself from being blown away like a leaf. But having once struggled past the actual summit, he had escaped that danger, and a minute later, through howling-wind and scourging rain, the fire-lit windows of the house were beaming 'home!' upon him. Another instant and his feet were on the firm gravel, and he went scudding before the wind until he had gained the corner of the house. Here, feeling his troubles over, he paused once more for breath, and took a dripping way towards the rear of the building.

He stayed for an instant to glance in at an old-fashioned broad mullioned window. He looked into a room where a jolly coal fire was burning in the grate, and blazing up the chimney. About it half-a-dozen people sat comfortably grouped, and there was a big brown steaming jug upon the wooden table in the centre of the room, which was paved with the large square tiles locally called 'quarries.' One of the group about the fire turned to this jug and poured out from it a generous-looking stream of dark brown liquid into a number of mugs of the old Staffordshire ware, which at that time of day was common in rustic households, though it seems now to have vanished from all places but the shelves of the collector. The onlooker shivered and spoke under his breath.

'You're making pretty free with old Jack's old October inside there, ain't you? Pretty fine old crowd to come home to!—guzzling at my expense. I'll sort ye.'

A moment later he was in the room, but short as the interval was between the close of his speech and his appearance before the group about the fire, his temper had apparently changed, for he broke out in a cheery voice:

'Hilloa, my lads! I reckon one or two of you are weatherbound. Well, you've found a snug harbour here, and you're welcome to it. Mary,' he went on,

addressing a thick-set woman of middle age, who had risen at his entrance, and stood before him with an embarrassed aspect, 'don't tell the missus that I'm at home, but go upstairs and lay out dry things for me. I'm wet through to the marrow. I'll have a drop of that myself,' he said, laying a hand on one of the mugs and nodding round the little circle, with a beaming face.

One of the men noisily shifted his chair to make room for him, and the master of the house approached the fire, and, turning his back to it, began to steam like a whole washing day.

He sipped comfortably at the creaming contents of the mug, and fairly beamed upon his guests.

'You chaps,' he said, 'will have to wake up by and by. I hope there isn't one of you that hasn't got the spirit to go out and fight for his Queen and country?'

'There ain't a-going to be no fightin', Mr. Jervase,' said one of the men sheepishly.

'Don't you make any mistake about that, my lad,' said Mr. Jervase. 'I've got a bit of news for you as will set old England in a blaze within another four-and-twenty hours. And I suppose I'm the only man within five miles that knows it. You mark my words, now, all of you. You'll remember this night to the last day o' your lives. This is the 27th March, this is. The twenty-seventh of March in the year of Our Lord eighteen hundred and fifty-four. That's a date as will stick in your gizzards, my hearties. It's a date as will stick in old England's gizzard, and in the Czar of Rooshia's gizzard, and in the gizzard of Napoleon Three. And you can lay your oath to that, because Jack Jervase told you.'

'Why, what's happened, Mr. Jervase?' asked the man who had spoken earlier.

'Happened?' cried Mr. Jervase. 'Why, Her Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria has sent a message to her Royal 'Ouses of Parliament to say as she's declared war agen the Czar of all the Rooshias. And before a month is over your heads, my lads, there'll be war amongst the Great Powers of Europe, for the first time in eight-and-thirty years.'

The five men rose to their feet unconsciously in their excitement. They were mere country-side clods, and knew as little of the rights and wrongs of that great Eastern question which had overshadowed the world so long, as the horses they drove about the heavy country lanes or the flocks they herded. But they broke into a cheer.

The bringer of the news lifted a hand, and waved them into silence.

'You'll have the missus in to know what all that hullaballoo's about,' he said, reprovingly: 'and I don't want to be bothered until I've made a change. Now I'll tell you what it is, my lads. The Queen wants men, and there isn't one of you that isn't fit to go a-soldiering. I just tell you this—if any one of you, or the whole lot of you, see fit to take the Queen's shilling I'll put a pound to it for bounty money. Now, you needn't cheer again,' he added hastily.

As a matter of fact, none of his listeners showed any inclination to cheer. War in the abstract was a thing to cheer about, but war in the concrete—war with its possibilities—thus brought home to each individual mind excited no enthusiasm.

'You think about that, my lads,' said the host, distributing a series of smiling nods about him. 'Old Jack Jervase's day is over, or he'd be at it again, and so I tell you. It's many and many a year now since I heard a shot fired in anger, or since I stood on a ship's deck. But I've got the heart for the work still, if I haven't got the figger. Heigh-ho,' he went on, with a regretful moan, 'there's no

room for a pottle-bellied, bald-headed old coot like me atween the decks of a man o' war. But if I was five-and-twenty years younger, why, God bless my soul, I shouldn't hesitate a minute!'

The woman he had despatched immediately upon his entrance returned at this instant and coughed behind her hand to indicate her presence.

'All ready, Mary?' said Mr. Jervase in a ringing and cheery voice. 'That's well. Don't forget what I've told you, lads: fine young chaps like you ought not to desert their Queen and country in the hour of need. I'll keep my promise. Any one of you as takes the sergeant's shilling can claim a pound for bounty money from old Jack Jervase.'

So saying, he rolled, with a nautical gait, towards the door by which the domestic had re-entered the room, and having reached the stairfoot, and finding himself alone, he added, with a sudden snarl, 'I'd like to give three of ye a chance of earning a wooden leg anyhow—coming into my house and guzzling my best beer the very minute my back's turned on ye.'

He found a cheerful fire blazing in his own room, and dry clothing laid out before it. He began to undress, casting his coat into one corner of the room, with a gesture of exasperation, and his waistcoat into another. He tugged at his bootlaces angrily, muttering to himself meanwhile mere scraps of speech in which the words 'beer,' and 'waste,' and 'guzzling beasts,' were audible. When he had stripped completely, he gave himself a lusty towelling from head to foot, and then struggled into the warm, dry raiment prepared for him. As at the completion of his toilet he stood with a pair of stiff military brushes working at his hair and whiskers, before a big cheval glass, he looked eminently British for his day. The style is a little changing now, but the thick-set sturdy figure, the full paunch, the blunt scowling features, the cold grey eyes, the double chin, the firm yet sensual mouth, were all expressive of his type. The suit of pilot cloth into which he had changed gave him something of a seafaring look; but the high white collar, the shining black satin stock, the heavy gold chain which trailed across his waistcoat, and the clean-trimmed hirsute mutton-chop on either side the heavy jowl combined to make him intensely respectable to look at. He thrust his feet into a pair of wool-lined slippers, which he had left toasting till the last moment before the fire, and took his way downstairs, and along the passage which traversed the whole side of the house. His face was drawn into a heavy frown as he thrust open the door he came to, and he entered the room with a cough of magisterial importance. A tall, gaunt man, with stooping shoulders, rose to meet him, and the expression of Mr. Jervase's face changed as if by magic. Something of such a change had taken place between his looking in on the rustics assembled round his kitchen fire and his appearance amongst them. But now it was even swifter, and more pronounced.

'Why, General Boswell!' he cried. 'This is indeed an unexpected honour. I'm proud to see you, sir, beneath my 'umble roof. Jack Jervase wasn't a very distinguished servant of Her Majesty. He never held the Queen's commission, sir; but he fowt beneath his country's flag, and he'll always feel it an honour to welcome a superior officer of the sister arm.'

He said this with a laugh, and a roll of the head, as if to carry off by his own geniality any sense of presumption which might appear to lurk within his speech, and he bent low over the hand which was proffered to him.

The visitor's type was as pronouncedly English as John Jervase's own, and yet it could hardly have differed further from it if the two men had been

inhabitants of planets strange to one another. John Jervase was British bourgeois from head to foot, and the General from crown to sole was an aristocrat. His very figure told the observer that, and the manly aquiline features and the mild, yet searching blue eye had never left an instant's doubt about it in the mind of any man. He was some six feet four in stature, and the slight stoop which sat upon his shoulders looked somehow as if it had been brought about by the innate courtesy of a man who could not refrain from bending to people of inferior stature. It scarcely detracted from the military character of his carriage, and, indeed, the General could stand up straight enough when he chose, as divers of the old incorrigibles who had been under his command in many climates knew full well. It was always a bad sign to one of these when he saw the General square his shoulders: and if, in addition to this, both hands were sent at the same time to twist the ends of the great drooping grey moustache, the old offender knew that his plight was serious indeed. Yet, for a grizzled old campaigner, who was now growing nigh to three score years, the General was marvellously mild and sweet in manner. His features, to be sure, were high, and in some of their signs a little harsh; but his mouth was very gentle in expression, and the large yet deepset eyes beamed with a kind simplicity. It was a common saying in his fighting days that Boswell's men would have followed him into hell. But children trusted and loved him at sight; and it was a pretty picture sometimes in his social hours to see him as the centre of a bevy of young girls—over whom he always seemed to exercise a perfectly unconscious fascination.

'You've been to town, Jervase, I understand,' said the General, 'What's the news there?'

'The news, sir,' said Mr. Jervase. 'The news, sir, has come at last, and by this time I suppose Her Majesty's forces have got their marching orders.'

'Do you mean it's war, Jervase?' cried the General.

'I mean it's war, sir,' Jervase answered. 'The latest news, before I came away, was that the Queen had sent a message to Parliament that negotiations with the Czar are broken off. The message goes on to say that Her Majesty relies upon her faithful subjects to protect the Sultan against the encroachments of Russia.'

His manners and his accent were alike more dignified than they had been when he addressed the rustic crowd. It could be seen that he had one manner for the kitchen and another for the parlour.

'At last!' said the General, half under his breath. 'At last! Well, everybody has seen it coming, and there——' he went on, turning upon his heel and speaking in a raised voice, 'there is your chance, Polson. You're a lucky dog, not even to have your commission from your agent's hands, and yet to be on the edge of the biggest campaign since Waterloo.'

A lad of three-and-twenty had risen from a seat in the corner of the room at the moment of John Jervase's entry. He had risen so hastily that he had overturned half a set of chessmen from the board on which he had been playing, into the lap of a pretty girl, his partner in the game; but he had listened so intently, from the General's first question, that he was unconscious of that slight mishap. He walked into the broader light which shone beneath the central lamp, and asked eagerly:

'There's no mistake about that, Dad? There's no mistake about it?'

The speaker was Jervase's son, as a stranger seeing them under the same roof would have been ready to swear at sight. He was taller than his father by a good four inches; and the family resemblance, striking as it was, did not pierce so deep as the expression of the face. The father's blunt features were softened in the boy's, and though the look of energy was there, it was altogether lifted and spiritualised—possibly, perhaps, by the intense feeling of the moment.

'And there'll be no mistake about my commission?' the young man asked. 'There's no fear of any delay, or any official nonsense?'

'I sent my cheque to the agent before I left the town,' his father answered, 'and I expect you'll get your call to boot and saddle within a day or two at the outside.'

The pretty girl who had been playing chess with the young man in the corner laid down the pieces which had fallen in her lap. She placed them on the board, with a meaningless precision, and looked straight before her with wide eyes, and a face which had slowly grown paler and more pale.

'Polson, my boy,' said the General, 'I congratulate you. You are a lucky fellow.' He held out his right hand, and as the young man grasped it, he laid his left upon his shoulder. 'They won't keep you long at the Depot,' he said, 'for a man who can shoot straight, and ride to hounds, is half a soldier already. God bless you, my lad. You'll do your duty well, I know.'

There was silence in the room, and the noise of the storm outside, which nobody had hitherto thought about, fell upon the ears of all four, as if it had not been a familiar tone for hours, but as if it had but awakened at that instant. They all stood listening, for by this time the girl also had risen from her seat, and had made an indeterminate movement forward towards the centre of the room. And out of the boom and thunder of the storm there suddenly came a wild clatter of horses' feet, and a heavy gate was heard to fall back upon its fastening. An instant later there was a mad tugging at the front door bell, and an insaner clatter at the knocker. Jervase himself rushed to answer this sudden and unexpected summons, and opening the door unguardedly, was blown back into the hall, from the walls of which every hanging picture and every garment were swept by the incoming blast, like leaves. It sounded as if the house were coming down.

A drenched, bareheaded figure staggered into the hall, wind-driven, and would have fallen had not Jervase clutched at it. The newcomer and the master of the house held on to each other, and Jervase panted hoarsely:

'You? What's the matter?' 'The matter?' said the new arrival. 'The matter's ruin!'

Chapter II

The clatter of the tumbling objects in the hall brought out the General and Jack Jervase's son. The girl peered with a whiter face than ever from the parlour doorway, and a fourth auditor came upon the scene in the person of an elderly woman in black satin and old lace, who rushed into the hall with frightened eyes and upraised hands, in time to hear the question and the answer.

To make clear what the question and the answer meant to the four people who heard them, I must go back a step.

Jack Jervase ran away from home when the nineteenth century was in its teens. He had left behind him a harum-scarum reputation, and, save for his father and mother, but a solitary relative of his own name. When he came back, with coin in pouch, and the story of a life of strange adventure behind him, the old folks had been dead a dozen years, and the solitary cousin, whom he had always derided as a pious sneak, had so far prospered in the world's affairs that he had left the old-fashioned conventicle in which he had had his spiritual upbringing, and had become a pillar of the Established Church. The cousin had been christened Jacob and Noakes; but he had embroidered himself into James Knock Jervoyce; the Knocks being a family of some distinction in his neighbourhood, and the name Jervoyce having, to his fancy, a Norman-French sort of aspect which seemed to lift its bearer to a superior social height. James had many irons in the fire, and seemed to be prosperously busy at the commercial anvil all day long. Amongst the business enterprises he had in hand, there was but one which at any time had appeared to yield him no return for his labours. He had lent money on the strength of the security afforded by a brine pit in the neighbourhood of Droitwich; and his creditor having failed in the stipulated payments, James had foreclosed upon this property and had undertaken to work it for himself. He found this enterprise a failure, but since he could induce nobody to take it off his hands, he worked the property for what it was worth from time to time. There were seasons in which the pit was almost dry, and when it was impossible to work it at a profit. There were other seasons when the underground sources treated him more favourably. A more decided man than Mr. Knock Jervoyce would probably have decided to abandon the property altogether, and to let one loss stand for everything. There was a considerable cost incurred in the upkeep of machinery which was much oftener idle than engaged; and the occasional employment of the plant was, of course, on the average much more expensive than its constant use would have been. James was on the point, after two or three years of indecision, of relinquishing the working altogether, when Cousin John came home. There was a conference between the two, and following on that conference a very strange thing happened. The worthless mine became a property, and one of the best of its kind in England. Five men knew how this result was brought about, and three of them had been for a good many years in the enjoyment of a pension—one in Australia, one in Canada, and one in the United States. These pensions were paid by Cousins John and James, and paid by no means willingly. Not to boggle at this matter, the two cousins, at John's instigation, had contrived a simple villainy. Very near to the unproductive salt pit was a noble property of the same kind, and John's device had been to tap the wealthy neighbour's store by running a little adit from the worthless shaft into the rich one. It was not an unheard-of thing for the value of such properties to fluctuate. A rich mine would pay out, and a poor one at a distance would become suddenly enriched; and these changes were, no doubt rightly, in the common instance attributed to the capricious operations of Nature. If the owner of the tapped sources of the cousins' wealth suspected anything to begin with nobody ever knew. The only fact with which we need concern ourselves is that the fraud went on without exposure for many years, and that James and John alike grew fat on it.

A certain hulking ruffian, with an Australian digger's beard, had turned up of late to disturb the tranquillity of the partners. He had been asking what they regarded as an exorbitant price for his silence in respect to the construction of that adit which has just been mentioned, and had been fobbed off from time to time with five or ten pounds, as the case might be, and with promises of more. Young Polson Jervase had caught this person slinking about the house on the Beacon Hill in what looked to him like a suspicious fashion, and an interview between the two had resulted in a stand-up fight in which the blackmailer had got very much the worst of it. But as he rose from the last round, and spat out the fragments of one or two broken teeth, he said things which filled the honourable and manly spirit of young Jervase with a terror to which he hardly dared to give a name. The terror would have named itself loudly enough if he had dared but to let it; but next to being an honourable man himself, the young fellow wanted to believe that he came of honest people, and the rascal's threats and innuendoes had left him with a dreadful doubt upon his mind.

The combat had taken place at the very gate of the grey-stone house, and the old lady in the black satin and the costly yellow lace had flown out at the finish of it in time to hear the threats and innuendoes which had brought such trouble to her boy. It was a hundred to one that young Polson Jervase would have been less disturbed if his mother, hearing these things, had not fallen to trembling and weeping and wringing her hands; for he argued, naturally, that she would not have been so dreadfully upset if she had not feared at least that there was some ground for the words which had been spoken in her hearing.

General Boswell had his concern in the matter, also. He was an admirable soldier, but a wretched man of business; and his monetary affairs had never prospered until he had entrusted them to the hands of the cousins Jervase & Jervoyce. Little by little he had been drawn on until the greater part of his investments lay at their control.

And now for the pretty girl who is staring with so alarmed and white a visage on the tumult of the hall. This is General Boswell's daughter, sole child of a late marriage, and the apple of his eye. She has been wandering quite consciously towards an engagement with young Polson; and expects him, with excellent reason, to declare himself at almost any hour. She knows of her father's association with Jervase & Jervoyce, and, indeed, it has been a familiar thing to her ever since she came to be of an age to understand.

Thus the brief and terrible colloquy between the cousins translates itself variously for every listener.

To John Jervase it cries out of guilt detected.

To Polson Jervase it speaks of half-a-dozen things at once; it awakes with a crushing sense of certainty that late suspicion; it tells him of the ruin of the one man whom he most loves and honours in this narrow world—not his father, but the grey old father of his sweetheart; it tells him in an instant of a life of narrow means for the girl he loves; it hurls his own hopes in the mire, and makes the very thought of them a dishonour; it snatches from him the bright prospect of the career on which he has set his heart, the gate to which stood wide open but a moment earlier. And all this in the tick of a watch, in the space of time filled by one agonised beat of the heart.

For the girl, whatever it may mean hereafter, it means for the moment nothing more than a confused leaping of two thoughts in one. Her mind is conscious only of a mingled cry of 'Polson!' and of 'Father!'

So Guilt stares at Guilt, and Terror and Suspicion stare at both of them; and the roaring wind and lashing rain make exclamation dumb.

Jervase was the first to recover himself. He thrust his cousin on one side, and butted towards the open door; but he strove in vain to close it, until his son and the General lent their aid. The hall was sown with broken glass and fragments of picture frames, and here and there an engraving lay wet and crumpled, but not even the housewife regarded these things for the time being.

John Jervase turned from the final struggle with the door, and looked about him. His face had lost its ruddy tint. His eyes stared, his mouth twitched, and his lips were of the colour of lead. The swaggering jocundity of his manner had all gone. The very stature of the man seemed changed, and the square width of his shoulders was shrunk and rounded. He moistened his leaden lips three times with his tongue, and each time tried to speak in vain.

'Come in,' he said at last, in a harsh and rasping voice. And they all moved automatically into the parlour, he leading them.

They grouped there at the end of the centre table, and the instinct of the trembling housewife so far awoke within her that she closed the door, lest the servants and hangers-on about the house should hear what she knew was coming.

James Jervoyce, a mean-statured man, of meaner feature, with his hair plastered about his forehead by the rain, and the water dripping from his cape, stood as the centre of all eyes. His face was of the hue of grey paper, and he gasped for breath, and trembled.

'Pol,' said John Jervase, waving his right hand blindly, 'give me—give me the decanter and a tumbler.'

Both lay near at hand, and Jervase, having primed himself with a great gulp of neat brandy, spoke again.

'Now, James,' he asked, 'what's the matter? What do you mean by coming here to scare a peaceful house in this wild fashion?'

The accent was the accent of his youth, the broadest speech of the Castle Barfield region. James seemed incapable of answer, and his cousin, laying a hand anew upon the decanter, filled the glass almost to the brim, and held it out to him.

'Get a heart into you,' he said gruffly, 'and speak out!'

The timider of the guilty pair drank unwarily, not knowing what was offered to him, and fell into a fit of coughing. The rest awaited him in a tense expectation. At last he controlled himself, and spoke, sipping from time to time to moisten his dry lips.

'You know,' he said, glancing at the floor and at the faces round him alternately, 'you know that when old General Airey died, that young cub De Blacquaire came into the Droitwich property.'

'Well,' said John Jervase, 'we know that. Go on. What about it?'

'You know,' said James, 'that his property and ours neighboured each other. The young skunk has trumped up a charge against us of having tapped his brine, and having lived on the property of his estate for twenty years past.'

'Well,' said—John Jervase, 'that's a pretty cool piece of impudence, to be sure! But what is there to make a howl about?'

'He has got some suborned evidence from somewhere,' James answered, 'some scoundrels who pretend that they were employed by you and me to do the work.'

'Well,' said John once more, 'what is there in that to make a howl about? Is there no law in England—is there no way of making a fool and a knave smart for it, if they see fit to assail the reputation of two honest men like you and me, James? 'His voice began to take something of its old ring. 'I wonder at you—tearin' up like a madman at this time o' night, and in this weather, with a yam like that. Why, man, what's come to you? Missus,' he turned towards his wife, 'tell one of the wenches to get James a change, and when he's done that well sit down in quiet, and talk this matter over.'

'De Blacquaire!' he went on, as his wife left the room to obey his order. 'De Blacquaire, indeed! Who's De Blacquaire?

'It'll go pretty hard with you and me, James, if we can't put down a pound between us where he can put down twenty shillings. And libel's libel in this country, James, and them as chooses to talk it can be made to pay for it And any man as assaults the honest fame of Jack Jervase has got Jack Jervase to tackle, my lad. I've fowt the Queen's enemies, and I've fowt my own, and I'll stand fightin' till I die.'

'My dear Jervase,' said the General. 'My dear Mr. James! I need not tell you, I am sure, how entirely certain I am that a very grievous error has been made in this matter. But I can't understand—I really cannot understand—why an absurd charge of that sort should be at all disturbing to you.' He turned upon Mr. James with an air of mild remonstrance, and laid a friendly hand upon his shoulder. 'Really, really, really,' he said, 'I thought you had more courage.'

Mr. James was for the moment entirely deprived of that most useful quality. What with the chill which was coming upon him after a hasty and dangerous ride in that pelting rain and bitter wind through which he had travelled, and what with the perturbation of his spirit, he trembled like a shaken jelly, and his eyes were full of terror. John Jervase, obviously with the intent to make a diversion, turned upon him with a question.

'Didn't you come on horseback? 'he asked. His cousin stared at him with an idiotic want of apprehension of the question's meaning. 'Didn't you come on horseback?' Jervase asked more loudly than before.

'I—I suppose so,' stammered James.

'Suppose so! 'his cousin snarled at him, laying an unfriendly hand upon him and jolting him roughly to and fro. 'You came on a horse, didn't you? And if you didn't, how the devil did you get here?'

'Yes, yes, John,' the trembling rascal answered. 'I came on horseback, to be sure—of course I came on horseback. How else,' he asked feebly, 'could I have got here on a night like this?'

'Then where's the horse? 'Jervase demanded.

'I don't know,' said James. 'He has been here before, he knows his way to the stables. I—I heard him clattering off in that direction, I am almost sure.' He made a pitiable attempt to collect himself, and prattled on. 'Oh, yes, I am quite sure now—he clattered off towards the stables—I remember—he has been here before, and he would know his way. He's in the grounds in any case, for I know that the gate closed behind him.'

'Why didn't you stop for half a minute, anyhow? 'asked Jervase, who was glad of a chance to recover a seeming of composure for himself under the shelter of a pretended anger. 'Why didn't you give somebody the word in place of leaving a valuable beast like that wandering about in a tempest?

'I don't know,' James answered, as feebly as ever. 'I was in a hurry to get in.'

At this his cousin's temper broke altogether, or he was willing to relieve the tension of his own mind by allowing it to seem as if it did so.

