







England must be fed

(page 17)

A LAND-GIRL'S LOVE STORY

BY

BERTA RUCK

Author of "His Official Fiancée," "In Another
Girl's Shoes," "The Three of Hearts," etc.

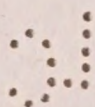
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TO
ALL THE GIRLS I MET
IN FARM, FIELD AND FOREST
WISHING THEM THE BEST OF LUCK,
AND LIFE, AND LOVE
FROM BERTA RUCK

Wales, 1918

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	"MAN MADE THE TOWN"	1
II	TWO VOICES CALL	12
III	THE TOSS-UP	22
IV	THE FIRST NIGHT IN CAMP	29
V	THE FIRST JOB	44
VI	THE FARMHOUSE MEAL	59
VII	AFTER-EFFECTS	69
VIII	THE PLUNGE	78
IX	OUR MESS-MATES	83
X	THE MILKING-LESSON	87
XI	THE LAND-GIRLS' LETTER-BAG	95
XII	WE "GET USED TO IT"	99
XIII	AN INVITATION	108
XIV	THE HEN-WIFE	118
XV	MOSTLY CONVERSATION	123
XVI	CURIOUS CONDUCT OF THE MAN-HATER	138
XVII	LAND-GIRLS GO SHOPPING	146
XVIII	THE NIGHT OF THE CONCERT	159
XIX	THE SURPRISE TURN	172
XX	LAND ARMY TESTS	184
XXI	THE MAN-HATER DISCUSSES MEN	191
XXII	HAY-HARVEST	202

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXIII	COLONEL FIELDING DISCUSSES "ENJOY- MENT"	207
XXIV	STORM	212
XXV	AFTER THE RAIN	218
XXVI	COLONEL FIELDING DISCUSSES "LOVE AND THE LIKE"	227
XXVII	A KITCHEN COURTSHIP	242
XXVIII	THE ONLOOKER	248
XXIX	LOVE — AFTER THE INTERVAL	261
XXX	COLONEL FIELDING DISCUSSES "THE MYS- TERY-GIRL"	273
XXXI	A FEW FACTS ABOUT RICHARD WYNN	283
XXXII	BUTTER-MAKING — WITH ACCOMPANIMENT	290
XXXIII	"OUR" GERMANS	300
XXXIV	HARVEST, NINETEEN-EIGHTEEN	322
XXXV	"FIRE, FIRE!"	330
XXXVI	THE HARVEST-MOON	338
	POSTSCRIPT — THE VICTORY-DANCE	348

ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
England must be fed	<i>Frontispiece</i> ✓
“ I was going to ask you to join up for the Land Army ”	20 ✓
We agreed that we were simply loving the life and the people, the work and the play	104 ✓
Still leaning on the gate, Captain Holiday said: “ I’m glad the country won that toss ”	218 ✓

A LAND-GIRL'S LOVE STORY

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CHAPTER I

“MAN MADE THE TOWN”

“What's this dull town to me?

Robin's not near.

What was't I wished to see?

What wished to hear?

Where's all the joy and mirth made this town a Heav'n on earth?
Oh, they are all fled with thee, Robin Adair!”

—SCOTS SONG.

“**T**HERE! I told you what kind of a young man he was, Joan.”

I only groaned; my elbows on the breakfast-table and my head buried in my hands. What does it matter what “kind” of young man he is, when you're in love with him?

“He's a beauty,” declared my chum Elizabeth. She pushed back the letter which had come as such a knock-out to me. “Who's this ‘Muriel’ who writes to tell you that she's just seen Harry Markham off to Salonika, when you didn't even know he'd got his orders?”

“It's Muriel Elvey; I introduced him to her myself at the theatre about a fortnight ago,” I explained, stunned. “That very pretty girl who was at school

in Germany with me. I didn't know they'd met again. . . . He didn't say good-bye to me! . . ."

"Rotter," snorted Elizabeth boyishly.

But some of us would rather be happy with a charming "rotter" than be bored for life by one of those prigs who never do anything wrong.

Haggardly I stared at that letter with its gold-printed "Muriel" at the top, its whiff of Chaminade. Little Elizabeth scowled sympathetically. She always had had a grimace for the name of Captain Harry Markham, who had been my idol for the last year.

(A rotter! What difference does that make!)

For that year life was a whirl of thrills and pangs because of one young soldier-man's black eyes and red tabs. At first it was all thrill. That's bound to be when the Harry-type — a born fighter and philanderer — leader of men and misleader of women — fills up a girl's horizon with his telephone-calls, his invitations, his flatteries — and himself.

Feverishly happy, I blessed the job that kept me where he was.

(And now this! This!)

My job was one of those that are described as "thundering good for a girl." It brought me in nearly three pounds a week, for I was secretary to a quite important official in one of those big rabbit-warren buildings in Whitehall that we call Ministries. It kept me indoors from ten A. M. until half-past six or seven or — if we'd a rush of work — eight o'clock at night.

It kept nerve and brain on the stretch, too! My

chief insisted upon taking the last ounce out of his under-strappers. Also, he had a horrible temper. But I accepted that as cheerfully as I accepted the stuffiness of that rabbit-warren, and the rushed lunches, and the work that was draining all the go-stuff out of me.

You see, my people lived in the country, and — because of Harry — I simply had to live in town. It would have killed me, I thought, to tear myself away from London and from our flat near Golder's Green. This had been let, furnished, by an officer, now at the front, to me and my old school-chum, Elizabeth Weare, who was clerk at my rabbit-warren. We did our own housework and marketing and cooking, tired as we were, after our office-day was done. Sounds rather like all work and no play? But it wasn't.

There was play, to take it out of me more than work. Play turned my days into a succession of wild jumps across stepping-stones. The stones, of course, were the times when Harry took me out. I would have worked underground and consented never to see the light of day, provided that I still saw him. Ah, I'm not the first girl who has made Paradise out of bricks and mortar, just because they hold a Harry!

I thought I was growing to mean to him as much as he meant to me. Elizabeth did warn me, but who ever takes any notice of these warnings from the looker-on who sees the game? And Elizabeth was by way of being a Man-Hater anyhow, so how put any trust in her opinion of my Prince Charming?