'Of all the funking, skunking, silly cowardly devils——'

The General took him by the arm with a commanding grip.

'You forget, my good Jervase, you forget—my daughter is present, and she is not accustomed to have her ears assailed by that sort of language.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Jervase, suddenly cooling down. 'I beg ten thousand pardons—I beg Miss Irene's pardon most of all. I forgot myself, and I apologise.'

He bowed to the girl and fell to pacing up and down the room, casting glances of wrath at the messenger of ill news.

The General, fearing a new outburst, turned to the old lady with his courtliest air.

'We are all a little agitated for the moment by the strange tidings Mr. Jervoyce has brought us, and they involve some matters of business about which it will be better for us to hold a consultation between ourselves. Will you be so very kind as to take Irene elsewhere for a little while? 'His voice and manner were perfectly composed, and his face lit up with one of his rare sweet smiles as he added: 'I do not believe, my dear Mrs. Jervase, that I have ever, in the whole course of my three-score years, so far transgressed as to drive a lady from her own parlour, until now.'

'We will go,' said Mrs. Jervase, and the General stepping to the door threw it open, and stood for his hostess and his daughter to go by. Irene looked first at young Polson Jervase with a glance of fear and inquiry, and the young fellow responded to it only by a curt nod of the head, as much as to say 'Go! 'She looked into her father's face as she passed through the doorway, and the old man smiled down on her reassuringly.

'This will all be over in a few minutes, dear,' he said, 'and then I will send for you.' He closed the door gently, and tinned to face the trio in the room.

'I have apologised to the ladies,' said Jervase, 'already; but I owe an apology to you, General. I'm very sorry that my temper carried me back to my old seafaring manners; but,' with a savage look at his cousin, 'a coward's my loathing. I hate the sight of a coward worse than I hate the smell of a rotten egg.'

'Let us try to understand things,' said the General. 'Mr. James has brought his tidings in such a manner that they are evidently very serious to his mind. Had he brought them coolly I should have smiled at them. As it is, I think we must come to an explanation.'

'Certainly, General,' Jervase answered. 'Let us come to an explanation. Get on, James. Who's this suborned rascal you have been telling us about?'

James began to pull off his dripping overcoat, which by this time had left a little pond of water on the carpet round about him, and to fumble in the inner breast pocket of it. 'There are three of them,' he answered, and for a while he said no more. The General looked from him to John Jervase, and back again, and if his face were at all an index to his mind, he saw something which did not please him. His stooping shoulders straightened, and one hand went up to stroke the grey moustache. His brows straightened, his mild grey-blue eye grew stern, and his mouth was ruled into a straight line. The fact was that the General had had an almost lifelong experience in the great art of reading men, and though he had preserved a child-like simplicity in his dealings with the world, the fact was due a thousand times more to the charity of his heart than

to any want of penetration. He was one of those who suspect nothing until suspicion is actually shaken awake, and who then see with a piercing clearness signs which would escape many who pride themselves upon their shrewdness. And when James Jervoyce faltered out the words, 'There are three of them! 'John Jervase gave a start and a look which indicated an instant understanding.

'He knows those three,' said General Boswell to himself.

'De Blacquaire's lawyer gave me their names to-day,' said Jervoyce, who had by this time found what he had been fumbling for in the pocket of his overcoat. 'Here they are.'

He reached out a crumpled piece of paper to his cousin, who took it from him, and, after a single glance at it, started again, and, pale as he was already, grew still paler.

'He knows those three,' said the General, voicelessly, and without a spoken word reached forward and took the crumpled page from Jervase's unresisting hand.

Chapter III

There was what seemed like a long silence, though in reality it endured only for a few seconds, whilst General Boswell searched for his gold-rimmed reading glasses, and balanced them on the bridge of that high Quixote nose. By and by, he began to read with great slowness and deliberation, pausing at every other instant to direct a look of calm inspection from John to James, and back again. 'William Ford,' he read, Ninth Avenue, Freemans Town, Ontario.' He paused after the name of the man—he paused after the name of the street—he paused after the name of the town, and he paused again when he had completed the reading of the address. The last pause was longer than the others had been, and he resumed his reading like a man of ice. 'William Buckle, Lafayetteville, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. George Lightfoot, late of Melbourne, now in England.'

He laid the paper down upon the table with a firm hand, and with a slight shake of the head threw the glasses from their place. 'Do you know these men?' he asked, directing his inquiry to Jervoyce.

'No,' he said, 'I never heard of any one of 'em.' His shifty eye tried in vain to meet his questioner's, and he began to fumble nervously with other papers which he had drawn from his pocket in his search for the first.

'It needs no penetration to discover that this man is lying,' said the General to himself. He addressed his question to John Jervase, who made shift somehow to meet his look. 'Do you know these men?' he asked.

'No,' John answered, 'I never heard of one of them. It's a conspiracy,' he cried, suddenly, 'that's what it is! It's a conspiracy! Quit shaking, you wretched coward! Stand up and fight this infernal libel like a man. Ain't there two of us? If this wicked charge is brought against James Knock Jervoyce, ain't it brought as well against Jack Jervase, his cousin and his partner? Look at me! You don't see me shivering and shaking like a frightened rabbit with a weasel after him.'

'Ah! 'cried James, in a weak exasperation, 'it all very well for you. It might mean loss of money to you at the worst; but I'm the man they're going for.'

'Oh,' said John, 'you are, are you? And why's that?'

'Stubbs told me this afternoon,' said James, 'that he could smash me dead, but so far he has no particle of evidence against you.'

A light sprang into the burly scoundrel's eyes. He veiled it in an instant, but not before two of the quartette there present had read it. The boy turned away, groaning, and the General looked after him with a face from which all sternness disappeared for a moment.

'Poor lad! 'he said, within doors. 'Poor lad!'

'Now, look here,' said John Jervase, 'they haven't got any evidence agen you any more than they have agen me. The whole thing's a put-up job. If it was De Blacquaire's doing, he'd have gone for me rather than for you, because he always hated me, and I've put him down more than once or twice at Petty Sessions, and taught him to know his place. But De Blacquaire's an officer and a gentleman'—he made a burly bow towards the General—' and I don't suppose for a minute that he'd be guilty even of dreaming of such a piece of rascality as this. It's much more likely to be some pettifogging lawyer's game—some sneaking rogue that's got these fellow-rascals round him, with an idea of doing a little bit of blackmail. Stubbs is a decent fellow—for a lawyer. I don't think Stubbs would have a finger in that sort of pie, any more than his master. But Stubbs has been got at; that's how it'll turn out, you bet. Keep your pecker up, James,' he added, in a tone which the patron and the bully spoke at once. 'Well take care of you. Just you trust to old Jack Jervase—that's your game, my lad. He'll fight the battle for the pair of us.'

Between his pretence of having thought the matter out impartially, and his other pretence of encouraging his timid relative, he had talked himself back into something like his common aspect, and his common manner; and there was a little of the nautical swagger in the few steps he took towards the table, where he applied himself again to the decanter.

Just then a knock sounded at the door, and the voice of the domestic from the kitchen was heard saying that Mr. James's change of clothes was ready for him in the master's bedroom.

'You know your way, James,' said Jervase. 'You'd better get into dry toggery at once. The missus will have a bedroom ready for you in half an hour. Meanwhile, you go and change; and when you come back we'll forget this nonsense over a bowl of punch. We've both had a drenching this wild night, and we shall neither of us be the worse for a good Captain's nip.'

James stole furtively away, making himself as small as possible, and the General's eye followed him to the door.

'Jervase,' said the General, with a suspicion of satire in his voice, 'your cousin seems to take this ridiculous matter rather seriously.'

'I don't know why he should, sir,' Jervase answered. 'He's had an honest reputation all his life. Now what is there in this,' he went on, taking up the scrap of writing the General had laid upon the table, 'what is there in this to frighten anybody? Who's William Ford, of Ontario, for instance? William Buckle, U.S.A.—who's he? And what's this other fellow's name—George Lightfoot, late of Melbourne, now in England——'

'Why!' cried Polson, suddenly, 'that's the very blackguard I——'

He paused suddenly, and turned with a gesture of dismay. He had given himself no time to calculate the significance of the words he had used, and they were no sooner spoken than he knew intuitively that he had at least in part betrayed his father. A lad of a more honest impulse and conduct could not have

been found in all England; but even if his father were a rogue—and the belief that he was nothing short of that had already shocked him to the heart—it was not a son's business to betray him. It was the son's concern to suffer his own share of shame, if shame should come, and to preserve a front of unshaken confidence. Polson was frozen at his own indiscretion.

'That is the blackguard,' said the General, with a certain silky quiet which had in his time grown to be very terrible to people who had come to understand its meaning, 'that is the blackguard, Polson? Be good enough to enlighten us a little further. You have some acquaintance with Lightfoot, late of Melbourne, now in England, though your father has no knowledge of him.'

'What do you know about any fellow of that name?' Jervase asked wrathfully. 'What bee have you got in your bonnet?'

'Let us see the bee, Polson, let us see the bee.'

'Why, sir,' said Polson, turning with outspread hands of appeal, 'it comes to nothing. It happened a week or two ago that I found a hulking fellow with a digger's beard and a red shirt—one of those chaps we've seen lately back from Ballarat and Geelong—skulking about outside the gate. I asked him what he wanted, and he was drunk and abusive, and—well, I had to give him a hiding.'

'Yes,' said the General, 'you had to give him a hiding. Why?'

'I've told you, sir,' Polson stammered. 'The fellow was drunk, and—when I ordered him away, he got so beastly cheeky that I had to go for him.'

'Before this happened,' said the General, somewhat drawling on the words, 'you exchanged cards and confidences?' Polson stretched out his hands again in appeal, and the General, looking at him with a countenance impassive as the Sphinx, felt a pang of pity in his heart, for the lad was a good lad, and the old warrior knew it, and he had been near to loving him, this past half-dozen years. And the boy was not merely pale with the suffering of his mind, but his very eyes had lost their colour, as a man's eyes do when he has received a shot in battle. The General knew that look, and had seen it in the eyes of dying comrades. It touched him nearly, but he gave no sign. 'Why did the man tell you his name, and that he came from Melbourne?'

'He said,' Polson returned, desperately, 'that he wanted to see Mr. Jervase, and that he meant to see him. He said my father would wish anybody in hell who tried to hide him. That's all, sir.'

'And you, Jervase,' said the General, 'never heard of this man?'

'Never in my life,' Jervase answered bluntly. 'The world's gone mad, I fancy. Everybody's making a fuss about a thing that'll be forgotten in a week's time. Why didn't you,' he continued, turning sternly upon Polson, 'why didn't you tell me about this?'

'A man can't make a shindy about it every time he has a turn-up with a tramp,' Polson answered. 'I didn't think it worth while to talk about it.'

'Polson,' said the General, 'I've known you since you were no higher than my knee, and I've never had a shadow of a reason to doubt your word. I don't want you to turn informer and I shan't ask you another question. You had better leave your father and myself to talk this out together.'

'No, sir,' said Polson, 'there's trouble in the house, and I'm going to stay here, unless I get my father's orders to go away.'

Now John Jervase was undoubtedly a good deal of a rogue, but no man is all of a piece, and he had one or two good characteristics. Amongst them was a true and deep affection for his only son, and if at the beginning of his career he

had had any such hope of honour and credit as his son had bidden fair to bring him as he neared the close of it, he would have made a better man. Polson's quietly expressed resolve pinched him a little inwardly, and he gave the boy a glance of gratitude.

'I don't say go, lad—I say stay. I've honoured and respected General Boswell since we first came to be neighbours, twenty years ago; and now I should have a very poor eye indeed if I couldn't see that he's on the way to lose his respect for me, if events don't change his mind. But if there's anything to be browt against Jack Jervase, let Jack Jervase's lad stand by and hear it, and see how his father takes the ackisation.'

'Very well, Jervase,' said the General. 'We will have it so. I have an interest in this affair, and I must tell you plainly that your manner is so very strange that I feel scarcely comfortable under it. You are a business man, and you must not object to my using business terms. Very nearly the whole of my fortune is invested in your hands. If your credit is seriously shaken, and, above all, if it is shaken by such a charge as is now being brought against the firm, my daughter and I are on the verge of ruin. It wouldn't greatly matter about an old campaigner like myself, for I am not yet so far broken that I can't still run in harness. But I have my little girl to think of, and for her sake I am going to do my duty, as a business man, however unpleasant it may be to me to do it.'

'The scandal can't touch you, sir.' The General smiled sternly.

'It can't touch me in one way, but it may break my fortune. Now answer me this one question. What is the worth of the brine which has been pumped up from our workings since the firm of Jervase & Jervoyce began to prosper in that enterprise?'

'I can tell you that, sir, roughly, in the turn of a hand. First and last, two hundred thousand pounds. That may be a thousand wrong on one side or the other—it may even be five thousand wrong on the one side or the other—but I'll guarantee that it's not more than that.'

'So that if this claim, whether by fair means or by foul, could be established, the firm could be made responsible in a Civil Court for that sum.'

'Exactly, sir. The case being established, the firm would be responsible for every penny.'

'And for how large a share,' the General asked, 'am I personally responsible?'

'Each member of the firm,' Jervase answered, 'is responsible in his own person for the whole amount. There's no limitation of liability.'

The conversation was marked by less excitement than it had been on the one side, and by a more business-like manner on the other.

'You needn't fear, sir,' said Jervase. 'James and I are good to meet the whole of the obligations, and, apart from that, these fellows who are being brought up against us are the very scum of the earth. I don't suppose that any Court of Law would listen to them.'

'No?' asked the General, with sudden keenness. 'And why are they the very scum of the earth? You don't know the men?'

Jervase was visibly disconcerted. He stammered as he answered:

'Why, what else but the scum of the earth can they be, to have trumped up a lying case like this?'

''Mph!' said the General. 'Be that as it may, as a partner in this concern, I may conceivably be made liable for two hundred thousand pounds?'

'That's the law, sir.'

'That being so, I must take this business into my own hands. Until I am legally advised to a contrary action I shall take no step without informing you of it. But the thing is too serious to be neglected, and I have little liking for your way of meeting it, Jervase, though I like your cousin's less.'

After this declaration, there was silence for the space of a full minute, and then James came back, his slight figure absurdly costumed in his cousin's clothes, which were too long for him in the arm, too short in the leg, and too full everywhere.

'Your cousin and I, Mr. Jervoyce,' said the General, 'have arrived at a partial understanding, and I must make the position clear as between you and myself. When did you first hear of this accusation?'

'To-day,' said James. 'Never a word until to-day.'

'When did you hear of this man Lightfoot, late of Melbourne, and now in England?' James cast a piteously beseeching eye towards Jervase, and the General held out a hand towards the latter as if to interdict the speaking of a word. He repeated his question. 'When did you first hear of the man Lightfoot, late of Melbourne? Now, come, sir,' the General cried, in a voice of command, 'you are here to answer that question on your own responsibility. You don't choose to answer? Now, the story is that these men have been blackmailing you. Assuming that story to be true, they have been paid, and it is evident that there must be some means of discovering the channel through which payments have been made. Are you prepared to submit to an examination of your books?'

'I am,' said John Jervase, 'willingly, at any moment.'

'You!' cried James.

'And not you?' said the General. 'Well, that simplifies matters.'

The wretched James had all but surrendered himself to fate a quarter of an hour before, and now, seeing that he had betrayed himself, he cast the case up altogether, and, throwing both arms upon the table, fell on his knees beside it, dropped his face upon his hands, and began to whimper.

'Wait a bit, sir,' cried John Jervase. 'Now just wait one minute and I'll put the case before you. Here are the facts. I should be obliged if you would take a seat, sir, and allow me to do the same.' He moved a chair towards the table with great deliberation, sat down leisurely, reached out for the decanter, filled his glass, emptied it and set it down—all with a certain look of weighty purpose. 'I'm going to make a clean breast of it, sir. I should leave James to do it if he was capable of doing anything but whimper like a kicked charity boy. It's a bit to my discredit to speak the plain truth, because I've got to admit that I have certainly made an effort to deceive you. That isn't creditable, and it goes again the grain to admit it. I said I didn't know this fellow Lightfoot. That was a lie. I know him well. I told the lie to shelter James.'

James lifted a beslobbered face, stared at the speaker for a single instant, and then allowed his head to fall upon his hands again.

'I did it to shelter James,' Jervase repeated, and as he spoke he dealt his cousin a sharp kick beneath the table, as if to bespeak that worthy gentleman's particular attention. 'James, to tell the truth about him, since it must be told, has always had two sides to him. He was a solid chapel-goer till he was thirty, and he was a deacon or an elder, or something of that sort; but he always had some little game on on the sly, and he always succeeded in keeping his Piccadillies pretty quiet. When he began to make money, he went over to the Church and took the plate round at collecting time, and got to be a sidesman,

and a trustee, and I don't know what all. He never married, but he's never been without a quiet little home of his own, with a lady at the head of the table—have ye, James?'

James groaned, but made no verbal answer.

'Now this loafer of a Lightfoot had a sister, and in respect of her, there's no doubt about it that something discreditable might have been laid to James. For once in his life, he acted like a fool, and he wrote the girl a pile of letters. This fellow Lightfoot got hold of 'em, and he's made James pay through the nose ever since. Now the girl's dead, and the thing's so old, James has refused to keep this lazy beggar in his idleness and his dissipations any longer. The fellow's tried to frighten him with the letters, and, failing in that, he's worked up this lie against the firm, has got two more blackguards to swear to it, seemingly, and there's the whole truth about the matter. I suppose they've got up some sort of a case, or Stubbs wouldn't be looking at it. But we shall blow it all to smithereens when we get them in the witness box. Now, that's the whole of the matter. Speak for yourself, James—make a clean breast of it. Isn't that the truth? I haven't exaggerated your iniquities, and you may just as well own up to 'em.'

He kicked his cousin a second time again by way of warning, and James looked up for a second time, and being fortified by the expression of his cousin's face, he spoke.

'It's horribly humiliating to have those things said,' he gasped. 'But that is the truth about the whole transaction, General. God forgive me—it's many years ago. But that's the miserable truth.'

'I think,' said the General, rising from the seat he had taken at his host's invitation, 'that it is time for me to go home.'

'You can't do that, sir,' cried Polson. 'It's impossible. The weather is worse than ever. Think of Irene going out in such a storm as this! You were weatherbound here hours ago, and listen to it now. No carriage could live on the hillside to-night.'

'That is probably true,' said the General with great dryness. 'And since I am forced to intrude myself upon your hospitalities, I will ask you, Polson, to be good enough to show me to my room.'

He walked from the apartment without further speech, Polson following him; and when the sound of footsteps in the passage had died, John Jervase rose and closed the door.

'Well, James,' he said with a grating laugh, 'that cock didn't fight anyhow.'

Chapter IV

The oil-lamp which hung in the hall was flickering uncertainly as Polson and the General walked towards the foot of the staircase, leaving the passage in darkness for a second or two at a time, and then flaring up with an unwonted brilliance. The young man took a bedroom candle from a table at the stairfoot, lit it, and motioned the General to precede him. He, altogether military in gait, with his shoulders squared to the utmost, marched upstairs as if he were heading an assault by escalade. Polson followed, drooping.

'This is your room, sir,' the young man said when they came to the end of the corridor on which they had entered. He threw open the door, and revealed a cheerful scene. Tall wax candles flamed here and there, a great fire burned with a steady glow on the hearth, and the rich dark maroon curtains and hangings of the room gave it a secluded, sheltered, and homely look which under other circumstances would have been wholly comfortable by contrast with the elemental war outside. The General walked into the apartment bolt upright, and Polson stood with the door handle in his grasp, waiting to catch his eye for a single instant that he might say good-night. The elder man wheeled suddenly.

'Come in!' he said. 'Come in and close the door.' Polson obeyed, wondering what was about to happen. 'I suspect,' Boswell began, 'that I shall have cause to be sorry for myself and for somebody much dearer to me than myself before this business is over. But I am sorry for you, in the meantime, my lad, and I want to tell you that you will have to revise your ideas a little.'

'As to what, sir?' asked Polson.

'Unless I am very much mistaken,' the elder went on, 'the business which has been sprung upon us to-night will take some time to settle, and will make more noise in the world than either you or I will care to hear. You can't go into the army with this hanging over you.'

'I had made up my mind about that already,' said the youngster.

'Well,' the General returned, 'it's a bitter pill for you to swallow, and, as I have said, I am sorry for you. It will not be easy for you to be on terms of intimate friendship with a man who is compelled to fight your father tooth and nail, and there is nothing else for it at this moment but for you and me to say good-bye. Things may right themselves, but I see no use in mincing matters, and I tell you the honest truth when I say that I don't believe it, and that for the moment I don't even hope for it. There are some men,' he added, 'who can't afford to treat themselves to violent emotions, and Mr. James Knock Jervoyce is one of them. I hope your father may be able to clear himself of all complicity; but that man's a rascal whatever happens.'

'Good-bye, sir,' said Polson.

'Good-bye,' the General answered. He held out his hand, but Polson did not see that friendly gesture, and he walked from the room quite broken, his chin fallen upon his breast, and his broad shoulders rounded with despondency. He went straight to his own room, and there also, after the generous fashion of the countryside, a cheerful fire was burning. It had fallen to a settled ruby glow, and though it filled the room with warmth, it afforded but little light. Polson sat down in the shadow, and stared at the heart of the fire. Outside, the wind howled and wailed, as if in alternate wild triumph and wild mourning; and the rain beat upon the window panes in driving sheets. But he heard no sound and was unconscious of his immediate surroundings. Only two hours ago he had been sitting in sweet nearness to the girl he loved; and he had been transcendently and tumultuously happy. How happy he had not known until the blow came which had dashed the structure of his life to pieces. He had always longed for a career in the army, and the rumours of war which had flown so thickly for the past year and a half had served naturally to set a keener edge to his desire. A commission had not seemed a very likely thing to hope for at one time, for in the years before the Crimean War the sons of the British bourgeoisie were not very welcome in the British army. But as his father had climbed hand-over-hand to wealth, and as one local honour after another had

fallen upon him, the prospect grew clearer. Now, John Jervase for three years had held the Commission of the Peace, and had taken a part in politics which had made him something of a figure in the district. He was above all the poor man's friend, and had become a great authority on working-man economics. He had been foremost in the local movement for the establishment of the Penny Bank, and had printed a pamphlet which somebody else had written to his order, which had brought him into a favourable prominence. The commission for which Polson yearned grew nearer and nearer in prospect, and at last he had almost placed his hand upon it. Now it was gone—gone, in all probability, beyond retrieval, and that alone would have been enough for an average grief. Yet it was barely a tithe of the sudden burden he had to bear. He had lost Irene, and any man who has ever been seriously in love knows what that may mean to the heart of three-and-twenty. And even this was not all, for he had lost his father—lost irrevocably the bluff, outspoken, honourable man of whom, in spite of the occasionally disturbing vulgarities of his manner, he had all his life been proud. Confusedly and slowly the sense of all these losses surged upon him. Now one was uppermost in his mind, and now another; but they were always linked together in one leaden feeling of heavy misery. He sat motionless for a full half-hour, staring at the fire. At last a single dry sob, which shook him from head to foot, escaped him. He rose with a bulldog shake of the head, threw back his shoulders, and walked resolutely but slowly down the staircase. He would have it out then and there, he declared to himself, and would come to an understanding with his father. He would actually know the truth without disguise, and, having learned it, would decide upon the conduct of his future life. There was no thought of desertion in his mind, but there was a great longing to be at action, to be striving with something for a settled purpose; and no settled purpose was possible for him until he and his father could stand heart to heart and face to face, with all pretence between them broken down.