Gradually there slipped through the thrill of it all

the first pang of doubt. Surely he meant to propose? No? Yes? No?

The pangs came oftener. Could he mean nothing? Just the flirtation that camouflages itself under the name of being great pals? Or would he presently say something? This was a wearing time, I can tell you. Presently the thrills grew fewer, the pangs more frequent. This is also bound to be when the Harry-type cools off again. Was he cooling? Wasn't he? A seesaw of agony!

Slowly zest and colour began to fade out of the life that saw less and less of the young staff officer whose fancy I had amused for some months.

Hope dies hard.

Then a whole fortnight — this last one — went by without a sign from him. I hoped on, wildly, that something would happen, and, finally, this very morning, something had happened with a vengeance! It had killed hope with a sledge-hammer.

Devastating news came from that girl to whom I'd introduced him myself! I might have known that Harry the Susceptible would fall to Muriel's lovely little Lily-Elsie-like face! At that German school they had all raved about it, I remember; walking down Unter den Linden, Muriel had always been put between the two severest governesses, and even so the tightly-uniformed Prussian officers had followed and had jostled us in passing to try to steal one glance from "*die bild-hübsche Engländerin's*" demure big eyes.

So those eyes had been the last into which Harry had smiled before he left Blighty again! I had never had another look; I who adored him, who had been given to suppose that he returned it.

Harry had gone. Gone! Without a good-bye. Well — it was all over — finished — na poo!

I was left to make what I could of the situation.

What could I do?

Apparently nothing but gulp down my sugarless tea, push aside the stale war-bread with its one scrape of margarine that represented my breakfast, and set off for my day's work, leaving Elizabeth to wash up. She had a day off from the rabbit-warren. I wished I had; I scarcely felt like coping with the office.

“Poor old kid! Such is men,” grunted Elizabeth. “You look absolutely played out.”

“Do I? I needn't ever bother again about how I look. That's one comfort,” I sighed, as I crammed on my hat.

This had an impertinent little wreath of coloured buds, and was lined with rose, because Harry said pink next to my face always suited me. I'd bought it to wear up the river with him.

Oh, the pathos of these hats, these pretty frocks that have been specially bought for “some” man! Long after that man has ceased to care a button what one wears the hat is still fresh, the frock seems to go on and on. Things remain. It's the people who change. I must have changed, too, after a blow in the face like

that! What had it done to me? I gave one deliberate and searching glance at myself in the sitting-room looking-glass.

It showed me a plain and weary girl, with ten years added to her actual age. A slim, stooping figure that moved without zest. Eyes without brightness. Hair ditto — where were “the goldy lights” that Harry once praised in my hair? It was as drab and dull as the whole of my outlook had grown in the last half-hour.

I'd had what is called a ripping time, you see. Here was the bill I had to pay — low, secret misery, dark heaviness of heart, looks and girlishness lost — as I thought — for ever!

I stuffed into my bag the fateful letter that had knocked the bottom out of my world for me.

“You're forgetting these,” Elizabeth reminded me, handing me a couple of other envelopes that lay unopened by my plate. I hadn't even noticed them.

“Haven't time,” I said, pocketing them as I dashed down the four flights of brass-bound steps from our flat to the entrance.

There was no sign that either of those unopened letters held anything out of the ordinary. In my own mind I had no presentiment of wonder to come. I thought I knew my fate, thanks.

Let this be a lesson to any young woman who thinks the like. For when she is quite, quite sure that “all is over” for her, that is the moment when “All” is preparing to begin.

* * * * *

Here I've given you my picture as I was all those weeks ago. Now skip those weeks and see the contrast; the picture of me as I am today. A straight and supple body, all conscious of the Jest of living. Limbs rounded and firm. Face joyous, glowing, and clean-skinned under the tan. Hair glossy and full of gleams; eyes bright as the morning, with the atmosphere of sunshine and clean airs all round me. A new self, in fact, made by a new life. Thousands of girls all over the country at this moment can show the same miracle.

I am going to tell you the story of how it happened to me.

* * * * *

I had to rush for my Tube train, only in time to be held up by that exasperating wooden barrier, while the corncrake voice of the official rasped out: “Stand back, there!” And the train did not move out for another good half-minute.

Fuming, I waited on the platform, squashed against that barrier by the crowd who pressed behind me — a crowd who looked nervy and strained, and who — to put it mildly — smelt. Well, any business girl who glances at her light blouse after a day's work in town will know what I mean. I myself must have looked about as cheery as that face one sometimes catches sight of at the small square window of a black prison-van.

The only air and exercise I ever got in those days were in the three hundred yards' walk from our Mansions to the Tube, and in the two minutes' scurry at

the other end from the Tube station to the rabbit-warren.

I hung on to a strap all the way to Charing Cross, hating everything. That letter seemed to have laid open all my nerves; they were jarred by the jostling passengers, by the conductor's raucous shouts, by the very advertisements of patent medicines and boot polish on the Tube walls, by the steps, the lift, in fact, everything to do with the loathsome journey.

At the office I got a black look from my chief, Mr. Winter, and a stinging comment on my lateness. I'd had them before, but then I'd scarcely noticed them. Now the daily round seemed unbearable.

When I had Harry to look forward to in the evening, it scarcely mattered how my day was spent. But now — ye gods! I suddenly found everything rankling — the look of the rabbit-warren's dingy corridors and annexes, the click of the typewriters, the whir of the telephone bells, and the Cockney accents of some of the workers!

And worst of all was the inevitable office smell, made up of so many horrors. I put them in their order of unpleasantness:—

The hot iron of the water pipes.

Ink.

Dust.

Common yellow soap.

The sink.

Stale office towels.

Cigars.

All this sounds an unmitigated grouse! But I have to get it over, showing you the perfectly revolting time I had. Sunlight and sweet air have since streamed into my days. But how can I forget the stuffiness of Mr. Winter's room?

“Can't we keep that window shut?” was my chief's motto.

The one extremely grimy window gave on to Whitehall, and to open even a crack of it let in all the noise of the traffic.

“Can't we have that window kept SHUT?”