The hall lamp had flickered out, as it had threatened to do, and he groped his way in darkness, though at another moment he would have walked with the sure foot of custom blindfold about the house. Somehow, the whole tide of his purpose seemed suddenly to ebb. He became conscious of the night, and stood in the dark to listen to its wild voices. There were other voices in the air, for he could hear his father speaking in a deep, loud hum, and Jervoyce answering from time to time in a treble like that of an hysteric woman. He felt his way to a hall chair which had its place close to the parlour door, and sat down there to wait until he should find his father alone. He could hear no words from where he sat, but through all the plangent noises of the storm he could discern anger and command in his father's voice, and a querulous appeal which had a note of rage in it in the voice of his father's companion. He paid but little heed, for his heart was growing numbed, and no distinct thought any longer found a place in his mind. Sitting there in the dark and the cold, he grew barely conscious of his own pain. This is Nature's mercy. When the wound is beyond bearing she draws away the sufferer's consciousness, and an extremity of agony brings its own relief, if only for a little while. A dull ache of respite follows the keener agonies alike of bodily and of mental pain. So he sat there, dulled and numb and empty, and for the moment he cared for nothing.

A gleam of light and the sound of a coming footstep awoke him to a knowledge of his surroundings. He did not wish to be found there sitting miserably in the dark, and he arose, and stood uncertain in what direction to

move. The light grew clearer and nearer, and as it turned the corner he saw that it was carried by Irene. He forgot his impulse towards flight, and stood rooted, staring as if he beheld a vision. The little figure came forward with uncertain footsteps, one hand holding the candlestick overhead and the other groping for the wall. The feet trod with a. harsh sound on one or two fragments of broken glass which had escaped the housemaid's broom. A yearning ache filled him as the girl came nearer, for he saw that her eyes were blind with tears. There was no distortion of the features, save that the small mouth quivered; and the shining drops brimmed over heavily and silently. Not a sigh escaped her, and she came on like a figure in a dream. He moved forward involuntarily, and her name sprang to his lips.

'Irene!'

She paused and pressed her disengaged hand upon her eyes to clear them of that bitter rain. Then she looked up at him in silence, and the big tears began to well over, shining like diamonds as they fell to the bosom of her dress. It was to be his last sight of her in his own home. He knew it, and his own heart was like cold iron in his breast. She made a picture never to be forgotten; a picture to be recalled on stormy nights at sea; in many a lonely hour of contemplation on alien shores; in many hours of sickness and delirium, in summer heats among the vineyards on the banks of Alma, in winter frosts in the trenches of Sevastopol; in convalescent wanderings amid the dumb reminders of English dead at Scutari; and later, too, in happy hours when the storms of youth were over, and manhood's heart had found safe anchorage, and the dear head was touched with silver.

She stood there weeping, and he had no power to comfort her—no right to comfort her.

'Good-bye, Irene.' He had the right at least to say that to the sweetheart of his boyhood, and the chosen idol of his young manhood's heart. 'I have seen your father, dear, and whatever there might have been, it's all over. Good-bye, and—God bless you, always. Always. Always.'

'I have seen him, too,' she answered, and though the tears rained down as fast as ever, there was no break in the sweet quiet voice. 'Good-bye. God bless you.'

This was all their farewell, save that when she turned away with that uncertain groping of the hand he took it in his own and guided it to the rail of the staircase. He watched her as she slowly mounted the stairs, with the light of the candle falling on her hair, and turning its brown masses to dark gold. All her figure was in shadow, and the dim gold head seemed to float upward until it vanished at the turning of a corner, and the feint light on the wall grew fainter. Then he heard the soft opening of a door, and before it closed again, one sob reached his ears, and stabbed the heart that had laid within him like cold iron; and he knew that all her self-control had broken down. The door closed swiftly, shutting out the last ray of light reflected from the wall, and he found his way back to his chair, and sat there doggedly fighting with himself, and praying for Heaven's mercy on her, until his eyes tingled as if they had been pricked by a needle. Whether he would have it so or no, the tears came, and as he hid his face in his hands, they dripped between his fingers to the floor. He was but three-and-twenty, and the first passion of the pain of life was upon him.

The door at his side was opened stealthily, and his father spoke almost at his ear, in a harsh whisper.

'Hillo! The hall's dark. They've all gone to bed, I suppose. Now don't let's have any more chatter. Spain's the land for you, my lad. You'll start first thing tomorrow. You lie low, and leave me to work things for the pair of us if I can. If I see that the game's going against us I shall follow. Good God, what's that?'

'I am here, father,' said Polson, rising. 'I have been waiting to speak to you.' Jervase started violently at his unexpected voice, and half recoiled into the room behind him.

'You're here?' he said, advancing with clenched hands. 'What are you doing here? Eavesdropping?'

'No, sir,' said Polson more sternly than he had ever spoken in his life till then. 'That isn't my line of country, and you know it. I want to speak to you.'

'Go to your room,' said his father, hissing from between clenched teeth. 'Go to your room, sir, and be damned to you.'

'I have meant to speak to you,' Polson answered, 'since I had time to think this night's work over, and after what I heard just now, I mean it more than ever.'

He entered the room and his father gave way before him. He had forgotten the evident traces of his recent tears, and stood with his eyelashes still glistening and his cheeks wet and scalded. But his brows were drawn level and his jaw was thrust out beneath the tightened lips in a way which brought out the family likeness with amazing force.

'Well,' said his father. 'Say your say, and go.'

'I shall say my say,' the younger man responded. 'Spain is not the place. Castle Barfield is the place. The Beacon Hill is the place. This house is the place.'

'So you have been eavesdropping?'

'You know I haven't,' Polson answered in cold disdain. 'But I'm not going to follow that red herring. I say Spain's not the place—unless——'

He choked and stammered and could go no further.

'Unless what?'

'Unless—oh, my God! how can I say it? Unless my father and his cousin are a brace of rascals.'

'That's pretty language from an only son.'

'Yes. It's pretty language. Give me a chance to take it back, and change it.'

'Sit down,' said Jervase, pointing to a chair. His son obeyed him, and he took a seat at the opposite side of the table, leaning both his arms forward ponderously. 'Now, you and me have got to have this out, I see.'

'Yes,' the young man answered, repressing a sick shudder. 'We must have it out, father.'

'Very well; I suppose you believe the yarn these chaps have pitched to Stubbs?'

'What am I to believe?'

'Suppose it's true, what do you think is going to happen?'

'Shame and ruin to us all,' said Polson.

'As for shame—maybe yes—most likely no. As for ruin—that's as I please.'

'Oh?'

'That's as I please, I tell you. If this here idiot hadn't come bursting in and yelping out his story as he did, we could have managed some sort of a

compromise quite easy. As it is, we've got our own partner again us. You can guess what sort of a chance that'd give us in a court of justice. Now you remember, Polson. This ain't a civil perceeding. The minute they get them chaps over from Canada and the States it's a criminal prosecution. D'ye want to see your own father in the dock? I don't, and so I tell you. He isn't going to stand there—you may bet your life to that, and say I told you. If I can get this braying jackass, this leaking sieve, this trembling, yowking lady's lapdog out o' the way I can face things.'

'You can say what you like about me, John,' said Mr. Jervoyce.

'Thank you for nothing,' John answered. 'That's my privilege without your leave or with it.'

'It's all true, is it?' asked Polson, drearily.

'Yes. It's all true. But look here, Polson, when this fool's out o' the way we can make a fight for credit. It's him as deserves to suffer, and it's him as has got to suffer to begin with.'

'Me!' cried James. 'Me that deserves to suffer? Who was it put the thing into my mind? Who was it that came time and time and time again to whisper into my ear, and tell me where I could find the men—and—and—and everything? Why curse you——!'

'Look here,' said John Jervase. 'You're a sidesman and a trustee, and the Lord alone knows what all. Be decent in your language.'

'You made me your catspaw. You've left nothing to be traced to you if you could help it. You've thrust me into the mire so that you could walk over dry-shod.'

'You've had your share of the spoil, haven't you, you lean hypocrite?' asked Jervase. 'If you'll only do as I bid you now I'll pull you through.'

He had turned to address his cousin, and now he showed him a disdainful back, and came face to face with his son again.

'What on earth are you doing there?' he asked, after a minute's watching.

For Polson was divesting himself of his heavy gold watch and chain, and rolling out gold and silver from his pockets, and pulling one or two handsome rings from his fingers, and laying them all upon the tablecloth before him with an extraordinary stolidity of manner.

'What are you doing?' his father asked again.

'I've said good-bye to one or two things to-night,' said Polson. 'I've got no right to a farthing's worth of all that. I've got no right to anything. It seems I've lived on stolen money all my life and gone flaunting about in stolen feathers. Well, I didn't know it. Perhaps I ought to feel kinder towards you than I do, but I can't help it.'

'Why—why——' Jervase almost babbled. 'What's it mean?'

'It's one more good-bye. That's all.'

'You're not—you're not a-going to leave me, Polly? You're not a-going to throw your father over?'

'I thought my father was an honest man. I thought I had a right to go into the world amongst gentlemen and hold up my head amongst them, and make a career amongst them. That was a mistake, you see. I've been mistaken all along, and now I've found it out. Good-bye, father. Goodbye, James.'

'No, no, Polly. You mustn't go. I can't let you go.'

'Father,' the young man answered, sternly and sorrowfully, 'I am going. If I tried to swallow another mouthful in this house it would choke me. If I tried to

sleep here another night I might as well lie down on fire. If I can't eat meat I have a right to, I'll go without. If I can't lie down under an honest roof, I can find the lee-side of a hedge.'

'I've been a kind father to you, Polly, my lad; I've let you want for nothing.'

'You've let me want for an honest name. That's all. Good-bye.'

'But, Polly—Polly—my own lad, my only lad—you're all I've got to live for. What are you going to do?'

'I shall take the Queen's shilling, and try my luck in the Crimea.'

And before his father could answer him he was gone.

Chapter V

Polson was gone, so far, only to his own room, but so swiftly that it was impossible to intercept him, and the snick of the bolt in the lock arrested his father before he had set a single foot upon the stair.

Grim and pale, Polson lit his candles and began to range about the apartment, drawing out from one recess a pair of heavy walking boots, and from another a well-worn suit of velveteens which had seen him through a year or two of sport in the spinny and at the river side. He cast off the clothes he wore, hastily assumed these stouter garments, and having encased his legs in a pair of strong leather leggings, he opened his bedroom door, blew out his candle, and went swiftly down the stairs into the hall. There the wreckage-of an hour or two ago was all piled together in one corner, but groping amongst it in the darkness with both hands, he found a long waterproof overcoat, and after more search a sealskin shooting cap; appropriating both of these he strode to the rear of the house, opened the door by which his father had entered on that night of evil omen, and walked out into the roaring darkness.

He was on the sheltered side of the building and did not as yet feel the force of the wind. For half a minute he stood with his heart in his throat, and his hand upon the hasp of the door, straining his ears to listen. He heard nothing but the insane noises of the night. Suddenly, he drew the door towards him violently, and it closed with a slam and a snap. He was outside, and the thing he had purposed was accomplished. He had said good-bye to the house in which he had learned to walk and talk—the house which had been his home for the whole of his life, except for a year or two of earliest infancy, and the sound of the closing door seemed as if it cut his life in two.

He walked rapidly until he reached the ridge before he encountered the full violence of the storm, for the wind had shifted within the last hour or two. Then, stalwart as he was, it caught and whirled him and sent him running willy-nilly for a hundred yards or more. But there was not a nail in his boots which was not familiar with every acre of that country-side for a mile or two, and he found the path with ease and certainty, and ploughed along it as surely as if it had been broad daylight, though the night was black as a wolf's mouth. The bitter wind and driving rain were welcome to his hot eyes and scalded face, and he walked with a swift resolution until he had reached the spot from which in daylight the last view of the house would have been possible. There he turned, the waterproof coat whipping about his ankles like a torn sail, and the rain pattering its own music on his broad shoulders. Dimly, very dimly, he

could see—or perhaps he only thought he saw—the chimneys of the old home rising against a little clearing in the distant lift of the sky.

So very brief a while ago he had been happy there. Only an hour or two since he was meditating, between the moves of the game, on the very words he meant to use in telling Irene that he loved her. Only an hour or two since every thought was full of hope and ambition, since the path of honour stood wide open with a vague bright figure beckoning in its far distance.

A frost in harvest time will ripen grain, and a great grief will give a sudden maturity to character. It was a boy who dreamed the happy dreams of that evening; it was a man who turned his back upon the old homestead, and set out upon his journey through the world.

e had a seven miles' walk before him, and a black unsheltered night at the end of it; but he walked as swiftly and as resolutely as if a goal of comfort had awaited him. When once the hillside was cleared and he had reached level ground, progress was less difficult, and after the tremendous tempest of the day the wind gave signs of having blown itself out. There were pausings and relentings in it, and there were clear spaces in the sky out of which the stars began to shine keen and clear. The storm was over by the time when, after two hours of brisk walking, he had reached his journey's end, and found himself before the long bleak wall of the cavalry barracks of the great Midland town. He had a long spell of waiting before him, and seating himself on a hewn stone at the side of the barrack gate he filled and lit his pipe, and prepared himself for a game of patience. Once or twice in the course of the long night a policeman passed him, turned his bull's-eye lantern upon his face, and went by without questioning, and these events made the only break in the long monotony of the hours. He had at last fallen either into a stupor or a doze, when suddenly the notes of a bugle sounding the *reveille* startled him to his feet, with its urgent call of

Wake! Wake! Wake!
And wake in a hurry—a hurry—a hurry—a hurry,
And Wake! Wake! Wake!

There began to be a faint stir about the place, like the humming in a hive the inmates of which have been disturbed, and a little while later the bugle rang out again, in notes that were destined to become familiar to his ears.

All you that are able
Come down to the stable,
And water your horses and give 'em some corn.
And if you don't do it
The Colonel shall know it,
And you shall be punished the very next morn.

Soon afterwards the gates were opened, and a man in uniform appeared with a carbine tucked beneath his arm and began to pace up and down, just within the great bare barrack square. Polson marched up to him.

'Are you recruiting here?' he asked.

'We are so,' the man answered. 'Do you want to join?'

Polson nodded.

'Better see the Sergeant in the guardroom,' the sentry told him. 'Go through that door and you will find him there.'

People who read their Dickens, as all men who are privileged to speak the English language ought to do, will remember a striking little passage in 'Oliver Twist,' in which the author moralises upon the first dressing of a new-born pauper baby. Until the faded yellow garments which have done service for many predecessors are wrapped about it, the baby might be anybody's child—a Duke's, or a ploughman's. But the livery of its unfortunate estate marks and stamps it at once and gives it the social caste and cachet it is doomed to wear. But it is not so when time has developed character, and a change of garb does not work an actual transformation in the grown man. Polson had purposely chosen the shabbiest outfit he could find in his whole kit; but he was recognisably a gentleman at a glance, and as he strode into the guard-room the Sergeant in charge, who was sitting on the edge of a sloping wooden bedstead, stood up and saluted him, a fact for which the recruit had to pay later on.

'You want recruits here?' said Polson, and the Sergeant, finding that he had been betrayed into a sign of respect for one who was willing to become his own inferior, answered him with a scowling ill-temper.

'Yes!' he snapped. 'Wait there till the orderly room is opened.'

The young man was too full of his own concerns to take offence at a tone. He sat down quietly and waited. Uniformed men came and went, and nobody took heed of him until some two hours had gone by, when the Sergeant awoke him from his reverie.

'Come this way.'

He followed the Sergeant across the square, and through an open doorway on the far side of it. The Sergeant turned on him. 'Take your cap off, and walk into that room.' Polson obeyed again, and found himself in the presence of a young officer who was bending over a sheaf of papers on a rough table, pen in hand.

'Man wishes to join, sir,' said the Sergeant.

The officer looked up and rose to his feet with an exclamation.

'Good God, Jervase! What are you doing here?'

'I've come to take the Queen's shilling, Volnay,' Polson answered.

'Why, what's become of the commission?' the other asked. 'Go outside, Sergeant. I want to have some talk in private with this gentleman.'

Now, chance had played a queer trick here, for it had led the intending recruit straight to his oldest and closest chum, his old schoolfellow, and old Oxford comrade. It had not occurred to him to think what regiment was quartered in Birmingham at that time, and he had walked straight towards his purpose without a thought of the possibility of such an encounter as this.

'You ain't serious, old fellow, are you?' asked Captain Volnay.

'Yes,' said Polson, 'I'm quite serious.'

'Sit down,' said Volnay. 'Of course you'll tell me just as much and just as little as you want to. But before you take a step that you can't retreat from, you'd better think things over.'

'No,' said Polson, 'I've done all the thinking I have need for, and I've made up my mind. You'll take me, of course?'

'Look here,' said Volnay, 'you won't like it, and I take the liberty to tell you so. It's an infernally disagreeable life—it's a beast of a life for a gentleman to live. It's all very well, of course, if you're amongst your own set; but a gentleman ranker is certain to have a hell of a time. He has all the non-coms on to him out

of jealousy; and he's bullied and browbeaten beyond endurance. As for the mere rough side of the living, nobody minds that. But if you do what you intend, you'll find before the week's over that you've stepped into a whole tubful of scalding hot water, and you'll wish yourself well out of it again.'

'That's all right, old chap,' said Polson. 'I shan't be the first to try it, and I dare say I shall pull through as well as another.'

'Now, here's a sample,' said Volnay with a laugh to take the edge from his words. 'Here's a sample of the sort of thing you're walking into. It'll be a piece of rank impertinence on your part to call me "old chap" in half an hour's time, and you mustn't do it. When you catch sight of me, it'll be your business to stand up as stiff as a ramrod and salute me; and you'll have to say "sir" when you talk to me. And you won't like that. And I shan't like it. And look here, old chap, you think twice about it.'

'I've told you already,' Polson answered, 'I've done all my thinking.'

'Well,' said Volnay, 'wilful must if wilful will. You haven't been getting into any sort of mischief, have you?'

'No,' said Polson. 'I've done nothing that I have a right to be ashamed of.'

'Had a row with the old man?'

'Yes.'

'Go home and make it up again, Jervase. A private soldier's life is a dog's life for a man of your breeding, and you'll find it so.'

'That's as may be,' Polson answered. 'But I've quite made up my mind, and all the talking in the world will make no difference.'

Within reach of his hand there lay upon the table a loose bunch of ribbons, red, white, and blue, such as recruiting sergeants were wont to pin in the hats of their recruits. And Polson, toying with this, found that the bunch was held together at one end by a pin. He affixed it to his own cap.

'Now,' he said, putting on the cap and rising to his feet, 'the trick's done.'

'Oh, dear no!' said Volnay. 'The trick isn't done yet, old fellow. You've got to be formally enlisted, and to answer a rigmarole of questions, and be examined by the regimental doctor, and to take the oath. The trick isn't done yet, by a long chalk.'

'Well,' said Polson, 'I shall take it as a favour if you'll put me through with as little waste of time as possible, for, to tell you the truth, I want that shilling, and the sooner I get it the nearer I shall be to bread and cheese.'

'Oh!' said Volnay, 'I ain't curious, old chap. I'm not a bit curious; but if you can do it, I should like you to take me into your confidence, because I might be of some use. I'm stinking rich, you know—disgracefully rich. And if that fact's any good to you, why you've only to say so, and I'm your man.'

'Oh, no, it isn't money, Volnay. If it had been, I shouldn't have made any scruple about saying so. I can't talk about it. It's likely enough that you may hear everything in time.'

'There's no changing you?' Volnay asked. 'There's no getting you to wait for a week?'

'There's no changing me,' Polson answered, 'and no getting me to wait.'

'Oh, very well,' said Volnay. 'Just take that and cut across to the canteen and get some breakfast. Come back here in a quarter of an hour's time, and I'll put you through. You needn't scruple about taking it: you can pay me back, for there's a five-pound bounty, ready money, declared yesterday, and you'll have it handed over to you on enlisting.'

Polson took up the proffered sovereign, with something of a lump in his throat, and turned to go. He had scarce made a step towards the door when it opened suddenly. This was destined to be a day of strange encounters, for who should walk almost into his arms but that Major de Blacquaire who was the present owner of the Droitwich salt mine from which his father and his uncle had drawn an illicit fortune. There are men who are born to hate each other at sight; and this Major de Blacquaire and Polson, though they had but a slight knowledge of each other, had found time to develop a savage dislike on either side. De Blacquaire was a man with an exasperatingly cold and supercilious fashion of speech. He was a band-box dandy, and went scented like a lady. Polson had once threatened him with a horse-whip, and the Major had withdrawn from the conflict not because he had any want of physical courage, but solely because he was too much of a fine gentleman to brawl. He had never forgotten or forgiven the insult, and Polson had learned to hate him all the more because he mistook him for a coward. The two recoiled from each other just in time to avoid collision, for De Blacquaire had entered hastily. They regarded each other for an instant, and De Blacquaire's cynical and contemptuous gaze took in the other from head to foot, obviously taking note of the mean attire and the signs of the night march Polson had made. His glance fastened on the bunch of ribbons floating from the cap, and at that he smiled.

'Oh!' he said, with a finicking drawl. 'You've made a bolt of it, have you?'

'Say that again,' said Polson, 'and I'll ram it down your throat, and send a tooth or two along with it.'

'Indeed,' said De Blacquaire. 'I think you'll find that it won't pay you to use such language in your present position, Private Jervase.' He turned away and, with the whip he carried in his hand, struck a resounding blow upon the open door. 'Sergeant!' he called, 'bring up a file of men, and take this man to the guardroom.'

'On what authority, if you please?' asked Polson.

'On the authority of those ribbons, my man,' De Blacquaire answered.

'You mistake your authority, friend Popinjay,' said Polson. 'I am not in your service yet.'

'Has this man enlisted, Volnay?' asked the Major.

'No,' said Volnay, 'he hasn't. He means to. And now I see what terms you're on, I shall advise him very strongly, as an old friend of mine, to choose another regiment.'

'Yes,' said Polson. 'I think I'll choose another regiment. I'm not hungry for the cat-o'-nine tails, and I should earn it if I were under this brute's command five minutes. You'd be a handsome chap in your own way, Major, if it were not for that silly sneer you're pleased to carry about with you. But I warn you that, under any circumstances whatsoever, if you should presume upon any difference in our rank to insult me by a word, a gesture, or a look I'll spoil your beauty for you.'

'This man's a friend of yours, is he, Volnay?' said De Blacquaire, ignoring his antagonist.

'Yes,' said Volnay. 'A very old friend of mine.'

'Well, you can keep him with you. I've just got my appointment on the Staff. I'm off for Varna to-morrow, and I don't suppose that I shall meet the gentleman again. I want a private word with you. If Mr. Jervase will be so kind as to relieve us of his presence.'

'I'll be back in a quarter of an hour,' said Polson.

'All right, old chap,' Volnay answered, and made haste to add, before his old chum had left the room, 'I'm devilish glad you're going, De Blacquaire, and the whole regiment will share my sentiments. The mess will be a devilish sight happier without you.'

At this, the Major's pale face flushed for an instant, and Polson grinned sardonically as he strode away. He found his way into the canteen, made a rough breakfast there, and then returning found Volnay ready to put him through all the necessary formalities. An old Sergeant put the regulation questions as to name, age, and employment. Was he married? No. Was he an apprentice? No. Had he ever at any time offered himself for Her Majesty's service, and been refused? No. Had he ever been tried for any criminal offence? No. Then here was the Queen's shilling, and he was enlisted to serve Her Majesty for the term of twenty years, and was now to report himself to the doctor, and after passing his examination, would be required to present himself at noon to be sworn in before the Colonel, and failing so to present himself, he would be liable to arrest and imprisonment as a rogue and vagabond.

'So now the trick is done,' said Volnay, 'and you can't undo it. At another time you could have bought out for thirty pounds; but we shall be off to Varna in a week or two, and the Queen won't spare a man she has once laid hands on for love or money until we have got through the little brush that's coming with old Nick and his merry men.'