The last word rang out like the crack of a whip almost before I got in, on this particular morning.

I shut the window and got to work, suddenly wondering, “Shall I go on like this until I'm eighty?” My job for that beastly morning was to check long columns of figures on blue paper, with a form-number at the top, from duplicate lists.

Thrilling!

My eyes swam and my head throbbed as I muttered to myself over the table: “Nine thousand three hundred and sixty-five pounds nineteen shillings and a penny. Nine thousand three hundred and sixty-five pounds nineteen and a penny. (Tick off.) Two thousand four hundred and ten pounds eleven shillings,” and so on. The lists almost invariably tallied, but one dared not risk an error. “Nine thousand three hundred and ——!”

What a life! I saw it now as it was. That letter had opened my eyes. Oh, to get away from it all!

At lunch-time I went out, avoiding the chattering throng of girls. It was one of those sultry early-Spring days that seem hotter than July. All the luncheon-places were as full up as the Tube had been. I could not wait for a seat in that atmosphere of not-too-cheap but nasty food.

Eggs that were "fresh in places," badly poached, on toast limp with water, and never a suspicion of butter — fish that had said good-bye to the sea many days ago; or burnt pieces of bacon swimming in thin fat — all these presented unpalatable realities which I felt absolutely unable to face that day of days.

Sickened, I turned back into the glare of Trafalgar Square. I sat down listlessly in the only patch of shade that I could find, on the steps of the National Gallery. I looked across the bone-dry fountains where wounded soldiers were swinging their blue-trousered legs. I gazed gloomily past the Nelson Column, down Whitehall, with its 'buses and people.

Ants on a human ant-heap, struggling for life — but was it worth living? Deep in my heart the thought persisted, "I must get out of this. I can't stand it. How can I get away?"

Half-consciously my hand went to my bag to feel for the letter that had blackened existence. I hadn't looked at it again since Elizabeth had indignantly pushed it back to me. My fingers met the two other letters, not yet opened.

"May as well see what they are," I thought, drearily. One was a rather terrifying bill for shoes. Well, it

would be the last of its kind — it's love that comes so ruinously expensive in nice shoes and stockings!

The other was in a clear, strong hand-writing that I didn't know, and it had been forwarded on from my home.

I opened it.

Picture me, a speck of navy-blue and white on the grey steps. London glaring and blaring beyond me, and in my hand the scrap of paper — the second letter that was to fall upon me like a thunderbolt. First, Muriel's about Harry. Now this. I'd been actually carrying it about with me all the morning unopened, cheek-by-jowl with that other letter!

Listen to it!

Except that it was dated from some barracks, I didn't notice the address. My eye had at once caught the first sentence:

“My dear Joan,— They say a woman never forgets the first man who has kissed her ——”

Wouldn't those words give any girl a jolt? They startled me, even in my stricken state. “The first man who'd ever kissed me”—but the first and only man had been Harry himself! What on earth was the meaning of this, in a stranger's handwriting? It went on:

“That is why I have the cheek to write to you. Now you'll turn to the end of this letter to see who I am.”

Exactly what I found myself doing, breathlessly!

CHAPTER II

TWO VOICES CALL

“Do you remember that day in November
Long, long ago; long ago?”
— OLD SONG.

“Who’ll grow the bread of Victory?
Who’ll keep the country clean?
Who’ll reap Old England golden?
Who’ll sow her thick and green?

Carry on, carry on! for the men and boys are gone,
But the furrow shan’t lie fallow while the women carry on.”
— JANET BEGBIE.

THE signature of the letter was —

“Yours,

“RICHARD WYNN.”

Now, who in the world might he be? Richard Wynn?
Wynn?

Ah! Suddenly I realized why the surname at least was familiar. Mr. Wynn! Of course! I placed him, now. I did remember. Sitting there, wan, on this the most miserable morning of my life, my thoughts were switched back just seven years.

Seven mortal years ago! A gap between a disillusioned young woman of twenty-two and a gawky eager child of fifteen, as I then was.

That had been in the days when we lived on the borders of Wales. My father had farmed, in a scrambling sort of way, the small estate that he owned there, and

as he had to make ends meet somehow, he had taken in a trio of hobbledehoys as farm pupils — what they'd learnt from dear old Dad's antiquated methods goodness only knows.

Mr. Wynn was the eldest of these pupils. I don't think I'd ever taken as much interest in him as I had in the fox terrier puppy that he gave me just before he sailed for the ranch of an uncle in Canada. But I had hated his going away. I always did hate partings, even from the succession of mountain-bred cooks who stayed their six months with us. On that gloomy autumn morning, with the mountains blotted out by mist and the rain coming down in a steady drip-drip-drip on the slate roof, when we had all gathered in the veranda to say good-bye to the departing pupil I had suddenly felt like bursting into tears.

Mr. Wynn, the leggy, dark-haired Welsh lad of nineteen, had turned with his brand-new suit-case all ready labelled in his hand, had seen my blank look, had stared down upon me and had clutched me by the pig-tail as I turned to flee.

“Nice kid, ripping kid,” he'd muttered in a brusque, touched young voice. “Give us a kiss for good-bye, Joan.”

And he'd drawn my head back by its plait and kissed me under the eyes of my amused family. They had ragged me about it for months. How should I, at that age, have guessed the difference between that and a real kiss? Years later Harry had slipped the real kisses into my life, in the course of conversation, so to speak,

and by imperceptible degrees, which was Harry's insidious way of making love — none the less fatal!

Now, on the very day when love had left me in a way so very far from being imperceptible, here was this reminder from that other, forgotten young man, that went on:

“Plenty of things have happened since we said good-bye; but I've often wondered what became of the pretty kid with the thick brown pigtail. You'd a blue bow on it that day, and you never noticed that I walked off with that. I suppose there's just an off-chance that you are not married yet. Are you? If you aren't, would you care to marry me?”

I gasped as I came to this. Who wouldn't have been petrified?

“Would you care to marry me?”

But how — how fantastic! At breakfast-time upon this very day I'd had conveyed to me the devastating news that the one young man on whom my thoughts had hung wished to see no more of me. Now, at midday, here was shock No. 2. Another young man, of whom I hadn't thought since I was grown up, was actually proposing to me.

Both on one day!

Was I living in some wild dream of coincidences? But no. The Harry-wound went on aching steadily beyond this flash in the pan even as I read on.

“It sounds mad, I know.”

The writer actually admitted it.

“I’d explain details and things better if I saw you. May I come and see you? If so, please write to me here, where I shall be for the next ten days. I could get over to your father’s place. This needn’t commit you to anything. But if it is all off, don’t write. If I don’t hear from you within a week I shall know it was good-bye for good.—Yours, RICHARD WYNN.”

Stupefied, I sat staring at his letter.

Now a proposal of marriage from almost any young man in this world would bring its special thrill to almost any girl. This, quite apart from whether she accepts it or refuses. Isn’t that true, girls?

So it shows what a stupor of despair I was in that morning, when I tell you that only for a fleeting moment did I forget my troubles in the excitement of this Mr. Wynn’s letter.

I sighed as I got up, feeling a little dizzy from my perch on the National Gallery steps, for St. Martin’s Church clock showed half-past one, and it was time I started walking slowly back to that revolting office. I’d had no lunch, but lunch-time would be considered over by the time I had crawled down Whitehall again. Heavens! How I hated Whitehall, and wished that I never need set eyes upon . . .

Here the quite wild idea sprang into my mind.

“What about this way out of it? What if this were what I was longing for, the chance of a completely

new life? Something to whisk me right away out of everything that I knew in the days of Harry! Here's this Mr. Richard Wynn — who was quite a nice young man, if I could only remember his face a little bit more distinctly — asking to marry me. What if I said 'Yes'? Since I was not to marry Harry, what did it matter what sort of a man I did marry? But what was he like?"

Frowning, I tried to remember. Dark, tall, Norfolk jacket, loved dogs — that was as far as I got. Not a detail of his face could I recall! An unawakened girl-child, as I was seven years ago, takes scant notice of masculine faces. All she thinks of them is "*How ugly they are; how very unlike the people in books that the beautiful ladies are always falling in love with*" — and that's the summing-up of it for *her*, until she is seventeen or so. (Unless she's of the type of my little chum Elizabeth, who at twenty-one continued to hold this view.)

But what about this Richard Wynn, who at nineteen had seemed a century older than I?

Nowadays, I should not consider as a grown-up man that youth who'd devoured such platefuls of cold mutton and bread and cheese at my father's table. I wondered listlessly how he'd grown up. Quite cold-bloodedly — for remember what I was going through — I began to debate whether I'd say I would see him. It might be better than the office; better than living exactly the same life day after day, without Harry. And Harry would hear if I got engaged.

How many engagements, I wonder, are entered into in the mood in which I was at that darkest of moments?

I thought, "If I write ——"

Then my thoughts were broken into by something very different.

I'd already noticed, while only half-seeing it, that a little crowd had collected down in Trafalgar Square about the spot where the Tank Bank stood in the spring, a crowd composed of Colonial soldiers, of bare-headed factory girls from Charing Cross Road, of girl clerks from the countless Government offices round about.

Without much interest I glanced over the stone coping. Above the heads of the thickening crowd I saw a banner. It was white, with the scarlet-lettered motto:

"ENGLAND MUST BE FED."

There was a group on the small raised platform beneath it, an elderly man in a frock-coat, some ladies, and the gleam of a light smock. Some one was speaking underneath that flag. In the sultry midday air I suddenly heard, fresh and clear, a girlish voice. These were the scraps that came to me:

"I appeal to you girls in this crowd. Some of you are country-born girls, like me. I'm from Wales. My county was a green county. It is now a red county — ploughed up to help carry on the war. But must we look at these fields full of crops and think, 'These will

rot in the ground because there will never be hands enough to carry them in'?"

Ah! Land Army!

I'd heard of this before, and now Trafalgar Square saw girls being recruited as, three years ago, it saw young men being asked why they were not in khaki.

Then the speaker's young voice rose earnestly to my listless ears:

"I have put before you the disadvantages of this life. Long hours. Hard work. Poor pay. After you get your board and lodging a shilling a day, perhaps. Very poor pay. But, girls — our boys at the Front are offering their lives for just that. Won't you offer your services for that — and for them?"

The voice attracted me, the Welsh voice that holds the secret of being clear, yet soft, with the ends of its words pronounced as crisply as by a well-trained singer. It held me, that voice, while the speaker touched on the urgent need of workers to fill the places of men, who had gone from farm, field, dairy and byre.

Ah, the charming picture that she made! A bright, sturdy flower of girlhood set against the parched stonework of Town! She wore the Land Girl's uniform that sets off a woman's shape as no other costume has done yet. Under her slouch-hat her face was vividly brown and rose-coloured, with dark eyes alight. Her fresh, light belted smock, with its green armlet and scarlet crown, looked cool as well as trim.

The sight of her, I thought, should bring in as many

recruits as the speech. She looked as if she'd never dreamt of such things as unventilated offices, typewriters that clicked mechanically all day, nervous headaches, lives soured and blighted at twenty-two! Enviously I glanced at her. Suddenly — was it my imagination? — she looked straight back at me over the heads of the crowd. It was to me she seemed to be speaking now.

“You are offered some good things in this new life, girls. Good health. Good sleep ——”

Here I smiled bitterly. Good sleep. . . . I'd had a whole fortnight of hideously broken nights.

“There's no sleep like that of the worker on the land!” declared the recruiting land girl.

“Another thing you're offered is a good conscience with which to meet those lads when they return from fighting for you. Lastly — though I don't know if it's worth mentioning, really” — here her white teeth flashed in a merry smile across her rosy face — “you are offered a good complexion!”

Then something else unexpected happened. She jumped lightly down, and it was first of all to me — me! — that she made her way.

Straight up to me she came. She looked me full in the face, smiled prettily, and in that clear voice that sounded home-like to me because my home had been where she, too, came from, she said:

“I've been watching you all the time I've been speaking. I want to say something to you.”

“You want to speak to me?” I said, surprised.

“I noticed you at once,” said the Land Girl. “You looked — well, not very pleased with life.”