Chapter VI

There was no sleep in the grey-stone house on the Beacon Hill, on that eventful night on which Polson Jervase left his home, for anybody except the domestics, who were ignorant of the blow which had fallen on the household. Jervase made no pretence of courting sleep at all: but having banked up the fire he went down into the cellar, brought up a couple of bottles of brandy, and prepared himself to make a night of it. It had not been his habit for years to drink to excess, but in his earlier days at any time of trouble he had gone to that false solace, and now the instinct came back to him. James kept him company awhile in his potations, but by and by crept off to bed, and Jervase sat alone drinking fiercely, at first without apparent effect.

General Boswell rose before dawn without having closed an eye, and waited for the daylight. At its first dawning he walked softly to the room in which Irene lay and tapped quietly at the door.

'Who's there?' his daughter's voice asked him, and he answered:

'It is I, dear. I wish to speak to you for a moment.' The girl unlocked the door and left it partly open. He waited for a moment and then half entered the room. 'I am just starting for home,' he said. 'And in an hour the carriage will be here to bring you away. Pray be ready for it.'

She answered 'Yes,' and her father walked downstairs and into the hall. He was searching for his hat and overcoat when Jervase lurched out of the parlour. His bloodshot eyes and staggering gait showed in what fashion he had passed the night.

'You're off?' he said, thickly. 'Won't you have some breakfast?'

'No,' said the General. 'Go back to your bottle.'

'Look here,' said Jervase, 'I shall put this all right. I've had the night to think it over, and I shall effect a compromise. D'ye see? I shall effect a compromise. It won't cost you a penny, and it won't break me. I shall have a sleep by and by, and then I shall go and see Stubbs, and effect a compromise. I hope you don't bear malice, General? You'll shake hands before you go, won't you?'

'No,' said the General. 'Go back to—your bottle.'

'But I say,' Jervase proceeded, with a drunken tenacity, 'you ain't going to bear malice, are you, General?'

'Stand out of my way, you drunken beast!' the General responded, 'or I'll do you a mischief.'

'Oh, if that's the way you're going to take it, all right,' said Jervase. 'James and me are going to stand the racket—it won't hurt you either in credit or in pocket, and I don't see what you've got to be shirty about. It wasn't exactly what you might call a legirrimate transaction, but there are lots of things in business that are not legirrimate. See 'em done every day—see 'em done by respec'able people.'

Boswell by this time had found his hat and overcoat, and was prepared to go. He turned his back upon his host and re-ascended the stairs and knocked a second time at Irene's door.

'Is that you, Papa?'

'Yes, it is I. Can you hear me?'

'Oh, yes, distinctly.'

'I shall return for you. Keep your door locked until I come. Jervase has been drinking and he may annoy you.' With that, he walked back to the hall, where Jervase, holding on by the handle of the door, was solemnly swaying to and fro. 'I shall regret,' said Boswell, 'to be forced to use violence: but if you do not instantly free me of your very disagreeable presence I shall be compelled to do you damage. Stand on one side, I tell you. Go!'

There was that in the ring of his voice which pierced to Jervase's intelligence, bemused as he was, and he staggered back into the parlour. The General undid the fastenings of the door and walked out into the keen, bright morning air. When he returned an hour later, Jervase had drunk himself to sleep, and there was no further trouble with him. Irene was ready and came from her bedroom at the General's call. His heart ached as he looked at her, for the passage of that one night of sleepless grief had blighted all her fresh young beauty as a year of sickness might have done. He took her to his arms and held her there until she drew gently away from him.

'I know, dear,' she said in a voice she bravely tried to control, but with no great success. 'I know, dear.'

They exchanged no further words until they reached home, but her father placed an arm about her shoulders and drew her to his breast, where she nestled quietly. She had wept all her tears away, but a dry sob shook her frame from time to time, and with every repetition of the sound the father's face twitched as if a rough hand had been laid upon a wound. He parted from her tenderly when they reached home, and they met again at the breakfast table.

'You understand everything that has happened, dear?' he asked. 'I think so.'

'The owner of the salt mine which my partners have for years been robbing is a Major de Blacquaire, whose regiment is just now quartered at Birmingham. They will have the route in a day or two, and I must see him before he goes. I

shall drive into the town at once; and then I must run up to London. I do not know as yet what my partners' rascality may have cost me, but I am not a wealthy man, and the business may spell ruin. I cannot afford to be idle, and I must get back into harness. Lord Raglan knows my record. I was with him when he lost his right arm at Waterloo. He has more than once,' the old soldier went on with a certain stateliness, 'expressed a certain regard for me. I have every reason to believe myself highly honoured by his esteem. At a time like this men of experience will be in demand, and I feel hopeful of finding an appointment. I am not yet too old to serve my Queen and country. Lord Raglan will see service again, of course, and he is six years my senior, so that he is scarcely likely to make my years a ground of objection.'

'Take me with you, dear,' said Irene, 'I shall not be very happy if I am left alone.'

'Do you care for the drive this morning?' her father asked.

'I should like it,' she answered, 'of all things.'

'Run away and dress then,' said the General, 'for I have ordered the carriage already, and it will be round in a quarter of an hour. That is short notice for a lady's toilet.' he went on, trying to smile, 'but you must learn military despatch.'

And thus it came about that Polson and Irene met once more before the final parting, for at the moment at which the carriage swept into the barrack square the newly-enlisted recruit was walking towards the orderly room under the guidance of a corporal. The youngster still wore the fluttering ribbons in the shabby old sealskin cap, and that fact and his presence in the barracks told the whole story instantly.

'By Heaven!' cried the General, 'I like that. The lad has grit in him!' He cried aloud in the ringing clarion voice which advancing years had left in all its rounded sweetness, 'Hi, you there—halt!' and the corporal at the voice straightened himself and stood to attention. Polson knew the voice, but he walked on until the command was repeated. The General stopped the carriage and alighted. 'Can you bear to speak to him?' he whispered.

'Yes,' said Irene, 'I wish it.'

The General walked briskly to the recruit, and stretched out his hand towards him. 'You have done well, my lad. You could have done nothing better. You have an old soldier's respect, Polson. You have joined us?'

'Yes, sir,' said Polson, 'I have joined you. Volnay is here, sir—you remember Volnay?'

'His father and I charged together at Waterloo,' said the General. 'He is a good lad. You and he are great friends, I hear?'

'We have been,' Polson answered. 'Major de Blacquaire is here as well; but he has a Staff appointment, and I understand he leaves the corps to-morrow.'

'He is the man I am here to see,' said Boswell. 'Irene is with me, and I believe she wishes to speak to you.'

The young man glanced deprecatingly at his old array, and the General read the glance. 'She will understand all that,' he said, 'just as well as I do. You have seen De Blacquaire?'

'I believe he is in barracks—I saw him a few hours ago.'

'Corporal! 'called the General, 'find Major de Blacquaire, give him General Boswell's compliments, and ask him to receive me.'

The corporal saluted and went his way, a bewildered man, for it had never before fallen to his lot to find a raw recruit in the enjoyment of a General's

friendship. There was a mystery here, and it kept the regiment in talk for a little while until the interest in it died out; but it made Polson a man of mark from the first. The corporal was back in a minute with a salute to say that Major de Blacquaire was in his own apartment, and would be proud to see General Boswell at once, so the General sent off Polson to Irene and made his way to De Blacquaire's quarters, piloted by the corporal. De Blaequaire received General Boswell with a show of profound respect.

'I am here,' began the General, plunging into business at once after his own soldierly fashion, 'I am here on an uncommonly unpleasant business. You are the proprietor of a salt mine. You may not be aware that I have invested the greater part of my fortune in the hands of your neighbours, Messrs. Jervase & Jervoyce.'

'I was not aware of that, sir,' said De Blaequaire, 'and I am very sorry to hear it. The men, to my certain knowledge, are a brace of thieves.'

'I heard a very startling piece of news last night,' the General continued. 'I heard that your solicitor, Mr. Stubbs I believe, has made a charge against my partners of having robbed you and the former proprietor of the mine, my lamented old friend General Airey, through a whole course of years.'

'That is undoubtedly true,' De Blacquaire answered. 'I have evidence that a passage exists between their mine and my own, and all the evidence points to the belief that it was purposely made. Their property, I learn, was a miserable failure for many years, and it has now for years yielded them a large income.'

'My share of that income,' said the General, 'has amounted to something like fifteen hundred pounds a year for seven years past, and I need not tell you that it will be my immediate business, so soon as I can realise the money, to repay you—on distinct proof, of course, of the felonious action of my partners.'

'I really do not see, General Boswell,' said De Blacquaire, 'that there is any call upon you to sacrifice yourself for their benefit. The men are wealthy, and I have no doubt that I can force them to disgorge.'

'It will be my own hope and aim to do that also,' the General answered. 'But I have no wish for money which has been dishonourably acquired, and I am very much afraid that I have been living at your cost. It is my obvious duty to return to you whatever has come into my possession, provided always that the facts are assured. I have my remedy against my partners in the law courts, and if necessary I must seek it there.'

'I shall not venture,' said De Blacquaire, 'to dispute a point of personal honour with General Boswell; but I venture to suggest that the better course would be for us, as the injured parties, to join forces against Messrs. Jervase & Jervoyce, and discuss the partition of the spoils when we have secured them. They are thoroughly solvent; I know that, for I have made inquiries; and they are well worth powder and shot. Until the case is heard, or until they themselves come to heel of their own free will, I cannot in honesty receive anything from you.

Their confession or, failing that, their conviction must absolutely precede any such action as you contemplate. I am taking a business point of view, sir, and I think that on reflection you will find that there is no escape from it.'

The General sat frowning and perplexed. He was in haste to be rid of the sense that he was handling tainted money, and he was eager even to beggar himself to secure freedom from the load which lay upon his mind. 'I wish you to understand, Major de Blacquaire,' he said, 'that I am pressing this matter for

reasons personal to myself. I am placed in a most abominable and unbearable position. I have unwittingly been made a partner in a very shameful transaction, and I may tell you that I have not the faintest doubt in my own mind as to the justice of your cause. I do not feel that as a man of honour I am justified in retaining for a day money which has been actually stolen from another. I think I may say that it is your duty to relieve me from this burden. I must fight for my own hand afterwards; but I cannot consent to hold these gains a moment longer than is necessary for me to repay them.'

'Suppose, sir,' said De Blacquaire, 'that we submit this matter to an independent and high-minded arbiter. You know Colonel Stacey? He is in quarters at this moment, I believe, and I am sure he would give his judgment between us willingly, I feel so confident of his verdict that perhaps it's hardly fair on my part to suggest the appeal to him.'

'I know Stacey well,' said the General, 'Colonel Stacey is a man of honour. I have a great respect for Stacey, and I will abide by his opinion. I feel assured that he will be on my side. Will you kindly take me to him?'

'Certainly, sir.' The Major took up his forage cap, opened the door for his guest, and marshalled him into the open, where he saw the hated Polson standing at the side of the General's carriage in conversation with a lady. His gorge rose within him at the spectacle, and it came into his mind that General Boswell might be as little pleased as he himself was. He asked a question by way of calling his companion's attention. 'That is your carriage, sir?'

'Ah, by the way,' the General answered, 'that reminds me. That is young Jervase standing there. His commission is probably in his agent's hands to-day. He has learned the facts about this salt mine business, and he has thrown up what I know to have been the dearest hope of his life. He has joined as a recruit. He is a very fine and worthy fellow, Major de Blacquaire. I don't know a better lad in the world, and I desire to bespeak your good will for him. A gentleman's position in the ranks is not very tolerable; but a friend at court may make things easier for him.'

Now Major de Blacquaire had made a very excellent impression on the elder warrior, who thought that he had behaved honourably and with delicacy in respect to the unfortunate business which had brought them together; but he undid that impression most conclusively.

'Should you call,' he asked in his most deliberate and supercilious drawl, 'should you call Mr. Polson a gentleman, sir?'

'Most decidedly, sir!' the General answered, with sudden heat. 'He has the instincts of a gentleman, and the sense of honour of a gentleman. He has had the education of a gentleman, and has lived among gentlemen. If these are not the facts to warrant the use of the word, I have no judgment in the matter.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said De Blacquaire, 'I am possibly prejudiced; but I thought the fellow a sort of unlicked cub.'

The General said no more, but his shoulders straightened, and both hands went up to the big grey moustache. It was in his mind to offer a retort, but he remembered his own dignity in time, and contented himself by saying, 'I shall recommend him most strongly to Colonel Stacey's best consideration. And you, Major de Blacquaire, I understand, are leaving the regiment?'

'I have received a Staff appointment, sir, and I leave to-morrow. These are the Colonel's quarters.'

Both men had grown extremely frigid, but Colonel Stacey's welcome to his old campaigning comrade smoothed the General's ruffled mind. He was a bluff, grizzled man of sixty, with a scarlet countenance and a white head so closely cropped that it looked like a bottle-brush. He had seen service in every quarter of the world, and his manly chest was covered with well-won medals. He listened to the General's story sympathetically, but he gave his judgment with a twinkle of the eye.

'The same old Quixote, eh, George? De Blacquaire's right, of course—absolutely right. And as for you, my boy, you haven't got a leg to stand on. Of course you're going to join forces with your fellow sufferer, and it's quite monstrous to suggest that the money should come out of the pocket of an innocent man. If the case were anybody's but your own you'd look at it like a sensible man. And if you were advising me, you would tell me precisely what I'm telling you. Here, where's that rascal of mine?' He opened the door and shouted, and in came a bronzed dragoon in civilian costume. 'Get a bottle of champagne and bring glasses. I've been longing for an excuse for self-indulgence all the morning, and I'm much obliged to you for giving it.'

'I mustn't join you,' said the General.

'Oh, by gad,' said the Colonel, 'but you must and you shall. I'm expecting to get my marching orders any hour, and those chaps mean to fight, mind you, and it's an open problem as to whether old Bob Stacey will come back again. Come on, George! You're not going to shirk a last liquor with a comrade of forty years' standing!'

The General yielded, the wine was served, De Blacquaire at the Colonel's command emptied his glass and withdrew, leaving the old friends together. The General seized the moment to speak a word for Polson. He told the lad's story, and the Colonel nodded his white head with curt approval.

'Is he a smart fellow?' he asked.

'Highly intelligent,' the General answered. 'Took his B.A. at Oxford, first-rate man across country, excellent shot. Would have had his commission this week if his father hadn't turned out a rascal. Throws up everything like a lad of honour as he is, and takes the Queen's shilling.'

'That's all right,' said the Colonel. 'Leave him to me. I'll shepherd him.'

Chapter VII

General Boswell's coachman was a Scot; a grim, taciturn, brickdust-coloured fellow, who had been in his present service for a quarter of a century. He had been bred amongst horses from his boyhood, for his father had been a horsebreaker, and when he had run away from home and enlisted, he had satisfied ambition by becoming a driver of artillery. Then he had been wounded, and had turned batman for awhile. He had gone to the General as valet, but his stable love had broken out again, and he had gravitated by force of nature to the place of coachman. Polson's mind did not go back to a time when he did not remember Duncan, and to Irene he was like a fixed part of the scheme of nature. He had one defect which at this instant made him invaluable. He resented any imputation of the fact angrily, but he had been deaf as an adder for years.

There was no great privacy in a barrack square, to be sure, but it was as safe to talk within arm's length of Duncan as if he had been a stone Sphinx. Duncan was a man of rare discretion, and, though it must have been like an upheaval of the world to him to see the most constant of visitors at the General's modest little mansion, walking in shabby raiment in a barrack square with a recruit's ribbons fluttering from his cap, he saluted imperturbably as the young man came up, and then sat motionless.

Polson came to the side of the carriage, cap in hand.

'Your father told me I might speak to you,' he said wistfully. 'I hope I am not wrong in coming to you.'

'You have enlisted?' she asked him. 'You are going to the war?' Her self-possession cost her an effort, but she maintained it She had a soldier's daughter's pride, and though she had met this first great trouble so brief a time ago she had already taught herself to face it. Her father was a man conspicuously brave among the brave, and he had told her of his very first experience of war—a period of prolonged inaction under fire. 'A trying thing at first,' he had said, 'but duty will reconcile one to anything.' This memory had been present with her all the morning, and though the unexpected sight of her lost lover almost broke her down, the thought had had power to nerve her.

'Yes,' he answered simply. 'I have enlisted. I shall have to go through a certain amount of drill, but that will soon be over, and then, I suppose, I shall get my marching orders.'

'Father approves of what you have done,' she said.

'He has told me so,' he responded. 'I am very glad of it. God is good to me,' he went on, turning half away from her and gazing across the square. 'I had not hoped to see you again for years, if ever, and there is just one thing I wanted very much to say. It is of no use to have reserves and disguises at a time like this. I shan't distress you? Can you let me speak?'

'Put your cap on, Polson,' she said composedly. 'You will catch cold.'

The touch of womanly solicitude, small as it was, moved him. He obeyed her, and stood, still looking across the square, until he had mastered a suspicious clicking in the throat.

'You need have no fear of me, Polson,' Irene said. 'Speak out all your mind.'

'Well, dear, it's this. We've been comrades ever since I helped you to learn to ride your first pony. We've always been the very best of friends, and only last night I was going to ask for something more. You don't mind hearing me out, Irene?'

'No. Let us speak plainly. Let us understand each other.'

'Well, you see, everything went last night with a clean sweep by the board. I thought I was safe for a commission. I'd been brought up to expect a handsome fortune.' He spoke in a level tone, as if he had been reading uninteresting matter from a book. 'All that is changed and everything is changed with it. I'm a penniless private of dragoons, and our ways in the world are wide apart. For old time's sake I should be very sorry to believe that you'd ever forgot me altogether, but if you'll try to bring yourself to think of me as trying to be cheerful in a humble station, as remembering you always in my heart of hearts, and never forgetting the distance that divides us—if you'll try to think of me as always honouring myself because I was once your friend'—He was forced to pause, but he went on again, level-voiced and monotonous as before—'If you'll try to think of me as learning to be cheerful for your sake, not as a moaning,

broken-hearted chap—which I don't mean to be at all—but just doing my work, you know, and thinking about you like an affectionate poor relation might—why, then, in—in time you'll get to feel the parting less.'

'Have you finished, Polson?' 'Yes, dear. That's about all, I think. You see, I know you, Irene. You'll grizzle if you think I'm grizzling. That's your nature. You can't bear to think of a canary bird in pain.'

'And that is all?'

'Yes, dear. That's all.'

'I shall never forget you, dear. I shall never forget you, and I shall never change. If you had asked me to be your wife before these things happened I should have said "Yes," and I should have been proud and happy. But, Polson, this is why I thank God for having brought us together just this once. I want you to remember that in this war names will be heard of that never were known before. Yours may be one of them.'

'You mustn't waste your life thinking of me, Irene. I shall remember every word you have spoken. I shall treasure every word. I hope I shall do my duty.'

'I am sure of that,' she answered. And then for a long time not a word was spoken, and when at length they broke silence, they spoke of things which were indifferent by comparison. They discussed the probable hour of the arrival of the route, the probable destination of the regiment, the time at which Polson might expect to escape his drill.

At last the General appeared walking side by side with Colonel Stacey. Irene was facing that way, and was naturally the first to see him.

'Here is good-bye, dear,' she said. 'Papa is coming.'

'Good-bye,' he said softly. 'Good-bye. God bless you.'

'God bless you, too,' said Irene. She held out her little gloved hand to him, and he took it in his own. She looked bravely into his eyes, and they spoke their last farewell without a sign of tremor.

'This,' said the General, advancing as Polson turned away, 'is the young fellow of whom I have been speaking. Polson, this is your commanding officer, Colonel Stacey.' Polson raised his cap and bowed civilian fashion.

'Ah!' said the jolly colonel, turning his red face and twinkling eyes on the recruit.

'You are Polson Jervase? Joined this morning, eh? I hear an excellent account of you. Try to deserve it. I shall remember you. Good morning.'

But as Polson saluted again, and turned to go, the General seized him by the hand and shook it warmly.

'We must all face the fortune of war, my lad,' he said. 'The best of good luck go with you. If you hear of me out yonder, as you may, don't forget to report yourself. Good-bye.'

There were a good many eyes at the barrack windows, and the minds of many dragoons were inspired with wonder. For a General and a Waterloo veteran was a personage, and the daughter of the same was a personage, and it was out of the common for a newly-joined recruity to engage in intimate talk with the like of them for half an hour together, and to be shaken hands with by the veteran, and saluted as if he were an officer by the veteran's coachman, and personally introduced to 'Old Stayce' into the bargain.

And amazement sat on many foreheads when the carriage rolled away, and the General stood up to wave his hat to the recruity, and the lady stood up to wave her hand, and the recruity, unconscious of the interest he excited, waved

the shabby old sealskin cap in answer until the equipage was ringingly saluted at the gate, and swung swiftly out of sight.

And then, it was over. Oh, it was all over, and one manly heart was sore and cold. The new recruity stood there planted in the barrack square, as innocent of his surroundings as if he had been asleep, and mechanically filled and lit his pipe, and stood on with his chin sunk upon his breast, scarcely aware of his own thoughts, and as yet realising little but solitude and an ache in the doleful middle of it. But a warmth stole into the cold. When everything was said and done, there was one thing left. Irene loved him. Loved him! How sweet and sacred a wonder. Yet her own dear lips had told him that she would have been proud and happy to be his wife, and that nothing should change her. And she had given him an ambition. The lofty and inspiring words were not yet written, but their purport thrilled him, as it thrilled many who went out to fight and bleed for a cause which may not have been wholly worthy of their devotion, and yet in a sense was worthy because they believed in it with all their hearts and souls. For, after all, what is it but the purpose which ennobles action? If the greatest Englishman since Shakespeare had not yet given Polson Jervase the words in which to speak his thought, it lightened his breast all the same.

I wake to the higher aims
Of a land that has lost for a little her lust of gold,
And love of a peace that was full of wrongs and shames,
Horrible, hateful, monstrous, not to be told;
And hail once more to the banner of battle unroll'd,
Tho' many a light shall darken, and many shall weep
For those that are crush'd in the clash of jarring claims,
Yet God's just wrath shall be wreak'd on a giant liar;
And many a darkness into the light shall leap,
And shine in the sudden making of splendid names,
And noble thought be freer under the sun.
And the heart of a people beat with one desire;
For the peace, that I deem'd no peace, is over and done,
And now by the side of the Black and the Baltic deep,
And deathful-grinning mouths of the fortress, flames
The blood-red blossom of war with a heart of fire.

So thought Polson Jervase, and so thought hundreds of valiant men who were ready to lay down their lives in a quarrel which the years have proved unprofitable.

But a voice awoke the recruity from his reverie—a voice of authority which asked with a most unnecessary emphasis what the blank, blank he meant by skulking there, when he knew conventionally well that he had been conventionally well ordered to the quartermaster's stores to get his conventional kit. The recruit was not accustomed to hear himself addressed in this manner, and his earliest impulse was to hit the pug nose of the person who accosted him, but he remembered himself in time, and bethinking him of the wise man's saying, that a soft answer turneth away wrath, he asked meekly where he should go. Then the Sergeant, who was so straitly trousered and jacketted that he pranced in his going, ordered him to follow his nose, adding that if he conventionally well supposed that because a conventional General in a

conventional carriage came to see him off, he was entitled to shirk his conventional duties, he was conventionally well in error.

'I say, Sergeant,' said Polson, turning to face his conductor, 'that's a filthy bad habit. If you want to be respected, drop it.'

The Sergeant went as scarlet as his stable-jacket, and said that any conventional recruit had conventionally well got to respect him any conventional how.

'My dear sir, no,' said Polson. 'It's quite impossible to respect a man who talks like a foul-mouthed parrot.'

The Sergeant walked like a man astounded and said no more, and Polson likewise held his peace. They were both quietly businesslike whilst Polson got his kit served out to him, and by the time this work was over, the dinner hour had arrived. He was told off to a mess in a long barrack-room, in which his brother recruits were quartered, under the charge of an old soldier. Some of these new comrades were fresh from the plough, and some were the rowdy refuse of the town; one wore a miner's flannels, and another was a weedy youth from a shop-counter, who had a higher opinion of himself than others were likely to form.

The speech of every man jack of them was like the exhalation of a cesspool, and the newest of Her Majesty's hired servants sat in a grim wrath and loathing, seeing that he had chosen these for his life companions. The meal was plentiful, and not bad of its kind, but it was dirtily served, and asked for long custom or an appetite of more than average keenness. Our recruit had neither the one nor the other, but he remembered his promise to Irene. He had undertaken to meet his fate cheerfully, and the fare was part of his fate. He would have no re-pinings. The food was honest and wholesome, and he would probably learn to be eager for worse before the war was over. So he, as it were, squared his shoulders at his trencher, and was just ready to fall to, when one of the plough-tail gentry sitting just opposite let fall a speech which would have turned the stomach of a decent hog, if he had happened to understand it. Polson's heart maddened within him, and he smote his fist upon the unclothed table so that the plates of chipped enamel iron danced from end to end on it.

'You filthy clodpole!' he said, rising from his place and thrusting a prognathous jaw and blazing eyes half-way across the table. 'Speak like that again in my hearing, and I'll give you such a hiding as you never had since you were born.'

'And sarve him right, begorra,' said the man at the head of the table. 'It's sick I am of all the dirty stuff I've to listen to—An' dese boys is 'listed for de war, and dere's not wan of 'em knows he mayn't be stiff on de field in tree or four monts' time. An' be way of makin' ready for a soldier's end an' a sudden meetin' wid his God, dey're chewin' blasphaymious conversation from reveille to lights out, so dey are.'

'Thank you,' said Polson, and so sat down and tried to go on with his dinner.

The meal was finished in silence. The scene had its effect, and it had all the more surely for two or three things which happened later on. Example. The whole rough squad was turned into the riding school that afternoon dressed as they might happen to be. The accustomed old drill-horses, saddled and bridled, were ranged on the tan at the wall, with stirrups crossed over the shoulders, and when the word 'Mount' was given, Polson was the only one of the newly

recruited crowd who did not make a painful climb in trying to obey the order. He was in the saddle in a flash, and sat there like a centaur.

'We've got one man amongst us, seemin'ly,' said the old rough-riding Sergeant.

'You've seen a horse before to-day, my lad.'

'One or two,' said Polson.

'Come out,' said the red-nosed drill.

'Let's see what you're good for. Put her at that.'

'That' was a furze-covered revolving pole mounted on swivelled trestles, and about three feet high. It was a leap for a child, and Polson went over it, turned and came nimbly back again. The instructor approached him and took him by the foot and ankle.

'That's the shape for the cavalry leg,' he said. 'Keep that and don't lose it. Now put her at it again.'

As the recruit turned to obey the order, the Sergeant mischievously slashed the mare across the quarters, and the venerable she-trooper skipped; but this was hardly a thing to scare the best cross-country man of his shire, and Polson nipped over the bar and back again. At that moment entered Captain Volnay, to whom the drill, saluting, said:

'It's no use wasting this man's time here, sir. Colonel's orders are to get 'em through as fast as possible. He'd be better engaged at foot drill.'

'Very good,' said Volnay. 'You can dismount, my man. Come with me.'

On the far side of the square a squad was at work at the sword exercise, and the instructor's voice was bawling: 'Thrust, return, thrust—return. Carry—so! Slope—so! Shun! Stand at ease!'

'Well,' said Volnay. 'How do you like it?'

'I shall like it well enough, I dare say. I haven't shaken into the saddle yet.'

'I'm going to hand you over to this lot,' said Volnay, indicating the squad with a motion of the hand. 'D'you know anything about it?'

'A bit,' the recruit answered. 'You see, it's been the dream of my life to join, and I've been taking lessons.'

'Good old enthusiast!' said Volnay. 'I saw you meeting old Stayce. He's a grand old sort. No finer soldier in the army. Regiment adores him. And he has an eye for a man who does his duty. A nod's as good as a wink to a blind horse, old Pol, eh?'

'I'll try,' said Polson.

'You'll try right enough. You're a good old pebble. I've got to be professional, you understand. No end of a devil of a lot of unpleasantness if these chaps suspected favouritism.'

'Oh,' said Polson, 'I'm at work. No playing en amateur.'

'That's the style. There are some of our fellows saying there'll be no fighting. That's rubbish. There's glory in front of some of us, Polly.'

They went on in silence until they reached the guard.

'Shun!' roared the Sergeant, and the men clicked their heels together and straightened their backs and tucked their chins in and assumed that ramrod posture which the authorised drill-book of the day described as 'the free and unconstrained attitude of a soldier.'

'Sergeant,' said Volnay, 'this man has just joined, but Sergeant Gill finds that he can ride and has dismissed him from the riding school. He tells me that he's

been taking lessons in sabre practice. Just put him through his paces, will you?'

So the Sergeant set his squad to stand at ease again, and Polson, being provided with a belt and sabre, was stuck up in front of it, feeling absurdly like a trick ape on show.

'Draw—so! Slope—so! Prep—air! Prove distance!' and so on.

'Pursuin' practice. One. Cut—thrust—parry. Two. Cut—thrust—parry. Shunt Now from the word of command, right through. Sword exercise. Prep—air! Prove distance—go! Shun! Pursuin' practice I Prep—air! Go! Shun! That's all right, sir. Ever been in the service before, young feller?'

'No,' said Polson. 'I always meant to join, and I thought I'd get ready as far as I could.'

'Now look here, my lad,' said the Sergeant. 'You've been through the mill before, you have. You're a deserter, you know, that's what you are.'

Polson laughed. He had thought never to laugh again, but the accusation tickled him.

'I beg your pardon, Captain Volnay,' he said, saluting in officer's fashion—the only way he had been taught; 'but perhaps you will speak up for me.'

'Deserter?' said Volnay. 'Rubbish! Known the man for years. Always keen on the service, and got ready for it. Jervase.' 'Yes, sir.'

'You're a pretty good shot, I gather?' 'Thank you, sir.'

'Any instruction in musketry?' 'Pretty fair, sir.'

'Put him through his facings, Sergeant, in the riding school at four o'clock this afternoon. I'll be there. You hear, Jervase?'

'Yes, sir.'

At this juncture the Sergeant surprised a wink from Volnay, which that young gentleman supposed to have been unseen, and he fell a-thinking. The result of his cogitation was rapid and conclusive. The young man who knew the minutiae of his trade of soldier, and had an officer's trick of salute, and was on winking terms with the wealthiest man in the regiment, was a person to be made up to, and to be made up to in the least transparent way.

'We're awfully short-handed, sir,' said the Sergeant, touching his forage cap to Volnay. 'We might utilise this man as a drill, sir, if you'll permit me to suggest such a thing. I could get on twice as fast, sir, if I'd half the squad to deal with.'

'Very well,' said Volnay. 'I'll see the adjutant about that.'

And the raw recruit was drilling his barrack-room comrades before he or they had fitted on a uniform, and his ringing 'Carry—so!' or 'Ground—oh!' sounded through the square as imperiously as any in those first busy days.

'You're a (conventional) wonder, you are,' said the drill instructor at the close of the second day. 'You've got the powers that be behind you, and you'll be one of us in a month or two. Promotion's quick when the word comes for blood and rust and mud and oil.'

Chapter VIII

If Polson had not to be taught how to ride, how to handle a sabre or a gun, or how to balance himself in the goose-step—matters which he had taken the

pains to master long ago—there were still certain things to learn, and the button stick, and the flat and chain burnish, and the pots of chrome yellow, and blacking, and pipeclay, were just as strange to him as they would have been to any other raw recruit; so that he was teaching his business at one end and learning it at the other for a matter of some four or five days.

There was a poor exile of Erin in the shape of an impecunious Irish nobleman, who enlisted on the same day with Polson and whose uniform was tried on in the same hour.

They were in the tailor's shop together with a hurried Sergeant standing over them.

The aristocratic Paddy pulled on his trousers with a heavy sigh.

'The livery,' said he, 'of me degradation.'

'It is the Queen's uniform,' said Polson, 'and you have a right to be proud to wear it.'

The child of Erin buttoned his stable jacket and went out to drill, and Polson gave him a purposed double dose of labour. He had given orders to an individual man here and there, but until he became a dragoon he had never commanded a crowd, and there is something in that which makes either a man or a sweep of the commander. Polson was all alert, eager to teach what he knew to the slow and loutish squad before him; but on that first morning of his wearing the Queen's cloth, keen as he was upon his own business, he could not help recognising a certain pair of flea-bitten greys which swept through the barrack gate whilst he was at work some fifty yards away. They came from the Bar-field Arms, and he had helped the man who now drove them in their breaking, four or five years ago.

There was a cry of 'Guard, tarn out!' and a clash of salute as the carriage rolled through the gates without a challenge, and the man who sat at the back, disdaining the cushions, and with a lustrous silk hat cocked over one eyebrow, was his father. John Jervase came into barracks, as he had gone everywhere throughout his life, with a magnificent impudence, and he distributed salutes to all and sundry from a majestic forefinger; whilst his only son watched him with a sardonic eye as he bowled up to the officers' quarters.

The card of Mr. John Jervase was carried to Colonel Stacey, and Colonel Stacey was ready to receive Mr. Jervase in a flash.

'I am told, sir,' said Mr. Jervase, in that bluff, John-Bull way of his, which had brought a hundred people to his net, 'that the regiment has its marching orders, and I can quite believe that you've got something better to do than to listen to anything I have to say.'

'I'm pressed for time, sir,' said the Colonel. 'The regiment marches in an hour.'

'Here's a lad of mine, sir,' said Jervase, 'has enlisted. And here is a letter from Kirby & Sons, the well-known Army agents, telling me they've got my cheque for his commission. It's been the hope of my heart to see the lad in the army, and it's been his hope also. We've had a quarrel, sir, and I don't mind confessing that it is my fault. The lad's a good lad.' His voice began to tremble. 'But he's throwing his life away for a freak. I've bowt his commission, and here's the letter from the London agents to say that the whole thing is complete. I know he's here, for I heard him as I crossed the barrack square. I'd like you to help me to bring him back to reason.'

The Colonel took a whip from the table and struck a blow upon the door, which was one of his substitutes for bell-ringing.

'Private Jervase,' he said, 'is drilling a squad in front of the Cupola. Send him here.' He waved his visitor to a chair, and plunged into the examination of a heap of papers which lay before him. Jervase nursed his silk hat in both hands and waited, listening to the scattered noises of the barrack square and catching amongst them his son's voice with a sort of fatal sound of command in it.

'Is he going to talk to me like that?' asked the father of himself; and the minutes went slowly by until Colonel Stacey's batman tapped respectfully at the door, and announced 'Private Jervase.'

'I'll leave you,' said the Colonel, gathering his papers in his hand, and darting towards the doorway.

'I beg you won't, sir,' cried Jervase the elder, 'I shall be more than obliged to you, sir, if you will help me to bring my boy to reason. There,' he cried, casting a letter upon the table, 'is a notice from the London agents that his commission is bought and paid for. There's my cheque for a thousand pounds, and if that isn't good enough for him, there's fifty twenty-pound notes of the Bank of England, and he can have both of 'em with as good a heart on my side as if he took the one and left the other.'

The Colonel looked from the son to the father, and back from the father to the son.

'Really, Mr. Jervase,' he said, 'I don't see that this is much of an affair of mine. I will leave you to fight it out between you.'

The Colonel walked to the door, and father and son were left together. John Jervase, banker, capitalist, driver of men, was not in the least like himself that morning, and his hands trembled so that he was fain to clutch one with another, and to hold both tight between his knees as he sat.

'Look here, Polly,' he began, but Polson gazed sternly straight before him, and gave no sign of sympathy or forgiveness. 'Look here, Polly, I've had about a week of it, and I can't stand it any longer. You and me's got to be friends, or else I've got to put an end to things in a way as you won't fancy.'

He waited, but there was no response from the stolid figure in front of him. Polson stared out of the window and stood silent and immobile as a statue.

'I left you to yourself,' said Jervase, 'until I'd got everything right and comfortable. Major de Blaequaire has gone off to Southampton, and I believe he's on his way to Varna, somewhere in the Black Sea. I've made a deposit with Stubbs, his lawyer, of no less than fifty thousand pounds, my lad. That's been a shake, I tell you. I've had a good deal o' trouble to raise that sum in a hurry, but I've done it, and there's to be no action and no scandal of any sort until De Blaequaire comes back again. That gives your Uncle James and me time to turn round.'

He waited again, and still Polson stood like a statue and made no answer.

'I've done more than that,' Jervase went on. 'I've banked twelve thousand pounds to General Boswell's credit, so that come what may he isn't likely to suffer. If De Blaequaire carries the case on when he comes back to England, James and me can pay him every penny of his rightful claim, and we'll do it.'

He paused again, for his voice had once more half escaped from his control. The boy stood before him, cold and inflexible as doom. To the father's eye he had never looked so manly and handsome as he did at this moment, and what

with fatherly pride and self pity and a sense of the magnanimity of his own purposes, the emotions of John Jervase were strangely mixed.

'There'll be no trouble at all, Polly,' he said, after a pause. 'I've put everything straight for you. You've only got to run up to London to sign your papers, to have your commission, and go out like a gentleman. I've brought a portmanteau with me in the carriage, with everything you'll actually need in it for a week or two, and there's the money for you to order anything else you want. I packed the portmanteau with my own hands, Polly.'

He paused again, for in his own way he was genuinely moved: but the boy still stood there, staring out of the window, and answered never a word.

'You've got to listen,' said the elder, rising and shaking him by the shoulder. 'You think I have acted like a scoundrel, and you're ashamed of your old father. I dare say you're right, my lad, but it wasn't so much my fault as you might fancy. There was a leak between that mine of old General Airey's and your Uncle James's when I went into partnership with him, and, after all, we only helped Nature just a little bit, and there's many a man walking about this minute, holding his head high, who has done more wrong than I have.'

'For God's sake, don't!' cried Polson, breaking silence for the first time. 'It's bad enough as it is. Don't make it worse by talking about it.'

'I won't, Polly,' said Jervase. 'I'll do anything you like if you'll only shake hands and say as you forgive me. Now there's two thousand pound on this here table, and there's the letter from your agents; and you can be off to London within an hour, and have your heart's desire. What's the good of being stupid?'

He took a great bandana handkerchief from the tail pocket of his respectable black coat, and blew his nose resoundingly, and wiped his eyes. He was very deeply moved indeed, and Polson was profoundly sorry for him; but there was a sick whirl in the lad's mind which robbed him of any clear power of thought and seemed indeed to deaden feeling itself. Only he knew that nothing could undo his shame. Nothing could ever make him respect himself again. Nothing could give back to him the old sense of honour, the knowledge that he came of honest folk.

'Look here, Polly,' Jervase broke out again, 'I haven't bred you up to be a common soldier. When I was a young and struggling man, by comparison with what I am now, I said to myself, "I'll make my lad a gentleman." I sent you to Rugby, and I sent you to Oxford, and I never stinted neither love nor money. And if I was a bit over-greedy and in a hurry to be rich, I did what I did a good deal more for your sake than my own.'

'Leave bad alone, father,' said Polson, with an almost savage sternness. 'Can't you see that you make things worse with every word you speak? Isn't it enough for me to know what I know already, but you must make me a partner in that shameful business?'

'Polly,' said Jervase, almost fawning on him, 'I've been a hard man all my life, and I've lived a hard life for years. I've been a proudish sort of chap, in my own way, and I've never stooped to ask any man's pardon twice for the same offence. But it's different between you and me, and I can't let my own flesh and blood go away from me until I've had a word of some sort. It's only a word, Polly. You can't deny me! You're a-going out to the war, Polly, and you might never come back again. And think of me—think of your poor old father sittin' at home, and sayin' to himself, "I sent my son away with a broken heart and ashamed of his own father, and he wouldn't touch my hand before he went to his own death,

and he wouldn't say one forgiving word to me, and I murdered him, and I broke his heart, and I made him ashamed of his own father." You think of me, Polly, sittin' at home and thinkin' like that. Maybe for years and years. We're a long-lived lot, we Jervases, and I should make old bones in the course of nature, but I couldn't bear it, Polly, I couldn't bear it. I should have to put an end to it, and if you go away without a word, it won't be long before I do it.'

The bugles sang out the assembly in the barrack square. Polson both heard and understood, but his father did neither. Within half an hour the regiment would be on the march, and already the red-coated, brass-helmeted men, shining from head to foot and glittering in the fine array war wears before the exchange of the first blows, were moving about the open.

'Now look here, Polly,' said Jervase, striving no longer to disguise the wet eyes and the breaking voice, 'it's take it or leave it. There's your father's hand. Are you a-going to touch it before he goes away?'

'Don't you think,' asked Polson, 'that you're making it pretty hard for both of us?'

'Very well,' said Jervase, 'there's no handshake. There's no good-bye betwixt we two as friends. Perhaps you may come back in a different humour, Polly. Here's your agent's letter. Are you a-going to take your commission, and fight in a gentleman's uniform for your Queen and country, or are you going out to advertise your father's shame by wearing a private's coat?'

'I shall go as I am,' said Polson.

'Very well,' said John Jervase again. 'There's the father's hand refused, and there's the commission chucked into the gutter. Now here's a cheque for a thousand pound as you can cash with Cox & Co. in London. Are you a-going to take that, or are you not?'

'I'm not likely,' said Polson, 'to have any sort of use for money.'

'You're hard,' said his father. 'You're bitter hard. There's the 'and refused. There's the commission chucked, and there's the check too dirty for you to look at. Very well. Now there's fifty notes for twenty pounds a-piece. Will you take them?'

'No,' said the youngster, 'I shall have no want of money and no use for it.'

'You're hard,' said Jervase. 'You're bitter hard. Will you take one of them? It might come in useful. Take it, Polly. Just take it, even if you never spend it.' He clutched one note from the heap which lay upon the table, and held it in a shaking hand towards his son. And Polson still stood like a statue, and stared out of the window. He would fain have been more relenting had he dared, but he feared the loss of his own manhood if he once began to pardon, and perhaps he was severer to himself than to the old man who begged for his forgiveness. 'There's the 'and,' said Jervase, weeping openly. 'He won't touch that. There's the commission only waiting for him to sign, and he won't touch that. There's a cheque for a thousand pound as would send him to the war fitted out like a gentleman, and he won't touch that. There's the ready money to the same amount as would help him to hold his head up among his comrades anywhere, and he won't touch that. And here's a note for a mere twenty pounds, and his father asks him just to take it as a sort of a memorial, and to keep it like as if it was a funeral card, and he won't touch that.'

Polson was white to the lips, but he looked straight before him still, and gave no sign. Jervase took up the agent's letter and deliberately tore it into pieces. He took up his own cheque and tore that into pieces also. He patted the pile of

notes together and put them into his breast pocket, crying all the while with odd little child-like snatches of sound which were wounding to listen to.

The bugles sang out again in the square, and the distant hoofs were clattering on the cobbled stones in front of the stables. Through the window Polson could see the glitter of the polished brass of the band, as it moved slowly across the square towards the barrack gate, and formed up in a solid cube. There was a crowd outside in the streets, and from it rose a noise of cheering. There was silence in the room except for those child-like, unrestrained sobs which shook John Jervase; and even these quieted down as if he too were listening to the growing tumult outside. There was a sudden roll of drums, and the band began to play *'The Girl I left behind me*.' An imperious rap sounded at the door, and Colonel Stacey entered without waiting for a response.

'Do you take your commission, Jervase, or are you to be left here?' he asked brusquely.

'I am to be left here, sir,' Polson answered. 'But I hope that I may get my marching orders as soon as possible.'

'We embark on Friday,' said the Colonel, 'and another ship follows that day week. I'll see you through by then.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Polson, and the Colonel nodded and was gone.

The band was playing, and the crowd in the street was cheering, and there was silence between father and son for two or three minutes. Then rose from the barrack square a deafening roar as 'old Stayce' rode out on the bright bay with the three white stockings, and cantered to the front. The hoarse, commanding voice pealed out the word, the band crashed into a new marching tune, and the regiment began to move forward, like a scarlet snake with glistering scales. Clank and clatter of scabbard, tramp of the ordered ranks, blare of the band, and roar on roar from the street, and then little by little a falling silence. At last dead quiet.

'You needn't think there's no clean money in my hands,' said Jervase. 'I don't owe everything to that blasted brine-pit. You can take your own rights. You can take what I offer you, and feel as you're an honest man all the same. And Polly, if you're going out as a private soldier you'll want money. It isn't as if an untravelled man was talkin' to you. I know the Black Sea Coast I spent one Febiwerry there, a man before the mast. I'll back it again the Pole for cold. You'll miss a lot o' comforts, Polly, as a pound or two would buy for you.'

'I must go back to duty,' said Polson, 'or I shall get into hot water.'

'Take a hundred pound, Polly. It's clean money. I'll swear it on my Bible oath. Look here, Polly. Look here!'

Jervase rose and shook his son by both shoulders in a frenzy.

'Look here, Polly, look here. Listen.'

'I am listening, father.'

'Then look as if you was listening for Heaven's sake! I'm worth half a million, if I'm worth a penny. I never owned to it before, but if it isn't true God strike me dead. Outside that salt mine, I've been an honest man. You won't believe it, but I have. I saw a chance of making money elsewhere, and I wanted a start, and I turned rogue for the sake of it. Polly, Polly. I'll pay every penny with a three per cent, interest—compound, mind you—compound—and I shall be a rich man still!

'Pol, you're hard. I don't know where you get it from. But, mind you! One of these days you might find yourself led into a temptation, and then perhaps

you'll think of your old father. How many business men have gone through life, and never done but one thing as they had a call to be ashamed of? I've done one; and I've been bowled out at it! There's men that does hundreds, Polly, and are never bowled out at all! I'll tell you what. It ain't me having been dishonourable as stands between us. It's your own pride, Polly. It's a good pride. It's what you might call a righteous pride. But if I was just what I am, without being your father—if I was just what you might call an average old sinner, you wouldn't let me beg like this, Polly. No, you wouldn't! And look here, Polly. Money's money, and here's a thousand pound——'

'Damn your thousand pounds,' cried Polson. He turned to face his father in an agony, and struck his own clenched fist upon his breast three several times. Then he turned to his original position and stared through the window across the empty square.

'Yes,' said John Jervase slowly. 'Damn the thousand pounds. Damn it, and damn it, and damn it over again. You think I'm trying to bribe you, Polly? No! You wait till you're a father, with your only son a-going to the wars without a penny in his pocket, and hating you too much to take what you can give him. Then you'll feel what I feel. Damn the thousand pounds! Damn all the money as was ever coined. But, Polly, there's my hand again. I'd rather you took it full—but won't you take it empty?'

The lad took the empty hand and wrung it hard, and held it long.

Chapter IX

The time, half-past four o'clock in the morning; the date the twentieth of September, eighteen hundred and fifty-four; the place the southern bank of the River Alma. Present, some thirty thousand stalwart British men, the vast majority of them snoring open-mouthed, and here and there in the grey of the morning a sentry pacing up and down. Facing northward, Polson Jer-vase's regiment lies far to the right, and to the right of it again, at a distance of some half a mile, the men of Bosquet's command are also sleeping. This is a day destined to be famous and terrible in history; but the dawn is cloudless and quiet. Away beyond the slope of the valley, across the grey flow of the river and half-way upon the northern slope, the pacing sentries, or such of them as are sharp-sighted, can perceive what looks like a wrinkle in the hill. It is some three or maybe four miles from the long line of sleepers, and it indicates the outlines of that great Redoubt around which the memories of Englishmen will cling for centuries to come.