Here a passer-by glanced at the contrast we made standing there: Government office clerk and Land Girl. She, in smock and breeches, radiated rosy health; I, wearing my blue costume, Frenchy blouse, flower-wreathed hat and Louis-heeled shoes, wilted in limpness and pallor.

She said prettily:

“Are you on war-work of any kind?”

“Yes, I am. I work at ——” I gave her the rabbit-warren’s real name.

Her bright face fell.

“What a pity. We’re told not to try for recruits who are engaged in other departments. I was going to ask you to join up for the Land Army.”

“I! Oh, I should be no earthly good at that sort of thing,” I assured her pettishly, I’m afraid. “I must get back to the office.”

“A pity,” remarked the fair recruiter regretfully. “Perhaps you’ve a friend who’s not so busy. Would you pass these on?”

I took the leaflets she offered.

“Good-bye,” she said. Once out of sight of that energetic young worker, I rolled her papers into a ball and tossed them into a county council waste-paper bin.

That is, I thought I did.

My head ached so desperately that I hardly knew what I was doing by the time I got out of the glare of Whitehall and into the gloom of the office.



"I was going to ask you to join up for the Land Army"

I was before Mr. Winter, the chief who disliked me as much as he disliked open windows. Here was my chance to let in an apology for a breath of air. I tugged at the window. It was stiff. Down it came at last. But the effort had been too much for me in my run-down state; it made me feel positively sick.

Then came the last straw.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Mr. Winter rasped out behind me:

“Can’t you keep that window shut?”

I jumped violently — think of the morning I’d had. I forgot myself.

“Don’t shout at ——” I began. But all in an instant the office became dark as night. I threw out my hands. Then I pitched forward on my face, knowing no more.

I had fainted dead away.

Half an hour later I was sent home, after Mr. Winter had leapt at his chance of telling me that I was obviously not strong enough for war-work, and that I need not present myself at these offices any more. Perhaps he was scarcely justified. Perhaps he wanted to frighten me into an appeal. But I didn’t say a word, I was too dazed.

Sacked!

Well, after that, I thought, there was only one thing for me to do.

CHAPTER III

THE TOSS-UP

“And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss.”—KIPLING.

“ELIZABETH! What should you say if I were to accept an offer of marriage?” I demanded abruptly.

This was after I'd got back to the flat, had flung myself down on my bed with the announcement that I'd been sacked from the rabbit-warren, and had turned thirstily to the tea that my chum had brought in at once.

Washed-out, I lay against the pillow, while Elizabeth did the ministering angel in a boyish shirt, and with thick black locks “bobbed” about her square-chinned little face.

Elizabeth is the most loyal pal who ever barked out home-truths at a chum, waiting on her hand and foot the while . . . Oh, girl-friends! What would life be without them when men forsake us by desertion and death, when other men overwork us and harry us, and when all men (as it sometimes seems) misunderstand us! Men don't believe in loyal and lasting friendships between women. Elizabeth, in return, never believed much in men.

“Offer of marriage?” she retorted. “What are you raving about?”

Between sips of tea I gave her the story of the letter that I had taken away unopened that morning.

“Asks me to write within the week, unless it was to be good-bye for good!” I concluded. “What do you think of it?”

“Shell-shock,” Elizabeth promptly suggested. “Poor fellow! Must be quite off his head. How long was he out at the Front, Joan?”

“How should I know? I only know he wrote from those barracks.”

“You don’t know his regiment or anything?”

“Not a thing. Not the colour of his eyes, or why he never wrote to me before, or where he’s been for the last seven years, or what doing. Absolutely nothing do I know about him. Except that he wants me to be his wife!”

My stupor of the morning had given way to a reaction of bravado; I laughed into Elizabeth’s little steady face.

“Knew you weren’t serious,” she said. “I’m glad you’re bucking up, though. It’s quite a mercy that you have got the sack. You’d have had to go home and take things easy for a bit in any case, so ——” Here I interrupted her with more vigour than I’d felt capable of all day.

“Go home?” I echoed, really nettled. “D’you imagine that I’m going home after this? Not much! Go home! Go back to ——” I took a long breath to underline the words — “to Agatha?”

Now, Agatha was my young stepmother.

Nobody could find fault with Agatha. She was sensible, quiet, admirably domesticated, a splendid needlewoman and parish worker, an excellent wife to Dad, and always tactful towards his grown-up children. Only — well, Agatha was a person who never made a mistake in her life. And the people who do make headstrong, passionate, idiotic mistakes — well, is it to *that* sort of person that they turn when they're in trouble? I ask you.

Elizabeth shook her cropped head. She had to see it.

“What will you do, then? Try for another job in town, I suppose?”

“Oh, I don't care what I do!” I said wearily. “There aren't many things I can do. Marrying this young man is one of them, anyway. Why shouldn't I? All marriage is a ghastly risk. Especially when a girl knows she can never, never care for anybody.”

It was here that Elizabeth, that good chum, took me fairly in hand.

“I'll talk now,” she said. “You listen.” And she began to talk coolly and helpfully and like a dose of bromide, which was what I needed at that point.

“You said there weren't many things you could do. Home's off. You're not rich enough to do nothing, so you must do something. That means you either marry for a job — lots of girls do, poor wretches — or take one. I suppose your precious Winter isn't too chilly to give you a reference?”

“I daresay he's warmer now he's got that window shut!” I answered languidly.

“Then you’re left with the choice of doing a sensible thing or a silly one,” Elizabeth declared. “You go into another Government office, or you marry this man, who may drink or squint or have a beard for all you know.”

“He used not to,” I murmured with my eyes closed.

“Oh, you do remember so much about him? I say, could I see his letter?”

“Of course. Rummage in my bag for it, will you? — but I’ve told you all that was in it.”

“I’d like to see the writing,” said Elizabeth, rummaging. Presently I heard her say “Hullo!” in a more alert voice. I opened my eyes interested — Elizabeth was scanning a paper. It was headed:—

“WOMEN’S LAND ARMY.”

“I thought I threw those things away,” said I. “Can’t you find the letter?”

“No,” said Elizabeth. “No other letter here.” Instantly I realized what I had done.

“It was Mr. Wynn’s letter that I threw away,” I exclaimed dismayed. “Address and all. I thought it was those pamphlets. How silly of me! Now I can’t write to Mr. Wynn!”

“That settles that,” said the practical Elizabeth, “and leaves you to take another Government office job or ——”

She paused for emphasis, looked straight at me. “Or *this!*”

Here she waved the paper she'd been studying. It showed pictures of smiling girls in smocks and breeches, busy. They were making butter, they were stacking fodder, they were feeding baby calves out of buckets. Underneath the photographs was written:

“ *Will YOU do this?* ”

I stared at Elizabeth.

“ Join the Land Army! Me! ”

“ Yes, you. Do your bit. They say England wants feeding. It looks like it ” — she glanced at the comfortless tray — “ so go and help, Joan. ”

“ Would you like to, yourself? ” I retorted.

“ Me? ” cried Elizabeth in turn. “ Nothing would induce me, thanks. I should loathe it! ”

“ Yet you think I ought to join up! ”

“ Best thing for you, ” declared my chum briskly. “ Help your country, work in the open, get fit, and forget there are such things as men! ”

“ All very well for you to talk in that gay and airy way about ‘ forgetting, ’ ” I retorted, nettled again. “ You wait ——! If ever *your* time comes —— ”

“ Ha! ” jeered Elizabeth, putting back her bonnie little head of a page, and squaring her shoulders. “ If ——! ”

She looked like the Princess of that fairy-tale on whom the fairies laid a curse that she should never marry a man she loved because, on her bridal night, she herself would be turned into a lad.

“Stranger things have happened,” I threatened her, “than a girl like you falling in love in the end.”

“Yes. A girl like you getting over it. That’s happened before now,” retorted the downright little Man-hater. “Now, what about this Land Army idea?”

“But — but I should hate every minute of it!” I objected.

“Worse than marrying the wrong person?” murmured Elizabeth.

Here an odd thing happened. At those words “the wrong person” there flashed into my mind for the first time the thought that has visited it, ah! how often since then, in spite of Harry, in spite of my not caring what happened now. In spite of everything, it struck me, “If I never hear anything more about this Mr. Wynn, it will be a pity.” Yes, at the time I felt that.

“What a toss-up everything is,” I said recklessly. “Shall I go to work in breeches and a smock? Or shall I get married? Heads or tails? Have you a penny, Elizabeth?”

“Don’t be silly.”

“I mean it. Have you a penny?”

“Put my last into the gas meter!”

“Then I’ll try this.” I took up the remaining dry biscuit from the bread platter. “England must be fed,” I quoted. “Heads I go and help to feed her. Tails I marry for a job. Heads is the side with the maker’s name on. Now!”

I spun the biscuit into the air. Gambling with England’s food!

It came down, spun on the empty platter, fell flat.
With quite a thrill I bent to see the result of my
toss.

“Heads!”

“Land Army!” cried Elizabeth, throwing up her
head. “We’re for it!”

I turned to her.

“We?”

“Looks like it! Suppose I’ve got to join up with
you,” grumbled my chum, who was always better than
her word, “and see what comes!”

* * * * *

A fortnight later we were both glancing at the set of
our new Land Army hats in the narrow strip of mirror
of a railway carriage, bound for the countryside.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRST NIGHT IN CAMP

“Why did I leave my little back-room in Bloomsbury?”

— VICTORIAN SONG.

TRANSFORMATION scene.

From a London office to a Land Girls' Camp in Mid-Wales. From a cramped, sixth-story flat looking down on slums to that big light hut set among the woods that peeped a green “welcome” in at the many windows.

Every window was wide open on that first evening when Elizabeth and I got down to the camp.

Our first impressions of it? Well! I can only say we were not “out” to be encouraged, or to like anything at all at that moment! Tired, stiff from our journey, awkward in our unfamiliar uniform and heavy boots, we followed the young forewoman who'd met us at the tiny station called “Careg,” and had piloted us up and down what seemed interminable miles of lanes to this hut.

A queer, surprisingly ugly place, this long bare building! Corrugated iron without, matchboarding within, with bare floors, trestle tables, and kitchen-chairs. It had been intended for a parish hall for meetings and sales of work; but the platform had been taken away, and the whole building turned into a bar-

racks for girl-workers. Land Army slouch hats and brown raincoats hung from the pegs, gay-coloured prints were pinned upon the unvarnished walls, and flowers stood about in glass jam-jars.

The place resounded with laughter and talk. It was clustered with Camp-ites, who wore the same rig as our own. We still felt as if we were in fancy-dress. But these other light smocks and laced-up leggings and hob-nailed boots all bore the signs of honest wear and tear from the work for which they were designed.

These girls had "worked themselves and their clothes in" to the new job. On that first evening they looked to us a race apart. They made me feel a nervous and apologetic weed! They were a bewildering crowd.

"Now, you girls! Make a bit of room at this end of the table," ordered the forewoman cheerily. "Here are the two new workers for the training depot. They're to live here."

Faces turned from each side of the long mess-table towards us. The babel of talk died down. There was a scraping of chairs on the scrubbed floor. A girl jumped up and fetched cups; another pushed aside one of the glass gallipots that held sheaves of blue-bells and marsh-yellows all down the table.

"That's right. You sit here, will you? Room for a little one!" — the little one being Elizabeth, who seemed to have shrunk since she put on breeches, into some small, shock-headed, pale and defensive boy. "And you, Vic, look after this other one."

"What's your name?" from the forewoman.

“Matthews? Joan Matthews! Sit down, Joan; have your tea. There’s plenty more milk in the big jug; and pass up that bit of rhubarb pie for them. They’re all the way from London.”

“London!” chorused the girls at the table in a variety of voices.

“London, fancy!”

“Eustern! All change! Stand clear o’ the gates!” sang out one, in gruff imitation. “Air-raid shelter this way! Full up, full up! Pass along there.”

“Piccadilly, theatres and shops!”

“Bond-street!”

“’Igh-street!”

“Dear old giddy London!”