Near five o'clock, and a soft warm morning wind blowing under a stainless sky. Gallopers from headquarters pass here and there with a quiet word, 'Wake your men, and make no noise.' There is no sound of any bugle call at that reveille, and the men silently arise, sit up and shake themselves, and mostly make their toilet by a simple process of eye-rubbing and the assumption of their headgear. Then the camp fires are lit here and there where a clump of officers gathers together over their morning tea and coffee. For thus early in the campaign all the luxuries of home are not abandoned or forgotten. Troop and company orderlies stroll down to the river, bearing buckets, and the rank and file munch their ration of ship's biscuit. And before the simple meal is barely

over, the stealthy word passes along the ranks, and a forward march begins, ghost-like in the dawn. Somewhat clumsily manoeuvred by their chiefs, the line, three or four miles in length, dips; down towards the river and crowds at a few chosen fording places. Then it spreads out again like an open fan, and marches up the further slope—the infantrymen dripping from the arm-pits downwards, and the handful of cavalry on the right of the British flank shining in the rising sun to the horses' shoulders.

Then a pause, and a long pause. Vine yards along the hill and spaces of field and farm, and scattered houses here and there, and on the left the village of Vourliouk, set aflame by the foe for some as yet undiscovered reason. The smoke goes circling up into the pure air, and a faint scent of burning is discernible. Still a mile and a half away on either side the great Redoubt, and in front of it there are cubes and oblongs which look like masses of grey stone, and might pass for such except that now and again they may be seen to move. These are the infantry troops of Russia, with whom our own men are soon to be in deadly conflict. The fields of Europe have heard no sounds of any cannon fired in anger since the last loud Sabbath of Waterloo shook down the spoilers of the Continent; but, unseen at this distance, the guns which line that wrinkle of the hill above there are charged to the throat, and there are resolute men behind them.

The sun rises higher and higher, and the men of the halted army throw themselves to the ground, awaiting a further word from somebody. Solitary gallopers go hither and thither, over the rolling hills. The staff, with waving plumes, goes cantering along the line, and the idea somehow passes through the ranks that Lord Raglan has gone to consult with Monsieur St. Arnaud as to the disposition of the day's battle. There are thousands of youngsters lying there among the vineyards who have never, until this moment, set eyes on their commander. Raglan goes by amidst a dropping fire of cheers, the sleeve of the right arm dangling loose beside him, his bronzed Roman face one cheerful and inspiring smile, and the cunning left hand, with which he has learned to write his despatches, held low down as he controls his charger. And on the far right of the English line, Polson Jervase is standing at his horse's head, cheering with the rest, when on a sudden he discerns a familiar figure: General Boswell is at the Chiefs side and the two are in familiar converse. The young soldier's first battle not yet begun, and Irene's father going by so near and yet so unmindful of him as a mere unit among the waiting thousands. And it is not yet, not even yet, so very certain that we are to give battle this morning, after all. For we have been bedevilled hither and thither with false marches and with false rumours of sailing and lines of route. Monsieur St. Arnaud has been for camping south of the Balkans, and giving battle to the power of Russia there, and Raglan has been all for the Crimea and the road to Sevastopol. And no man has known what to believe amongst the divided councils of the Allies. The men amongst the vineyards are plucking and sucking the grapes. The sun grows hotter and hotter, and there is so dreary a silence in these waiting hours that the angry neigh of a horse is heard for a mile along the line. Five o'clock when we began to move, and here is high noon, and impatience all on edge, and nothing done. The staff comes cantering back, and another hour goes by in silence; and then from the Highlanders half a mile away on the left of the handful of cavalry there rises a sound of jubilation. And round the camp fires at night, when the fight is over and the English are in possession of the field, the

men learn the reason of the cry. Sir Colin Campbell has sent round the word that the men are to break their cartridge packets, and lay the cartridges loose in their pouches, and this is the first word of real business. Now at one o'clock, or near it, the note passes along the line from east to west, and the men are afoot again, and marching forward two deep against those solid masses of grey human masonry, and that gash upon the hill-side which is by and by to burst like a volcano into flame. There goes the first boom of cannon from the Russian side, and a round shot sends the earth spluttering amidst the staff as it canters by once more, plumes waving, and epaulets, and scabbards, and gold lace, and all the fine tinsel of war, as yet unsoiled, glittering in the sunshine.

This is no day for a cavalryman to win honour. Here we sit on the hill-side with a downward slope before us, and an upward slope beyond, and the unmounted men are working their way onward and upward, whilst we are held inactive. And now the war begins in earnest. The tartan fellows are lounging along, half of them with the stem of a grape bunch between their teeth, loading and firing as they go, scarcely a man of them having stood fire before, and walking towards their baptism of death and blood with an astounding cheerfulness, and the long waving broken line converges as if by instinct, and, as the historians of the battle tell us, without definite order from any quarter, towards that grim gash on the hillside, until it grows to be something of a mob, so thickly clustered that the Russian batteries cleave lines through it. It wavers, it pauses, it rushes forward, it takes shelter beneath the forehead of the hill on which the great Redoubt stands, and then declines, a mere swarm of ants to look at from this distance, towards the belching roar and smoke and flame. And on a sudden the batteries are silent, and far and far there goes up a cheer. And then there is silence again, and a long waiting, and the grave massive oblongs and cubes of masonry come down on this side and on that, and the watchers in the valley wait in a tense and terrible strain. Where are the reinforcements? Where is the Duke of Cambridge, with the Guards? Hidden away there in a wrinkle of the hill they are waiting for some unknown reason, and the conquerors of the great Redoubt seem doomed. But after awful minutes and minutes, which stretch to hours, the line sweeps up. Raglan's immortal two guns come into play from the knoll on the distant right, and the tide of battle is turned again. And all the while we of the cavalry division are maddened with excitement, and consumed by ennui, by turns, wearied with thirst and heat, and waiting in vain for our chance to strike a blow at the enemy. Bored and tired and athirst, the men who have stood for hours at the bridle throw themselves on the sunburned grass. No chance for us to-day, says one to the other, and the tide of battle, now grown invisible, is rolling noisily here and there, now seeming as if it would vanish altogether into the air, and now as if a flying enemy had suddenly taken heart and were back in swift return. And here is a hill to the west of us, and the hot sun, yet shining clean and bright through whiffs and shreds of scattered smoke, goes down behind it, and the shadow lengthens, and creeps up the brown-green face of the hill to the left. And lo, on a sudden, a sweating galloper on the crest of the hill, with his horse one lather from haunch to bridle, is tearing down with orders. Here is old Stacey in the saddle again, and his hoarse voice is calling. The tired and thirsty souls are alert in an instant, and away go the Heavy Dragoons at a walk until the hill is breasted. Then at a trot, a canter, a gallop, a charge. For the masses of the enemy are all huddled in disorderly crowds away there in the pass, and it needs

but one decisive blow to smite them into utter rout and scatter them like chaff. Then was an hour when the fate of a great campaign lay in the balance; and because that hour was not chosen England had to pour out her blood and her treasure in one mingled torrent for a year or two. For as the charging regiment was in amongst the lingerers of the retreat, the pursuit was called away. The keener spirits had naturally ridden furthest, and there was no man there that day who was keener than Polson Jervase. When the bugles rang out the *'Retire*,' he would, had he been in command, have risked a plagiarism of Nelson, with a glass at the blind eye, and would have failed to recognise the recalling signal. But he was a unit, and a private unit at that. And he was already half emmeshed amidst the edges of the flying crowd, and actually at their mercy, if any of the fugitives had found so much as a sheep's heart to awake within him.

So he turned and galloped back, and since he had been one of the first in the advance, he was naturally one of the last to retreat. There had been a rare burst of a downhill mile or two, and his horse, unfed and unwatered within the last twelve hours, was in need of mercy. He rode the poor beast tenderly, caressing him as he went, and looking up he was aware of an officer in staff uniform, who was rounding up the stragglers. There are few things that appeal more directly from man to man than the sympathy of the sound and rooted sportsman. Polson had followed the hounds almost from the time when he could first bestride a pony; and the sight of a clean workman across bad country was like wine to him at any time. This fellow in the cocked hat and waving plumes was splendidly mounted, to be sure, but the going was as treacherous and difficult as it well could be, and the horseman rode with an address and daring which were delightful to look at. He waved an urgent hand from three or four hundred yards away towards Polson, who responded by a gesture indicating the route he meant to take. The last straggler having been thus rounded up, the officer turned and reined in his charger for a final look at the retreating forces of the enemy; and somewhere from the black middle mass of them down in the shadow of the valley there came a flash and a volley of smoke, and almost directly afterwards an echoing boom of sound. The charger reared, drooped upon his haunches, and fell over; the rider dropped with admirable agility on one side and avoided the threatened mischief of the fall. There were scores of unmastered steeds racing about the valley and the upward slopes; Polson rode for the nearest, and, having secured it, cantered up to the place where the dead charger lay, A round shot had ploughed its way clean through the noble creature's chest, and the sight was pitiable and gruesome.

'Here is a mount, sir,' said the young dragoon. 'Not as good as your own, but it will carry you back to camp, anyhow.'

As he spoke, the epauletted cocked-hatted owner of the slaughtered charger was leaning downward, detaching something from a holster, and when he looked up he displayed the features of Major de Blacquaire.

Until that instant neither could have recognised the other, but at the first glance there was a challenge in the eyes of either.

'Thanks, my man,' said De Blacquaire, laying a hand upon the rein which Polson held out towards him.

Nothing could have been more savagely incisive than the tone, nothing more purposed to wound.

You caught this horse rather cleverly,' said De Blacquaire, 'and I'm very much obliged to you. Of course, you understand that a man doesn't go into

action with a lot of money about him; but if you'll ask for me at headquarters this evening, Major de Blacquaire, you'll find half-a-sovereign waiting for you. You can ask my man for it.'

The Major stood drawling there, with purposed insult in word and tone and smile, and Polson, leaning downward, drew his dragoon's gauntlet from the left hand, and struck him across the face with it.

'I suppose,' he said, 'that's flat mutiny, and whilst I am about it, here's another sample of the same.'

The Major retreated behind his horse, and stood there, almost speechless with indignation.

'I threatened you with a hiding once before,' said Polson. 'And you were cur enough to run away. I told you on the day I joined that if we ever met again and by word or look or gesture you insulted me, I would spoil that handsome face of yours. You can report against me, if you like, and I dare say that if you do it may go pretty hard with me. But I will let you off for the moment with what you have taken, and for the present I will say good evening to you.'

He drew on his gauntlet as he spoke, and turned his horse's head.

'Wait there,' said De Blacquaire. 'I have just one word to say to you. You know that I could have you triced to the triangle and flogged?' Polson nodded, but said nothing. His eyes spoke for him. 'You know I could have you court-martialled and shot?'

'Like enough,' said Polson. Major de Blacquaire swung into the saddle. 'I don't care to take revenge that way,' he said. 'I have known you always for an impudent and underbred young cub; but you go by way of pretending to be a gentleman, and I have my punishment in store for you. I learned something of you from your friend, Captain Volnay, and amongst other things I find you are playing Quixote. When the campaign is over you'll be going back to the old thief's thousands. I will give you a gaol-bird to go back to. I have at quarters what amounts to a confession. It's an offer of restitution from Mr. Jervase; and I am not disposed to accept it. The case must slumber until this little business is over; but when I get back I will make a criminal prosecution of it, and you may make up your mind for whatever it may be worth that the work of this last five minutes has made a felon of that blackguard of a father.'

'And that,' said Polson, 'is an English officer's answer to a blow!'

'Yes,' said De Blacquaire, 'that is the English officer's answer.' And so saying, he put in spurs and rode away.

Chapter X

Here we are, fifteen months later, with Balaclava and Inkerman behind us, and the world ringing with the story of our valour; and something here and there being said about the staring incapacity of our commanders and the crass dishonesty and stupidity of our contractors. The army which left home in such bright array is transformed to a crowd of ragged vagabonds, and all the services are mixed together in the trenches and the camps before Sevastopol. Here are men of the Horse Artillery whose batteries have lost their horses; and here are cavalrymen dismounted, whether by reason of warlike misadventure or the sheer starvation of horseflesh. And since folks must do something for their

bread in campaigning times, as at more peaceful seasons, the rules and regulations of special branches of the military service are cast aside, and men of every arm are working in the trenches together. A crowd of vagabonds we are to look at, to be sure; but a year of war, if you only think of it, makes a boy a veteran, and the bronzed, weatherbeaten, and ragged lads of whom the army is in the main composed, have lived in an atmosphere of powder for a year past; have gone marching and counter-marching under shot and shell; and charging, and repelling charges, until the imminent peril of their lives is a great deal more familiar to them than their daily bread. The peril is there always, and the bread turns up with extreme fitfulness.

On the Christmas Eve of 'fifty-five there was a time of excitement in the second parallel before the Malakoff; and this was not because of any special danger of the siege or any threatened imminent assault, but simply and merely because of the late slaughter of a pig of tender age whose screams had come up from the Turkish camp about the witching hour of midnight.

Amongst the war-worn, ragged, bronzed and bearded crowd is that identical Paddy who reckoned his uniform the livery of his degradation when he first assumed it. He is as ragged as any Connemara harvester by this time, and as tanned, as plucky, and as impudent in the face of death and hardship as he knows how to stick; and it is he who has brought the news which flutters the spirits of the score of men who are huddled in the trench together, right beneath the gaping embrasure of the Russian guns.

It was near midnight, and an extreme languor of fatigue had fallen upon all men when the tattered slip of Hibernian nobility crawled up on hands and knees so as not to expose himself against the sky-line, and dropped into his own place in the trench. He dropped with his feet on the stomach of Sergeant Polson Jervase, who denounced his clumsiness in fair set terms, which came as pat to his lips as if he had rehearsed them for a year.

'Is that you?' said Paddy. 'I beg yer pardon, and be damned to you. And now will ye just listen? D'ye hear the death cry?'

Everybody heard the death cry, filling the air from barely a third of a mile away: the voice of pork at the last agony.

'The Lord alone knows where it's come from, but that Mussulman crush down below has got hold of a pig. The devil a ration has been served to them for a month past, and they ought to know what hunger means be this time. But bhoys,' the speaker went on, with a whispered emphasis, 'we're Christian men, I hope, and we can't dream of allowing those poor infidels to peril their immortal salvation by the eating of strange food. It's eternal loss to the soul of a Mussulman that puts a knife and fork into a griskin. And I'm proposin' a work of Christian charity. Have ye got the matayrials for a fire handy?'

One of the men sleepily bade him be damned, and turned over in the mud in a scrap of ragged blanket; but all the rest at the bare suggestion of a meal were wide awake. 'Sergeant, darlin', just be giving me half-a-dozen men and we will make an exploitation, and be back in no time with a meal of meat that ought to be good enough for this particular mess from now till New Year's Day. Is there any chance of a fire now?'

A member of the hungry, hard-bitten band owned a solitary lucifer; but was afraid that the damp had deprived it of all virtue.

'Hurry up, boys,' said one. 'If once those blessed Bazouks get a fork into piggy, we shall have to fight for a share of him.'

'We've got the makings of a fire here somewhere,' said the man with the solitary lucifer. 'But how are we to start it? This brushwood stuff is all wet, and it won't catch.'

But one man was there with a providential scrap of newspaper. There was a moon in the frosty sky, with tatters of windy cloud about it, which gave light enough to show the men each others' faces dimly, and they all clustered in a rough ring, some kneeling, some standing, and the centre of the throng was the man with the match. Near him, second only in importance, was the man with the newspaper, and kneeling near was a third who stirred up the loose brushwood below the heaped fuel which had been gathered and hoarded for a month past for a Christmas fire.

'Here's a dry pebble,' said one man, pressing solicitously forward, and proffering his midnight find to the man with the match. 'Strike her on that, and for God's sake hold your breath, boys.'

The human centre of interest, the man with the match, took the pebble and polished it to complete dryness on the lining of his overcoat. Then he struck the match, which emitted a faint phosphorescent glow, and went dark again.

In those days, when a Russian gunner felt aweary, and found a lack of interest in the crawling hours of darkness, he would let bang a gun from the Redoubt, simply pour passer le temps; and at this minute the skipping 'zip' of a shot, a splutter of earth, and then the sullen boom of the discharge came to give variation to the scene. The lucifer match, however, was the all-absorbing centre of interest just then, and the scratch on the pebble was a much more important sound than any bellow of cannon from the fort. The lucifer was barely equal to its duties, and half-a-dozen times it gave its feeble spark of phosphorescent light in vain; but at last it struck, and the blue and yellow sulphur bubbled and crackled into flame. The man with the newspaper was ready, and caught the fire. The wet twigs smoked pungently, and there was one heart-sinking moment when the last chance seemed to have vanished; but then the fire sparkled up merrily, and the blaze lit the earthen side of the trench and the silky-bearded, bronzed, unwashed faces, and the stalwart, tattered figures of the crowd, with a flickering changeful brightness.

'That's all right, boys,' said the Honourable Patrick Erroll, Private of Dragoons. 'And now, Sergeant darlin', give me half-a-dozen rank and file, and, please God, well have a meal for Christmas morning.'

'Now, I'm just as keen as any one of you,' said Sergeant Jervase, 'and just as hungry; but be very quiet about the business, Paddy, and don't have a row with the Bashis, for the Lord's sake.'

'Trust me, Sergeant,' said the Honourable Mr. Erroll, 'and nurse the fire whilst we're away.'

Out of the blank darkness of the night the flame and glow from the second parallel seemed to bite a hole; and as its brightness grew, it drew the attention of the gunners of the Malakoff, who banged at it sulkily from time to time. But the reckless contingent under Paddy's leadership had already clambered to the open and were making a muddy way in the darkness towards the Turkish camp.

Down in the trench the fire grew to a rich and splendid glow, and one or two of the favoured of fortune, who owned pipes and tobacco, plucked bright embers from it, and, nestling under the shelter of the wall, sucked away at their comfort with simple animal noises of satisfaction.

'I say, Bill,' says one, 'was you ever Hingry before you seen this Gawd-forsaken Crimea?'

'Lor' love yer,' says the man questioned, 'I was born hungry, and I've been hungry ever since. But if the Honourable Paddy finds that 'og, and I get hold of a hind leg of him, I won't complain before to-morrow midnight.'

The fire glowed with a richer and a richer light, and men of hospitable minds wiped their half-smoked clays on the inside crook of a coated elbow and passed on luxury and refreshment to less-favoured neighbours. It was a time for comradeship, if only for the fact that it was Christmas Eve, and coming fast towards Christmas morning. But the thought of the slain porker was in all men's minds, and made them expansive and generous and reserved by turns. Boom! said the gun from the Redoubt, and the earth spluttered between the collar of Sergeant Polson's jacket and his neck, and dribbled comfortlessly down his back, colder than any charity he had known of: lately-frozen earth, half thawed, with wet snow on the top of it, and a sulky boom behind to add a threat to its cold sting.

After long waiting, a voice in ecstatic laughter, and surely the voice of the Honourable Paddy, Shuffling footsteps in the dark, and the hungriest of the whole crowd in the trench climbing to peer into the blackness; a youth who has not yet finished growing, and who finds the irregularity of meals a cruel thing.

'I'd like to know,' says the Honourable Mr. Erroll cheerfully, 'who trusted those infernal Russians with a gun? They'll be hurting somebody by and by, if they're not careful. But here's the pig, boys, and there's nobody but poor little Ahmed Bey the worse for us. I knocked him on the head from behind, and we'll be none the worse friends to-morrow.'

Bang, and bang, and bang! sounded the guns from the Russian battery, drawn by the light; but a delicious odour rose upon the air, and the teeth of the little contingent watered. There was a ramrod with Sergeant Polson at one end of it, and Paddy Erroll at the other, and the loveliest loin of young pork in the middle; and the two, with scorched hands and scorched faces, turned, and turned, and turned the improvised spit. And there were some less nice in appetite who had raked out heaps of glowing cinders from the fire, and had lain succulent slices thereon and buried them in more cinders, and who were now enjoying a compound feast of pork and charcoal, with such an insane relish as no home-staying epicure could conceive over the lordliest dish the combined cuisine of the whole wide world could show him.

'What are you up to here, you fellows?' said a voice out of the darkness. 'That's a jolly appetising smell.'

'Fresh roast pork, sir,' responded one man with his mouth full.

'Fresh roast pork!' echoed the inquirer. 'Hillo—that you, Sergeant? You're in luck. I'll join your mess if you make no objection.'

'Nobody more welcome than Captain Volnay, sir,' said Polson. 'Find that old bread-box, one of you, and give Captain Volnay a seat.'

'Hurry up!' said Volnay. 'That smell is maddening. How did you men come in for such a treasure trove as this?'

'I'm Columbus,' said the Honourable Paddy, tinning the ramrod spit.

'Why, by Jingo!' cried Volnay, 'you've got a whole pig here. I say, Sergeant, I'm going to confiscate a leg for our Christmas mess. You don't think you fellows are going to be allowed to sit gourmandising here whilst we go hungry!'

One man, sheltered by the shadow, answered sneeringly:

'Precious little going hungry amongst your set, sir,' said he.

'And precious little you know about it, my good fellow,' Volnay answered, with his sunny laugh. 'Life isn't all beer and skittles amongst your officers, let me tell you.'

'I'd like to change, sir,' said the malcontent.

'Would you?'asked the Captain. 'Well, I dare say you would. But we all have enough to grumble at, and to spare, if we happen to be built that way. Just expedite that joint, Sergeant.'

'It will be all the better for another turn or two, sir,' said Polson. 'It's a deadly pity, but there's no such thing as a hint of crackling. Piggy came along with his bristles on, and we have no shaving tackle.'

'Who goes there?' cried a voice in the darkness, two score yards away.

'Grand rounds,' said another voice. It was Major de Blacquaire's, and Polson had not heard it since the day of the Alma, a year and three months ago.

'Halt, grand rounds, and give the countersign.'

'Bonnie Dundee.'

'Pass, grand rounds, and all's well.'

Grand rounds came tramping down the trench and the men about the fire rose up and stood to attention.

'What is this?' asked De Blacquaire. 'Who's in charge here?'

'I am, sir,' Polson answered, saluting.

'What's the meaning of this blaze here? Can't you see that you're drawing the enemy's fire? Report yourself to me at noon to-morrow. Scatter that stuff, and trample it out.'

A foot was thrust into the embers, and they flared up suddenly. The Major recognised his enemy, and looked from his eyes to the stripes upon the left sleeve of his ragged overcoat.

'Is that your own coat?' he asked. 'Yes, sir.'

'Sergeant are you? I'll break you for this to-morrow.'

'That you, old chap?' drawled Volnay from his seat on the bread-box. 'Said you were dead. We've got no end of a find here. Whole pig. If you'll let me know where to find you, I've bagged a ham, and I'll invite myself to dine with you, and bring my own rations with me.'

'Thaanks,' said De Blacquaire. 'Don't trouble. I shall find it my duty to report this scene of riot and disorder. Forward. March.'

Grand rounds went by, and the scattered fire faded.

'If you can manage to hack a slice of that pork off, Sergeant!' said Volnay, 'I'm beastly hungry.'

'Done, I think, to a turn,' said Polson. 'Who's got anything that will cut?'

'I'm tould, sir,' said a voice out of the darkness, with a rich oily brogue in it, 'that there's hours of difference between here and Limerick. Won't it be Christmas morning in old Ireland, sir? And will the bells be ringing?'

'Ye're out in your reckonin',' said another voice amid the shadows. 'It's exactly the other way. Your folks is going to bed in Limerick. The sun has a knack of risin' in the east, my lad, and we're far east of Ireland, or Aberdeen for that matter. I'm not mindin' the exact particulars, but it's a matter of some two hours, I'm thinking. It's deep midnight here, and an hour or so beyond it, and they'll be over their punchbowls, yonner. That's so, sir, I'm believin'?'