“Bit of a change to Careg Camp, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” I admitted, and in the breezy laughter my voice was drowned, also my heartfelt sigh.

For a sudden wave of regret swept over the whole of my tired being. I wondered what had possessed me to leave London. It was going to be awful! Why had I been so mad as to fill up those forms which that girl had given me in Trafalgar Square, and to make those inquiries, and to attend that Selection Committee and that Medical Board?

Why had I let Elizabeth — who was looking gloomy enough on her side of the table — persuade me to take this silly step? Why on earth did I join the Land Army for twelve months, agreeing to go wherever I was sent? Here they’d sent us into the wilds of the coun-

try — hundreds of miles away from every soul we knew, into this bare barn of a place and this mob of strange girls!

There! Now one of them who'd finished tea sprang up — sprang as if it were the beginning instead of the end of a working day — went to the piano at the other end of the hall, and began to rattle out gay music; and then two others were jumping up, too, taking each other by the hands in a clear space of the room and swinging into a two-step — dancing! After they'd been working on a farm-course all day!

They were all so bursting with “go” and chattering spirits that I felt I could never cope with them. Never should I make friends! Never should I attain to anything they could do! Never accustom myself to the strangeness of all this!

Here I was, a fish out of water. Even if I were miserable in London, it's better to be wretched in a place that you're used to, and where you're not expected to make any unwonted efforts, or to be bothered by fresh people. Yes! Would to goodness I'd stuck it in London, instead of rushing out of that frying-pan into this fire.

Absolutely “out of it all” and miserable, I expect my thoughts showed in my face as I sat there. For a bright-eyed girl opposite, with riotous red hair and a rounded throat starred with freckles, leaned across, smiled, and remarked in the deep, soft contralto of Southern Wales:

“Sure to feel strange at first! Longing for home.

I was the first ten days. Oh, I would have bought myself out and packed up. I would, indeed ——” she paused, and turned to the girl sitting beside me. “But they won’t want to get back to town after they’ve been here a bit, will they, Vic?”

The big dark Land Girl “Vic,” who sat next to me, showed all her white teeth in a large and friendly grin.

“Ah, you’ll be all right. You wait till you’ve stopped down here a couple of weeks, Celery-face, and your own boy won’t know you again!” she assured me in a ringing Cockney accent that set all the others laughing delightedly.

How popular she seemed! Good-natured, too. Presently I found her taking Elizabeth and me under her wing while the other girls went on with their various occupations.

None of them seemed to want to fling herself down and rest, doing absolutely nothing — which was all I should feel fit for, I thought gloomily. From the scullery-shed outside the hut came the sound of clinking crockery and of laughter, as two of the girls washed up. Overpoweringly cheery young women! I thought, peevish with fatigue.

Vic’s Cockney voice rose above the rest of the chatter, proffering encouragement and information.

“You’ll be surprised!” she declared. “You won’t want to leave, ever ——”

Chill silence from us.

“You’ll see it’s a fine life when you get your hand

in at the work," she continued, undaunted by our silence. "Tomorrow morning you start. I'll take you along to Mr. Price; he's the farmer at the Practice place. Oh, he's all right, Mr. Price is; and her, too. They won't be hard on you, seeing you've never worked before. . . . Oh! You have worked? . . . Oh, in business. Ah! that's a lady's job. This other's all right, though. Don't you go telling 'em you know all about farming just because you've made hay once or twice on your holidays ——"

"I wouldn't," I assured her.

"Oh! Well, I did. Talk about laugh ever since!" chuckled Vic. "Why, you don't know how much you don't know until you start in the Land Army! Why, one of the wounded Tommies from the hospital here says to me on the road just now, 'Are you on the land, miss?' I said, 'Well, I'm not on the sea!'"

Much appreciative laughter from her friends greeted this repartee, which, I believe, was then new.

"'No,' he says to me, 'but I bet you was all at sea the first time you tried to milk the cow!' I says, 'You're right!' I was, too! You see how you get on with it," to me. "Seven o'clock they milk."

"Seven!" I murmured, dismayed. In London I was never out of bed before the postman knocked.

"And where," asked Elizabeth, speaking for the first time, "where is this farm we've got to go to in the morning?"

"Mr. Holiday's? Oh, a lovely place! Great big

dairy farm that they've turned into this training centre for us. Only about a mile off from here."

"A mile!" I echoed blankly. "How do we get there, please?"

"Get there? Well, how d'you think?" retorted Vic gaily. "We walk, of course."

Walk! I wondered how long it was since I'd walked a whole mile before today. Walk! A mile before the day's work began? Oh! I was not the sort of girl who ought to dream of attempting this sort of life! All these others were overwhelmingly fit and healthy. You could see they were strong as horses, gay as larks! They must have been picked girls for the job.

Well, £2 would buy me out!

The girl in the sweater and breeches, who had been ironing out her smock, now put it on, all crisp. She also pinned a pink rose to the breast of it with a regimental brooch.

"Boys to meet, Peggy!" called the girl at the piano. Now, her voice was neither Cockney nor Welsh, but that of what was once called "the governing class." What a queer mixture they were here!

Peggy looked demure and remarked:

"I'm astonished at you," and strolled forth into the evening sunlight.

"Her young gentleman's in the hospital here," Vic informed us. "There's some real nice wounded boys there now. But for those, we girls might forget what a young man looked like."

Here Elizabeth spoke for the second time, looking, for the first time, a shade happier. She inquired "Ah, don't they allow men here?"

Chorus of variously accented "No's." With cheerful resignation Vic added, "Young men's very strictly rationed in this camp. Only our Mr. Price from the farm (o' course he's big enough to count for three!) and Mr. Rhys — the — Forestry, as they call him. Not another man is allowed to set his foot inside this place, so ——"

She broke off as if she caught sight of something.

"Whoever's this?" she ejaculated. I, nearest the open window, followed her look.

Two men, a little one and a tall one in khaki, were walking quickly up the path to the camp.

A young man in khaki, wearing a Sam Browne!

This sight was hardly a rarity to Elizabeth and me, fresh from London. So we were fairly taken aback at the reception of the phenomenon here, in this far-away rural camp of Land Girls.

Excitedly Vic at the window reported.