'I don't know, upon my word,' said Volnay. 'You're out of my depth, my lad. But it's a bit of a sin to talk about punch-bowls, isn't it, on a night like this,

when there isn't a hot drink within a hundred miles? Sergeant, this pork is like manna in the wilderness. Look me up before you report yourself to Major de Blacquaire, will you? I'm responsible for the fire, you understand. It was my duty to retire the whole crowd of you under arrest, I know, but there isn't a lot of fun going for you beggars here, is there? Goodnight, Sergeant, and don't forget the hour in the morning.'

'Good-night, sir.' 'God go with you, sir.' 'A merry Christmas and a loight harrut to you, sir, for many a year.'

'That's your man, nah, Sergeant,' said one man out of the shadow in a tone that was learned in Rotherham, or very near it. 'Ah like Captain Volnay as mooch as ah like anybody. He's got a kind of a way with him an' he sits dahn with the like of huz, and he talks to us as if we was men in place o' bein' cattle, which is the way with most on 'em. Here's good luck to Captain Volnay, an' if ah'd got a glass o' that steamin' poonch they'n got in Aberdeen, ode bird, ah'd scald my throat with a relish.'

They were all full of roast pork, or of pork more or less roasted, and the scent of the sacrifice was yet in the air, and their war-bitten souls were cheered and warmed, if ever so little.

'Yis,' said one lad, 'if half the quality knowed!'

'Hallo!' said Polson, turning in the fragrant dark. 'How far from Bilston were you born?'

'Wedgebury,' said the voice. 'No furder.'

'Beacon Hargate, me,' said Polson. 'I'd ha' guessed it, Sergeant. I'd ha' guessed it. I niver heerd your voice afore to-night, but there's a kind of a turn of the tongue in it now and then.'

The contingent fell to silence, and a wet clinging snow began, ruled in straight lines. The embers of the fire hissed under it, and the men drew themselves into such shelter as they could find, and waited in the grey, cold patience for the expected relief from duty. It was long in coming, and they learned afterwards that the regimental Sergeant-major, whose duty it ought to have been to relieve them on that Christmas morning, was dead from dysentery, poor fellow, and as a matter of fact it turned out that he was buried in the muddy earth and half frozen in there before anybody remembered to take up his duty.

The long, long night went on, and the Russian gunner, finding his attention no longer drawn to the distant fire, had gone to sleep or anyhow fallen silent, when a witching noise rose upon the air, and all the worn, half-sleeping men sat up to listen. Surely there was the sound of church bells, and there was a rush towards the pleasant noise. It was only a man from the smithy who happened to have a musical ear and had rigged up a kind of gallows from which he had hung carbine and rifle barrels of varying lengths and calibre, on the which he was beating with an iron rod. The sulky dull beginning of the dawn on Christmas Day, and there in the trenches the Christmas bells ringing as they might have rung in any village church in old England, two thousand miles away. And the hearts of the listeners rose to their throats, and men were quiet whilst the music sounded. The notes reached far, and fell on many a drowsy ear, conjuring up visions in the half-slumbering minds of humble whitewashed village steeples, far and far away. Polson's contingent, drawn from a distance of some two hundred yards, stuffed that ingenious musician with half-cold roast pork, and left him well rewarded for his toils.

By one of those surprising fatuities which distinguished this particular campaign almost above all others in which the English private soldier has been engaged, an attack which was ordered for black midnight was ready just in the grey of dawn, and Polson's ear caught a whispered word of command here and there, and a noise of careful footsteps. The trench of the second parallel was ten feet deep, but there was a ladder of foot-holes just behind him, and he turned and climbed, digging his fingers into the half-frozen turf on the Russian side. There was the grim Redoubt at which the English guns had hammered in vain this many and many a day, still solidly silhouetted against the clearing sky of morning, dark and lowering, quiet as death and yet from old experience holding a threat in the entrails of it. The men—three or four thousand of them, as one might guess—climbed into the trench of the first parallel and were lost to sight. They emerged crouching, and raced across the space which intervened between them and the second, where Polson's own post lay. They were down like a dumb wind on the one side and up again on the other, and raced, crouching, for the first, into which they again disappeared. The man who shouldered Polson from his place, and whose face as he went by might be distinctly seen, was Major de Blacquaire.

'Leading a forlorn hope, you devil, are you?' said the Sergeant to himself; but the words were silent, and he felt a simple throb of admiration for the set mouth and resolute eyes of the man who had climbed past him, and wished himself in his place.

The racing, crouching crowd had dived into the foremost trench and had reappeared again before it was discerned by the Russian sentries; but a hundred yards away from the foot of the glacis, the whole advance was caught and swept and twisted, as by a whirlwind, by a hail of gunshot, canister and rifle fire. The half-melted, new-fallen snow clung to the sloping glacis of the Redoubt, and made a greyish background of dim light against which a watcher could perceive not only the whole motion of the line, but the gesture of any single figure in it. Hate and interest and admiration alike prompted Polson's eyes to follow the slim, active figure with the waving sword which silently beckoned on his followers. The Redoubt opened, as it were, with an earthquake crash, and all the black front of it went fiery red and yellow, and at the first discharge of this inferno, the figure with the flourished sabre in his right hand fell prone. The double line of the invaders shook and wavered from right to left, and men dropped amongst them as if the scythe of Death were literally sweeping there. The lines advanced, wavered, paused, turned, turned again, advanced again with mad cheering, scarce heard amid the rattle of musketry and the roaring of the guns; and finally broke and ran, utterly routed. The onlooker had no part in this conflict except to bite and ram down a cartridge or two and to send a shot more or less at random into the black oblong of the opposing fort; but clinging with his feet on that precarious muddy ladder, and with his elbows to the frozen turf, he saw clearly the convulsive gesture with which De Blacquaire lifted his sabre in a last effort to wave on his men.

Man is a very complex creature, and he will not be finally analysed and done with until this planet is very much older than it was in the nineteenth Christian century. Whether it was hate, or personal pride, or a sudden flash of admiration for a man whom he had hitherto despised, Polson Jervase could not have told you to his dying day.

But though the motives which inspired him were very wildly mixed and very uncertain in their origin, there is no doubt whatever as to the deed to which amongst themselves they inspired him that Christmas morning. The Malakoff belched hell. The flying crowds hustled him and threw him twice or thrice. But he was on his feet again, racing towards that prone figure. He dropped into the front trench and trod upon a wounded man who screamed beneath his heel, and climbed out on the further side. The air was musical with hooting shell and singing shot and hissing bullet as if a whole diabolic orchestra were fiddling and bugling. Polson found the fallen body of his foe, and hugged it in his arms, and raced back as hard as he could tear. He tumbled into the trench of the first parallel almost anyhow; but he gripped the man he hated, and in his soul was a great rejoicing. He tore up the opposite side, and came out upon the open slope again, with the unconscious man still in his arms.

'You'll ruin me, you devil!' said Polson, as he ran breathlessly with the wind of shot and shell in his ears. 'And I'm to report myself to you to-morrow, am I? We may report ourselves to Almighty God together, but you are safe for the minute, I guess.'

He was within a yard of his own post when these mad exaltations of an excited fancy crossed his mind, and at that instant a musket shot took him in the neck and he fell with his burden into the trench before him.

Chapter XI

We swoop, as it were, to the skies, and we drop, as it were, to the very sea bed, and we are seasick to the souls of us, one and all; and of the five hundred men the staunch boat carries, there are a round four hundred and fifty wounded, and a round four hundred who will never see the skies with conscious eyes again. We are bound for Scutari, where an enlightened intelligence, awakened at last to some beginning of elementary necessity, has established a hospital; for Government, as usual in such matters, after five hundred years of more or less victorious prowling to and fro in the world and more of gathered experience than any other body of men ever had in the history of the world, has positively made up its mind to shelter broken bones and sick bodies from the mere inclemencies of the weather.

It would not have done so much had it not been for the intervention of a lady whose name deserves to be immortal so long as the British Empire paints itself red upon the map; but Florence Nightingale had enlisted the sympathy of English hearts more quickly than the Queen's shilling had enlisted fighting men, and the Crimean hospitals were the centre of a thousand human interests. The authorities had somehow caught and impounded the good ship CÆSAR at Odessa, and had despatched it to a desert bay with no landing place or chartered sounding, near Ouklacool Aides, and, having loaded it there with wounded, had ordered it across to the Black Sea and down the Dardanelles. The stout Ayrshire heart of the captain was sick and sore within him many a time on that grim voyage, for before it was half over he had spent his last round shot on board and his last bit of spare canvas in the sewing up and weighting of men who were fated to be buried in the deep.

Amongst those who escaped this dreary fate were Polson Jervase and the enemy he had rescued at so grave a risk of his own life, and they two, with about one half the original human cargo of the ship, reached Scutari, and were landed there, and carried into hospital. A rough sea voyage in January weather in the Black Sea affords no pleasant nurture for a wounded man, and the poor fellows who were carried or helped ashore were a pitiable crew indeed. Neither Polson nor his enemy was conscious at the hour of landing, or had been truly conscious throughout the whole of the long and trying voyage. They were lowered in their stretchers from the ship's side to the caiques which were brought alongside, pulled to the shore and carried by hand to the hospital. They were luckier in this respect than the majority of the men, who were huddled into the straw of the lumbering octagonal-wheeled arabas. The rustic Turk had not yet mastered the art, even if he has mastered it to-day, of constructing a cartwheel in a circle. He makes it eight-sided, and builds his vehicles without springs, and the wounded went along the vile road with a compound jolt for every foot of ground they traversed. There are men yet living who remember that piercing scene, and the cries which were wrung from the hearts of the stoutest fighting men in the world along that via dolorosa. It happened that the rescued and the rescuer were laid side by side, each on a bed some twenty inches in width; and there they were tended many days before either of them awoke to a real knowledge of his surroundings. In their waking hours they babbled deliriously, the pair of them, letting out the secrets of their very souls, if anybody had been there to listen. Day by day, and night by night, Polson, as he remembered afterwards, heard the best loved voice in the world from time to time, and sometimes with it and sometimes alone the voice he hated most. The wind was blowing the rain against the windows of the grey-stone house on Beacon Hill, and Irene and his father were whispering secrets together in the parlour. Then De Blacquaire was chattering there and saying all manner of things which were not pertinent to the case in hand, and Irene was answering him. John Jervase was talking by turns to all three, and was sometimes absurdly sentimental, dropping tears on the listener's upturned face. All this was so strange and confused, so much a dream of delirium, that when at last the sufferer awoke to reason, he attached no meaning to it.

It was the 1st of February, as he found out afterwards, and he had been crazy for five weeks. He stared feebly up at the ceiling and wondered as to his whereabouts. He tried to lift a hand, but he might have worn a gauntlet of lead, it felt so heavy; though, when at last he struggled into a changed posture, it looked as if it were made of egg-shell porcelain, it was so thin and worn.

'I wonder,' he said within himself—and this was his first conscious thought, 'I wonder if I saved that sweep.' And then at his side he heard De Blacquaire's voice.

'Thank you,' it was saying. 'You're awfully sweet and kind, and I'm very much obliged to you. That is much easier.'

Polson was greatly interested, but in the very act of turning over to look at his enemy, and to find out whom he was addressing, he fell into a deep sleep. The next time he came back to consciousness it was dark, except for a sickly burning oil lamp on a sconce fixed against a wall at a little distance. He began to be aware of the fact that he was amazingly hungry, and the memory of what he imagined to have been his last meal came back to him. He laughed feebly, and he spoke.

'I wonder what the beggars did with the rest of that pig.'

There was the sound beside him as of an emotional snuffle, and John Jervase blew his nose resoundingly, so that Polson knew that his father was there before the old man bent his head above him. He was too weak to be surprised at anything, and had no earthly notion as to his own whereabouts.

'Why, you've come round again, Polly,' said his father. 'You know me, don't you?'

It was in Polson's mind to return a hearty nod in the affirmative, but all he managed to do was to close his eyes and open them again.

'Why, that's hearty!' said Jervase, smoothing the bedclothes above him with a tremulous hand. 'That's hearty, old chap. They said you wouldn't pull through, but I knew better all along. Now, you was to take this, if you woke up, and you've got to keep very still and quiet. This is the very best beef tea as you can get for love or money in all Asia Minor. You let me tuck this napkin under your chin, Polly, and I'll feed you with a golden tablespoon. You'd 'ardly believe it, but I bought this in Vienna on my way out here, and it used to belong to the Empress Catherine of Rooshia, and I gave a twenty-pun' note for it, and it's got her monogram. You don't mind me chattering, old chap, but I don't want to excite you, and it's the doctor's orders that I mustn't; but it's pretty nigh on two years now since I set eyes on you, and when you get stronger and begin to walk about again, I shall have a heap of things to tell you.'

The wounded man lay face upwards, and sipped at the tepid liquid presented to his lips with a huge physical enjoyment. In his whole life he had never conceived of so complete a pleasure. Only the convalescent knows the joys of the table.

'That's the last spoonful, Polly,' said John Jervase, wiping the pale lips with the napkin he had tucked beneath the invalid's chin at the beginning of the meal. 'You'd like more, wouldn't you?'

Folson tried to nod again, and again achieved nothing more than a lowering and raising of the eyelids.

'You haven't got to have it, you know, old chap. You've got to be kept hungry. It's been touch and go for weeks, but you'll be all right now, if we take care of you. And I reckon we'll do that amongst us.'

A weary voice rose from the neighbouring bed.

'Stop that infernal cackle, whoever you are, and let me sleep. Don't you know better than to make a row like that in a hospital?'

Once more Polson—this time wide awake—was conscious of the voice of his enemy.

'It's all right,' his father whispered. 'I'll come back next time you've got to be fed, old chap, but he doesn't like me, and he's been down on me a hundred times already.'

The sick man stared at the ceiling where the oil lamp in its sconce on the wall had made a smoky semi-circle, and where the yellow light now slept upon the whitewash within the limits of the smoked half-ring. He was too weak to think very deeply, and too weak to feel very strongly; but the sense of home within his mind, and the father was the father, and the voice and the hand had never been unkind since he could remember, and the scorn and passion of his heart had somehow worn away, and he was not angry or contemptuous or full of hatred as he had been.

Jervase leaned over him in a momentary farewell, and Polson saw that the old man's eyes were full of tears. One dropped plump and warm on the tip of his own nose, and there was something comic and touching in the fact, and he giggled and snuffled over it to the verge of a weak hysteria.

'I wasn't to disturb you, Polly,' said Jervase, 'and I'm misbehaving myself. I've got to go, and you've got to go to sleep; but I'll be back as soon as ever they'll let me, and in a day or two's time you'll be strong enough for you and me to have a talk together.'

'I wish,' said the feeble, drawling voice from the neighbouring bed, 'that you would hold your tongue or go. I want to sleep.'

John Jervase stooped to kiss Polson on the forehead, and went his way down the silent ward, with his boots creaking with a fainter and fainter sound, until he reached the folding doors at the far end of the dormitory.

The lad lay quiet. He had parted with his father in bitter disdain and anger, but somehow these emotions had all departed from him by this time, and had left him as if they had been an evil spirit, banished by some better influence. He did not know—he was too weak and tired to think about things—but at his side there was an angry stirring and a peevish voice spoke to him.

'That's you, is it?'

Polson, a little strengthened by the food he had taken, managed to roll round upon his shoulder, and looked his late enemy in the face.

'It's I,' he said. 'Indubitably. And it's you, to a certainty. Where did you get hit?'

There was so long a silence that each thought that the other had fallen asleep; but when it had endured for perhaps the space of twenty minutes, De Blacquaire began to turn and murmur, and at last his words found an articulate form.

'I say,' he began, 'you there! You! Sergeant! Are you awake?'

'Wide,' said Polson.

The man beside him lay with pallid face and big bird-like eyes, staring at the smoked semi-circle on the ceiling, and after the inquiry he had offered and the answer given, there was silence again, whilst a man might have counted twenty.

'They've told me all about it,' said Major de Blacquaire, 'and I don't understand it.

'And I want to understand. What in the name of hell did you fetch me out for?'

'You go to sleep,' said Polson, 'and don't ask ridiculous questions.'

'I want to know,' said De Blacquaire.

'I'll tell you to-morrow,' the Sergeant answered. 'But it's no good thinking about things just now.'

Again there was a silence, and it lasted for a full hour. The rank petroleum lamp in the sconce burnt out and left a sickening stench upon the air. The whole space in which the wounded men lay went dark, and the wild free wind and the cruel driving rain beat at the window. In the black darkness voices spoke here and there. There were notes of fever from wounded men, and once or twice there was a last message whispered to a nurse's ear, never to be delivered. Dark and storm, and the heroic long-suffering soul released from the heroic long-suffering body, and going home at midnight.

Sick men who have been half-starved for a year or two, and who have run through every note of the gamut of emotion, may be quicker to appreciate these influences than common people are: but Polson Jervase, lying on his back and staring upwards in a futile endeavour to trace the semi-circular ring of smoke upon the ceiling, felt them all deeply.

Whilst he lay there, staring upwards, there was a sudden patter of bare feet on the bare floor at his side, and a hand clutched him.

'Look here,' said Major de Blacquaire, and even in his half dream he knew the voice instantly, as if he had been wide awake and the room had lain in broad daylight. 'Look here, what the devil did you do it for?'

'Get back into bed,' said Polson, 'and I'll try to talk to you.'

The beds were not more than twenty inches in width, and there was barely a foot between them, so that a man by the stretching of a hand could touch a comrade.

Out of the dark, to the Sergeant's intense surprise, there came a groping hand, which sought his own, and found it and Clutched it.

'What the devil did you do it for?' said De Blacquaire.

'Well,' said the wounded Sergeant, 'it's pretty hard to say. I suppose it's a mixed-up kind of thing altogether. I saw you drop, and you promised to break me in the morning, and if I'd let your chance go by, d'ye see——'

'See! 'said De Blacquaire, holding on to the hand in the darkness. 'You're not half a bad fellow, Jervase.'

'Ain't I?' said Jervase. 'You go on like this, Major, and I shall begin to think that you're a better sort than I fancied you were.'

The two men went to sleep together, each holding the other's hand. It was an odd thing, and quite unlikely to have been prophesied by anybody; but it happened.

An hour or two later, when the elder Jervase stole in on tiptoe, with a new cup of priceless beef-tea, he saw the two men lying there, with their faces turned to each other, as if they had been lovers, and hand holding hand. He took Polson by the wrist, and shook the grasp gently asunder.

'You've got to take this, old chap,' he said, and setting down the candle he carried, and fixing it by its own grease to the rough hospital table at the bed head, he began to feed the boy once more.

You are not to imagine the ward silent all this time. There are valiant souls of men passing with every hour, and groans of death and anguish, and all the living axe conscious.

When Jervase had fed the Sergeant to the last teaspoonful, he retired again, leaving the candle burning on the table at the bed head.

'These poor chaps,' he said, 'may find a little bit of comfort in a light, and any way, good English wax don't stink like Turkish lamp oil, does it, old chap?'

The 'old chap' winked. He had no strength to express himself in any more emphatic manner; but he had got to love his father once again, for, after all, the ties of blood are strong, and a man may have been a wrong doer without giving his own son an eternal cause to hate him. And when a man has a bullet hole through the neck, and has been unconscious for many days, and delirious for many weeks, and finds a once familiar face bending over him, habit asserts itself; and any hatred or despite which may have come in between two people long ago is likely to be scattered. It was a foreign air which howled about the gables and chimneys. It was a foreign wind which wept and moaned about that

abode of sorrow, and drove the rain against the window panes. But to the boy, the feel of whose father's hand was still warm in his own, it was home, home, home. The candle dwindled down, and he had been watchful enough to prevent the whole place being set on fire by waiting to blow out its final flame as it drove towards the bare wood on which it rested. Darkness came down and slumber with it; and then on the top of slumber a quiet whisper and a dawning light which waked many men in the long bare corridor. There was a candle carried by a hospital nurse in the sombre uniform of her craft, and behind it came a lady whom every waking man there present turned to thank, if it were only by a movement of the enfeebled hand, or a droop of the eyelid, or a motion of the deadened lips. Men who are dying after long sickness in hospital cannot cheer. Men who fall in the full tide of the strength of manhood on the battlefield can acclaim their leader. The wasted forces had naturally gone, but as the gleaming candle light led Florence Nightingale from couch to couch, the wakers turned and gave such signals as they could. The pitying, watchful, gracious face went by, and the candle light departed.

A good many weeks and months went by before the name of the owner of that gracious face and that memorable smile was known even to the parting souls and suffering bodies which were cheered by it.

Spring comes up earlier in the region of Scutari than it does in London, and there were many scores of ragged silken-bearded fellows rambling up and down the streets of the place on crutches before the first leaf had declared itself in any park in London, and almost before the first wayside flower had bloomed in any English country hedgerow.

Away to the north-east of the hospital lies that cemetery which for many a year to come will be a place of pilgrimage for the British globe-trotter. There are the hunched, high-shouldered monuments of many buried men, with the turban with its wreathen carvings to indicate the resting place of the master sex. In those days, when the shallow graves were being very quickly filled, the convalescent inmates of the hospital made the cemetery their favourite promenading ground, and it was here, upon a shining March Monday, that Polson and Major de Blacquaire encountered each other on their wanderings amid the tombs, the one on crutches, and the other painfully supporting his footsteps by the aid of a walking stick.

'Since they began to sort us about,' said De Blacquaire, 'I've lost sight of you. And you've never answered my question. Now, what the devil did you do it for?'

'Look here,' said Polson, using his favourite locution, 'you've threatened two or three times to make an end of me.'

'Yes,' said the Major, nodding and drawling on the word. 'That's right enough, But what's that got to do with it?'

'Well, you see,' said Polson, 'I'd got to give you the chance to do it.'

'Had you?' said Major de Blacquaire.

The one man was leaning on his crutches, and the other was stooping on his crutch walking-stick, and there was nobody near so far as either of them could see.

'I don't know,' said De Blacquaire, in a drooping voice. 'I may be all wrong, and in a sort of way knocked to pieces, don't you know. But I think on the whole, Sergeant, that you have acted like an unusually damned good fellow. Do you mind?'—he pointed to a sunken tomb by a motion of one of his crutches, and he sat down upon it. 'What has a fellow got to do when another fellow has

fetched him out of the fire at the risk of his own life, and one fellow hates the other fellow like the very devil? I'll tell you straight, Polson,' said De Blacquaire, in his old-mannered drawl, 'I'd have seen you damned and done for before I'd have reached out a finger to save you. And I think that you are the blamedest kind of an ass and a duffer to have pulled me out. And yet I don't know—I'm not so cursed certain that you'll suffer for it.'

Chapter XII

In the pale spring sunlight where they sat, there came a wholly incongruous figure. It was clad in black broadcloth, and black kid gloves, and there was a black shining silk hat on the top of it; and in one of the black kid gloved hands was balanced a black silk umbrella. The figure was that of John Jervase, and he was walking amidst the tombs of Scutari with about as much visible emotion as he would have shown if he had been on his daily walk to the Stock Exchange in Stevenson Place, Birmingham.

'They told me at the hospital as you'd got leave for a bit of a walk, Polly, and one of the chaps said it was likely I should find you here. You're better, ain't you? There's a little bit of colour in your face this morning.'

He was altogether gay and friendly, and his voice and manner alike were cheerful, but he fell into a ludicrous consternation as he turned to find Major de Blacquaire seated between two turbaned tombs at his left hand.

'I say, Sergeant,' said the Major, with his University drawl, 'I wish you'd go away for half a minute, and leave me to talk things over with your Governah?'

'As you like,' said Polson, and hobbled away towards the south end of the cemetery, where the bay lay gleaming that mild morning, and French and English troopships were landing men who were as broken as he himself had been a month ago.

'I suppose,' said De Blacquaire, scratching lines on the ground before him with one of his crutches, 'that you're one of the beastliest old bounders that one could find on the face of the earth, and I have the best sort of a good mind to get you into trouble. I suppose you know that?'

'Very well,' said John Jervase. 'If you won't get me into any sort of trouble that won't leave my boy outside, you're welcome.'

'Yes,' said the Major, 'that's where you come in. You go and rob your neighbour for a matter of about twenty years, and when I drop into his property you go on robbing me, and then because your son's a good chap a man is obliged to let you alone. I don't think that that is fair.'

John Jervase had seated himself at the opposite side of the cemetery path, and was as busy in the making of hieroglyphics with the point of his neatly folded silk umbrella as Major de Blacquaire was with the point of his crutch.

'Hit me,' he said, 'without hitting the boy and you are welcome.'

Major de Blacquaire scored the wet gravel with the crutch, looking frowningly down upon the ground, and Jervase scored the earth on his side with the neat brass ferrule.

'I don't quite see what I am to do with you,' said the Major. 'It isn't the boy's fault that he has a rotter for a father, is it?'

'Now you look here,' said John Jervase, heavily and solidly, 'I've had pretty nearly two years to think this thing over in. I've done wrong, and I own up to it. There's my boy, Polly, as is recommended for the Victoria Cross by Sir Colin Campbell, and fetched you out of the fire under the Malakoff, so I'm told, as if you'd been his very born brother. I've been sitting by his bed for more than a month past, and if I'm not a Dutchman he hates you like poison. He'd only got to leave you there and everything would have been at an end betwixt us; and what on earth he fetched you out for, I don't know. If you think, Major, that I'm appealing for myself, you're the most mistaken man in the whole wide world. If you can find a way of hitting old Jack Jervase without hitting the boy, find it and do it. But ever since I've heard about you, folks have told me that you pride yourself on being a gentleman; and if a gentleman is going to take it out of a chap who has nearly died for him, when he had every right to leave him alone, and when it was the biggest kind of blunder to rescue him, I'm no judge of what a gentleman ought to be.' Major de Blacquaire moved the point of the crutch to and fro on the moist gravel, and made his hieroglyphics in the soil without response for a minute or two. But at last he said, in his Cambridge drawl:

'You're an illimitable old bounder, but you're rather a clever old bounder, when all is said and done, and I suppose I shall have to let you go.'

'Major de Blacquaire,' said Jervase, 'if ever there was a man mistaken in this world, you're a mistaken man. I don't want your ticket, and I don't want your pardon. I've had two years to think this over in. I've been without my lad all the time, and I've come out here to find him broke and wandering in his mind. I've sat down between your bed and his, and I've heard him in his wanderings say how he hated you, and I've heard you say how you've hated him. And now I tell you, fair and square, find a way of hitting me that won't hit the lad, and I'll take anything that you can do to me.'

'There isn't any way,' said De Blacquaire, 'worse luck! I'm told that there's a doctrine of heredity, and we've got to believe that men are like their fathers. Personally, I'm not going to believe it And I shall be obliged to you if you will go and send back a lad who's about as much like you as you're like the Apostle Paul. Now—vanish! and behave like an honest fellow for once in your life for the sake of an honest son.'

John Jervase rose. 'It's all very well,' he said, 'for you to talk. You've never been poor and ambitious and hard run, and you don't know what temptation can amount to. You've got your money back again to the last penny. It's in Stubbs' hands, and I've stood the racket. And if the father did you a bad turn the son has done you a good one.'

'Will you kindly go away, Mr. Jervase?' said the Major.

'Yes,' said Jervase, 'I'll go away. But since I'm here, I'm going to ask you one question. Are you going to hit the boy through me?'

'Will you oblige me,' said Major de Blacquaire, 'by going to the devil?'

'Are you a-going,' said John Jervase, 'to make a scandal of this business when you get home again? I've paid your lawyer to the last farthing. My cousin's hooked it with pretty near a quarter of a million sterling, and gone out to Venezuela. And if I hadn't struck on a pretty fat thing in the way of a contract for forage and horseflesh for these French chaps here, I should have been pretty well a bankrupt. But I found the money, and you're as well off as you would have been if old General Airey had never heard my name.'

'That is good news to a poor man,' said De Blacquaire. 'And now, my dear sir, will you oblige me by going to the devil?'

'Are you a-going to make a scandal about this business when we get home again?' Jervase asked.

'No, you purblind clown,' said Major de Blacquaire, rising, and fitting his crutches to his armpits. 'I am not. You have about as much notion of what a man is bound to do under these conditions as an ox would have. Please do as I have asked you, and leave me, and send the boy along. I don't think that he will leave the same flavour on the palate as the father does.'

'I suppose,' said Jervase, 'that from your point of view I've been a badish sort of a lot?'

'I suppose you have,' said Major de Blacquaire.

'But Polly never knew about it, and you've never had any sort of a right to look down on him. Old Sir Ferdinand was the first of your crowd as ever climbed to the top of the tree, and I can remember him when he was no better off than I am.'

'I do not think,' said Major de Blacquaire, 'that I have ever encountered quite so pestiferous a stupidity. Will you go?'

The tension of the curious interview was relieved, for Polson, who had slowly paced the circular path which ran round the cemetery, came limping back again, dinting the wet gravel with the crutch-headed stick and leaning on it like a man who had achieved a forced march of many miles.

'That's the chap,' said John Jervase, 'as fetched you out from under fire.'

'I have a right,' said Major de Blacquaire, 'to be as well aware of that fact as you are, Mr. Jervase. Sergeant, I've been mistaken about you all along. Do you mind——' he paused, and there was a break in the aristocratic drawl he had so long affected that it had grown to be a trick of second nature with him, 'd'you mind shaking hands, Sergeant?'

Polson Jervase reached out the hand which was not engaged with the stick, and it happened to be the left.

'I don't want that, Sergeant,' said the Major.

'My dear fellow,' said Polson, 'it's the nearest to the heart.'

And De Blacquaire took it with a glint of moisture in his eyes.

'You ain't done that to me, Polly,' said Jervase. 'It's pretty near two years since you've done that to me. Are you ever going to shake hands with me again?'

Major de Blacquaire fitted his crutches to his shoulders, and stumped away, leaving father and son together.

'There's nobody seems to understand me, Polly,' said the elder. 'I ran my risk of getting into quod along with your Uncle James, and for a man who's been brought up respectable, that ought to count for something. I've owned up to everything, and I've paid for everything, and I'm a solid man this minute. Ain't you going to shake hands with your old father, Polly? I followed you out to the Crimea, and I learned where you was a-lyin', wounded, and I've nursed you from the minute I found you up till now. Shake hands, Polly.'

Father and son shook hands, with no very great good will, if the truth must be told, on the side of the younger; for Polson had yet to learn a lesson or two and had not caught the art of forgiveness for the repentant sinner who was still prosperous. It is a great deal easier for almost anybody to forgive the criminal

who has fallen to hunger and tatters than it is to find an excuse for him when he goes in shining broadcloth and lustrous silk and patent leather.

De Blacquaire went stumping along on his crutches in the weak spring sunshine, and Polson and his father, by mere chance, were looking after him when he paused at the corner of the one important monument in the grounds, and raised his forage cap to some person as yet unseen.

There is a sort of legend often taught in verse and fiction to the effect that no one true lover can be near another without the presence being felt. But Polson had turned away when his father laid a hand upon his sleeve, and asked him, 'Don't you see who that is, Polly?' And the lad, turning, saw the goddess of his dreams. It was Irene, and he recognised her face almost without surprise, for it flashed upon him instantly that her voice had sounded through all his fevered dreams since he had first laid his head upon the clean, sweet-smelling hospital pillow. The girl was dressed in black, and her slight figure looked the slighter for its garb. She came forward with a smile in her eyes, and with a quickened step.

'I've kept my promise,' said Jervase the elder, 'and I haven't spoke a word.' And with that he exhibited a tact he had not shown before, and walked smartly away, leaving the boy and girl together.

'I have wanted to see you,' she said amply, 'but I have kept away until I could be sure of bringing you good news. You know that my father is here?'

'I saw him on Lord Raglan's Staff at the Alma,' said Polson, 'and I have heard about him since from time to time.'

De Blacquaire was hobbling away on his crutches towards the hospital, and by this time was barely visible. Jervase in his black broadcloth and shining silk hat brandished his umbrella in the rear, and there was not another soul in sight.

'I knew you, dear,' said Polson. 'I have had your voice and hand about me for a month past.'

'I came out with my father,' said Irene, 'more than a year ago. Lord Raglan gave him some sort of work to do at the Embassy at Constantinople to begin with, and when the fighting began he was attached to the Staff and I was left behind. So I turned to the hospital and I have been at work here for a year and more.'

He forgot his wound, and stood upright with the crutch stick in one hand and held out both arms to her.

'I haven't the least little bit of a right, my dear,' he said, but she laughed tenderly, and ran to the offered shelter. All around were the unlettered, turbaned memorials of the dead, and there was just this one bit of youth and love in the middle of that record of a thousand tragedies.

'Have you heard the news?' she asked, looking up at the worn young face with its late sprung growth of silky beard.

'What news?' he asked.

'The news about yourself,' she answered.

'News about myself?' said Polson. 'What news is there about me?'

'You don't know?' cried Irene, recoiling from him a little with clasped hands and sparkling eyes. 'Is it going to be my good luck to tell you? You don't know any news about yourself?'

'I don't know any news about myself,' he answered; 'since I was bowled over on Christmas morning at Sevastopol, I haven't had a chance of hearing any, I've had your voice and this dear little hand about me all the time—I've known that.'

'And you don't know?' she asked him, 'you don't know what's waiting for you when you get back to England?'

A cloud fell upon him at the question. 'I don't know, dear,' he answered. 'I don't know what's waiting for me when I get back to England. But I do know that I'm a bit of a fool and a bit of a scoundrel to forget the reason why we said good-bye. I was so glad to see you again that it came natural to forget. And you'll forgive me sooner than I shall forgive myself.'

'Wait one minute, Polson,' said Irene. 'Here is a letter from papa. So soon as you can recover you are to be invalided home, and the gem of the letter is—do you guess? Do you guess? You are recommended by the Commander-in-Chief for the Victoria Cross. Here it is.' And she read, dancing on tiptoe. '"Our young friend, Polson, has magnificently distinguished himself, having rescued under heavy fire a wounded officer, whose name I have not yet been able to discover. But the gallant action was seen by the Chief, who was there in person, and who has told me that he has seen nothing more splendid in the whole course of his career."'

With that, she hid her face upon his breast again, and he folded his arms about her in a sort of stupor.

'I said good-bye, dear, long ago,' he stammered haltingly. 'I've no right to behave like this.'

'Why?' she asked. 'What can make any difference between us?'

He took her to his heart again at those fond words, and laid his lips upon her forehead. De Blacquaire's crutches had long since ceased to crunch along the road towards the hospital, and Jervase's broad shoulders had gone out of sight. There was no human creature near, but far and far away overhead a lark was soaring and singing. Many and many a pair of English lovers had heard the same song as the bird had hailed the rising or the setting sun, and both the young hearts beat to that native sounding music which rang so far away from home. Their lips came together, and there was music in their hearts.

'Take me back to the hospital, Polson,' she said, disengaging herself from his arms. 'I am on duty within a quarter of an hour.'

She took a little watch from her girdle, and looked at it with a cry.

'I have barely five minutes, and I have never failed to relieve guard since I came. Is that the word, dear?' She took his arm sedately, and walked along with him, he prodding at the wet gravel with his stick, and she half supporting him.

'Was that true?' she asked. 'Did you know that I was near you?'

'Did I know!' said Polson in a voice that was worth a thousand protestations to her ears.

'I always thought,' said Irene, 'that I disliked Major de Blacquaire until a week or two ago; but whilst you were lying there ill and delirious, he behaved so kindly that I shall never forget him. And he told me—you won't mind, Polson, dear, you won't let anything I say wound you? He told me that the past was buried. That awful, awful night will never be quite forgotten, but it has left nothing behind it. Your father has paid everything, and there is not a word to be spoken by anybody, ever any more.'

The lark sang in the thin sunlight as if he would break his very heart for joy, and the lovers walked homewards slowly, arm in arm.

Chapter XIII

It was the First of May, and that same good three-master, the CÆSAR, which had carried Major de Blacquaire and Sergeant Jervase from the Crimea to Scutari, was bowling merrily along south of Naples, where Vesuvius had his smoking cap on. There were many invalided men on board, and amongst them three with whom this story has a particular concern.

'You are right, Captain Tompson, it is abominably unlucky; I had reckoned on seeing the finish of the campaign, and it's hard to find oneself bowled over now, and sent home again like a useless old bale of damaged goods.'

General Boswell was stumping the sloping deck with the aid of the Captain's arm, getting his first hour of exercise since he came aboard. All the snowy canvas was filled hard as iron with a noble level breeze, and the ship was making a speed which would hardly have disgraced an Atlantic liner of the modern day. She made a prettier sight than any steam-driven craft ever made, or ever will make; and she carried a better music with her in the taut wind-smitten cordage of the shrouds and the deep organ hum of the stretched canvas.

'I am saying, Polson,' said the General, encountering the Sergeant halfway along the deck, 'that it's unluckier for an old fellow to get bowled over than it is for a young one. You may be as fit as a fiddle again in a month or two, and may have your fill of fighting for Queen and country; but I have done my last day's work, and that is a weary thing to think of.'

'Last day's fighting, sir?' said Polson, 'but not the last day's work. There's a heap to be done for the old country yet, and I hope that Irene's dream may come true and that you may go into the House of Commons and give those beggars at the War Office their proper fodder.'

'That is the business of a younger man than I am,' said the General, 'and I doubt if there's any mending in that direction. I have been at the game now, off and on, for something like forty years, and I know we have the best fighting stuff in the world at our command, but the Department have always made it their business to cripple it and starve it, and leave it naked and hungry. I've seen it in Spain, and in the Low Countries, and I've dragged out three years of it in the old Mahratta country, and it has always been the same. I suppose it always will be until we learn that it is as necessary to have a soldier to look after things at home as it is to have a soldier leading in the field. When we get you home again, my lad, well run you for the Southern Division of the county and you shall talk to 'em across the floor of the House of Commons.'

The three men reached the bows of the good boat and turned, and there was De Blacquaire before them with a weather-beaten servant holding him by the elbow and piloting him along the deck. He saluted in passing, and the General laid a hand upon his shoulder.

'I should like half an hour with you this morning,' he said, 'if you can spare the time to come into my stateroom for a talk.'

'I am at your service now, sir,' said De Blacquaire.

'Shall we go down?' asked the General. 'One tires easily still, and this May wind gets into an old man's head like wine.'

'And into a young man's, too,' said De Blacquaire. 'I am half tipsy with it, and shall be glad to get into shelter.'

'We'll see you at breakfast, Polson,' said the General, 'and until then, good-bye.'

The two men reached the General's cabin and sat down together.

'When we touched at Corfu,' said the General, 'I found a letter from my London agents—I'd like you to see it, and I shall be glad if you can confirm its contents, or at least a part of them.'

De Blacquaire took the proffered letter and read:

> 'Sir,—: We are instructed to inform you that a sum of fifty thousand pounds has been deposited with us to your credit by Mr. John Jervase, of Beacon Hargate. Mr. Jervase requests us in communicating with you to say that a further sum of one hundred thousand pounds, making in all one hundred and fifty thousand, has been deposited by him in the interest of Major de Blacquaire with that gentleman's agents. We are desired to add further that Mr. Jervase has joined his brother in South America, that he proposes to establish business relations there, and does not intend to return to England. We are, sir, your obedient humble servants, E. A. Cox & Co.'

'Except,' said De Blacquaire, 'that the sums mentioned here are reversed in order, I have a letter identical in terms. The old scoundrel has bled very freely.'

'And there's no vendetta?' said the General, smiling.

'Vendetta?' said De Blacquaire. 'You can hardly have a vendetta with a man who has saved your life, even though the beggar did it for no other reason than to show how much he despised you. I was wrong about the lad, General; he's a very fine fellow.'

'I could have told you that much long ago,' said the General. He reached out a lean brown hand and rang a bell which stood upon the stateroom table. 'You'll take a glass of wine, Major? It's against my rule, but I feel like breaking rules today.'

'And so do I, sir,' said De Blacquaire.

So the wine was brought, and the glasses were filled, and the two men drank to each other. The General lit a cheroot, and sat in a deck chair; but the younger man fidgeted and was obviously ill at ease.

'There is one thing on my mind, General Boswell,' he said at last, 'and I should like to get it over. I had two or three months at Scutari and I was nursed by an angel all the while.'

'Don't go on, my lad,' said the General, reaching a hand towards him. 'If I understand you, it's useless to talk of that.'

'Very well, sir,' said De Blacquaire, sipping gloomily at his wine; and nothing more was said for a minute or two, but the younger man gradually brightened, and it could be plainly seen that he was squaring his mental shoulders for the reception of a burden which he meant to cany.

'The Sergeant is a lucky dog, sir.'

'My dear fellow,' said the General, 'he has deserved to be a lucky dog. It is one of the ordinances of this life that a fellow can't choose his own father. If the lad had had a choice and had exercised it, I should have had no great respect

for him. And yet I had a sort of liking for old Jervase. He was a bounder always, but I thought he was an honest bounder.'

'They tell me,' said De Blacquaire, 'that the Sergeant's to have his V.C. for that business in front of the first parallel.'

'That's a settled thing, I fancy,' said the General 'Sir Colin's word ought to be good for anything at home, and my own should go for something.'

'Mine won't be wanting, sir, if they think it worth listening to.'

'What did you two fall out about?' the General asked.

Major de Blacquaire dipped into the cigar box which had been pushed over towards him long before, and very thoughtfully fingered an evil-looking Trichinopoli.

'Why, sir, I believe if the whole truth were told we fell out mainly because I was a bit of a puppy. You're an older man of the world than I am, sir, and I dare say you can't have failed to notice that some men who think they are insiders are outsiders, and that some of the fellows they despise are better than themselves.'

'Do you know, De Blacquaire,' said the General, 'I like that?'

'A year in camp, and two or three months in hospital, will do a lot towards changing a man's opinions.'

'Won't they?' cried the General. 'Egad! Won't they?' The old Christian Quixote mounted his hobby, and rode. 'There are things in war that nobody wants to think about. It's an ugly trade. When I was a youngster, and in my first action I was very hard-pressed, and I caught a bayonet out of the hand of a fellow who was dropping at my side, and I had to use it. It's fifty years ago now, but the man squealed and I haven't forgotten it, and I'm never likely to forget it. But a man is born to die, sir, and he's born to do his duty. I dare say I'm a simple thinker, Major de Blacquaire, but there are things a hundred times worse than war, and if you didn't believe that God sent them, you would have to turn infidel. I've seen two or three choleras, here and there, and a Black Death and a bubonic plague. What does it all mean? Jarring forces, sir, which Heaven will reconcile in its own good time. And that's what war means to my mind. You go where you're sent, just as the germ of disease, or whatever you call it, goes, and you do what you are set to do. And I'll say this for war, sir, as an old Christian man who has spent his life at it. It's the fire of God, to my way of thinking, and it burns out all manner of meannesses, and hypocrisies, and we should have a devil of a lot more to be ashamed of than we have if we didn't get into a solid fight now and again.'

'It is a school, sir,' said De Blacquaire.

'By heaven, sir,' said the solemn General, 'it is a school.'

'But there are more class-rooms than one in the great school house of human nature, and whilst the General was setting forth his theories of war, young Polson Jervase was setting out a theory of another and an opposite fashion as he walked the deck with Irene.

He was deadly serious also, for all that part of life which seems best worth having lay before him. And the two had many talks as they paced the decks, morn and eve together. Irene was almost the only lady on board, and most of the dot-and-go-one boys who had exchanged a natural limb for a timber toe, and the loose-sleeved men who had left an arm behind them at Sevastopol, had been beneath her care. And those who did not know her ministrations in effect knew them by oral tradition, and the bronzed fellows stumping and tramping

up and down saluted her with such a worship that her heart was like a fountain of glad tears a hundred times in a day.

A girl has a natural and inborn right to be proud of her sweetheart in any earthly circumstances whatsoever, if he were the merest snub-nosed, freckled, and chinless Jones that ever skipped over a counter. But to have an approved and veritable here for a lover, and to live at the same time as the sole heroine of so narrow a little world as a shipful of soldiers the incense of whose hearts went up about her constantly, was to be more than merely proud and happy. Polson had got a permanent crick in his neck from that bit of Russian lead which had caught him just as he dropped into the trench with De Blacquaire. In the course of time he began to carry it naturally, so that it looked like the merest little mannerism, but it could never have been handsome by any conceivable chance except in the eyes of a wife or a sweetheart. Irene adored it, and would have made it a rule of fashion, as the Grecian bend and the Alexandra limp came to be in later years, and no man would have been allowed to carry his head in any other fashion than Polson did save under heavy pains and penalties.

'When everybody can see how a story will end,' said one of the greatest masters of the narrative art, 'the story is ended,' and the written history of Polson Jervase is coming to a close.

There were certain things about which he was naturally anxious and about which it was impossible to ask any questions. But the truth came out little by little, and it appeared in the end that the world knew nothing of the secrets which had escaped between the partners in the firm of Jervase & Jervoyce in the course of that wild night which had brought to England news of such portentous moment. There were rumours, of course. There was a gossip to the effect that the firm had been on the edge of ruin, and that Polson, rather than miss the fighting, had elected to go out as a private soldier, dropping his hope of a commission for the time being. This was a fancy which hurt nobody. John Jervase had left his affairs in excellent order when he had established his own line of retreat, and since he had been known to have made money hand over fist within the last year or two, the halo which surrounds the millionaire was about him, and it would have been hard to say whether he or the boy were more popular in the Castle Barfield region. The general idea was that they were a pair of valiant fellows; the one in the commercial and the other in the warlike way.

Poor Raglan's heroisms and blunders were buried together before the day came when in the ordinary course of events he would have led his troops along the saluting line and have received the honours due to him from his Sovereign.

The scent of hot grass was strong in the flaming noontide in Hyde Park when London poured out its scores and scores of thousands to witness the ceremonial which crowned a foolish and disastrous war with a triumph better earned by the valour of the men who fought there than by the statecraft of the other men who sent them into combat. Ragged and lean and bearded, with the soil of the Crimea still upon them, the men of Alma and Inkerman, of Balaclava and Sevastopol, marched through the roaring citizen crowd and formed up in the Park. There were many men of valour there—many who had earned as well as any other the mark of honour which was that day to be bestowed; but opposite the bright pavilion with the raised crimson dais on which the Queen was to take her seat there was but a mere handful of the halt and maimed,

upon whom the eyes of the vast multitude, whether civil or military, were fixed. They were no more than specks in the great open space—just so many little coloured ants to the eye—and the gaze of the spectators gloated on them. For they were Britain's chosen. These were the men of whom all London had been reading with bated breath for well nigh three years past. These were the men of Alma's heights and Balaclava's charge and Inkerman's fog, and the frost of the trenches—the pick and pride of the whole contingent which had gone out to do battle for England's honour. That they had never been truly called upon to go made little if any difference at that hour, for London was in the mood for hero-worship rather than political criticism just then, and not the rudest judge of British policy would have cared to speak a word against the ceremony of the day.

And when, after long waiting, the royal carriage came, with the pretty, smiling little matronly figure bowing and swaying amidst the ringing thunders of the world's greatest city, and the bands rolled out their 'God Save the Queen' as she passed them one after another, one happy, happy onlooker looked up at one war-hardened old veteran through tears.

'Upon my word,' said the General, with a grimace which was really much less humorous than he meant it to be, and in a voice which was hardly as steady as he would have liked to have it—'upon my word, Irene, I'd give twopence to be in your shoes at this moment.'

For one of the scarlet ants in the far distance, on the green tablecloth of the turf, was just then advancing towards the little figure on the dais, and an instant or two later the Queen was stooping to pin the bronze badge of honour to the coat of Polson Jervase.