"Here's our Mr. Rhys, bringing in an officer!"
Sensation!

"An officer?" cried twenty voices at once.

"An officer?"

"Sure it is an officer?"

"Some one from the hospital ——"

"No officers there! Who can it be?"

"Friend of yours, Sybil!" — this to the girl who had been playing the piano.

“Somebody’s boy got a commission — don’t all rush ——”

But already they all had made a rush to the window, where Vic was lifting up a corner of the white case-ment curtain to peep.

They crowded five deep behind her.

“It is an officer too!” announced the red-haired girl. “Captain!”

“I say, isn’t he tall!”

“Doesn’t he make carroty little Rhys look a shrimp?”

“Dark, isn’t he? I do like dark men. A fair man always looks so quiet.”

“Huh! ‘Looks’! This one looks ‘quiet’ enough, but I daresay ——”

“Whatever’s he coming here for?”

“He’s not coming in; no such luck.”

“Sssssh!” hissed Vic, with the noise of an engine letting off steam. “He’s coming in now!”

Instantly the crowd about the window scattered like flies before a switch. The crochet, the ironing, the book, the washing-up, all were resumed. It was indeed a model camp-room, full of silently-industrious young women, that met the eyes of the two visitors.

First the small, pink-faced man in leggings and loud checks, with an orange moustache and a plume of amber hair that seemed to spring up off his forehead as he took off his hat, smiled, and nodded about to the sedate assembly of girls.

“Good evening, young ladies. Good evening, Miss Easton. Brought you a caller,” said Mr. Rhys.

Miss Easton, the forewoman, said “Good evening, Mr. Rhys,” as demurely as if she had no curiosity at all about this caller. The tall man’s shape that was darkening the doorway behind Mr. Rhys gave a sudden abrupt movement forward.

“This,” said Mr. Rhys in his pleasant Welshy voice, “is Captain Holiday.”

Mr. Rhys, putting his hat and twisty stick down on a chair, added without further explanation, “I told Captain Holiday I thought you wouldn’t mind letting him have a bit of a look round the place.”

“That’s all right, Mr. Rhys,” said the forewoman, with a little bow to acknowledge the salute of the strange officer, who had now come right into the room.

* * * * *

Here I would like to give my first impression of him, though every one knows how difficult it is to recall an impression taken when one is too dog-tired to notice clearly, or to care what any fresh person is like.

I suppose I must have seen mechanically that this young man was of a light and active build, and that he had what people call a “nice” face, open, friendly, and sunburnt.

I didn’t take in then the resolute set of the mouth under the closely-hogged russet moustache, or even see what sort of eyes he’d got. I know now that they are handsome, grey-blue eyes, set deep behind a thick

fringe of brown. Sweet eyes, with that look in them that means, "Do like me!" A look so often contradicted in a man's face by the obdurate line and tilt of the jaw, which would try to proclaim, "I don't care a dash whether people like me or not."

* * * * *

All this was lost on me that first moment. I just noticed the gay ribbon on Captain Holiday's well-worn khaki jacket, with two gold stripes at the cuff.

Then I could not help noticing something rather odd about the young man — namely, the quick, searching glance that he sent all round the big room, taking in every Land Girl there. Was he looking for some one? But no. After passing every girl, that search-light glance found me — and it held me! Yes; it was at me, who'd never seen him in my life before, that he seemed to stare hardest of all! Why?

Then I thought it must be my imagination that this stranger was staring at all. Possibly he was just shortsighted, and saw nothing but what was just under his nose. I turned what attention I had to the golden-and-white collie who trailed in behind him.

Led by the instinct these creatures have for an admirer, she sidled up to me.

Her master was not too shortsighted, then, to see this! For he took two hasty strides right across the room, bringing him up to where I sat with Elizabeth; he gave a little quick soft whistle, and instantly the collie sidled away again to her master's riding-booted heel.

I had just time to suppose that this Captain Holiday — whoever he might be — was about to say something friendly and pleasant when he spoke.

The voice that came out of that nice, friendly face was brusque and deep and carrying. The words that were set to that perfectly charming smile were unexpected enough.

He demanded, still without taking his eyes from my face:

“You’re new, aren’t you? How long do you imagine that you’re going to stick this?”

I looked up. For a moment I scarcely knew whether I had understood. Had he really asked that blunt, uncivil question?

“Were you speaking to me?” I said.

He nodded.

“To you? Yes, of course I was.”

Indignantly surprised, I met his look again — steady, measuring, disconcerting. Then I felt a perfect fool, in that stiff, new-smelling uniform for which I felt — in both senses — so unfitted. Then I blushed. After which, naturally, I felt I should hate him for ever.

He waited; for some reason he was obviously determined that I should speak again. I don’t know what I should have answered; I think I just meant to reply, “I don’t know,” but at that moment little Mr. Rhys came up to call his attention to the time.

“If you want to get on to the farm, Captain Holiday ——”

“Righto,” said this odd Captain Holiday.

He gave a last half-smiling glance at me, and something that might have been a little gesture of taking leave.

Then he turned to say “Good-bye” to the forewoman.

A moment later I realized that he and Mr. Rhys had left the hut.

For immediately the normal noise of the place burst out afresh, like a stream released from the dam. Down, with a bang, went the iron on the stand. Away into corners flew the book, the blouse-mending, the crochet, the letter-writing pad. Chattering and laughing, the Land Girls rushed five deep to the window again.

“There they go!”

“Fancy a man about this place! First thing you could call a man that’s been in here since we started!”

“What a shame,” from the deep-voiced Welsh girl. “Why couldn’t you call our nice little Mr. Rhys ‘a man’?”

“Oh, him! He’s in and out every day. Can’t call that ‘a man’ about the place. More like a husband!” from another. “Miss Easton, whoever was the officer?”

“Couldn’t tell you. You heard Mr. Rhys say he was Captain Holiday, and that’s all I know.”

“‘Holiday.’ Wonder if that’s got anything to do with the farm?”

Here, as the men passed by my window, I caught a few words, uttered by that carrying voice. The stranger was saying: "What was the name of that girl I spoke to?"

What, I thought, irritably, had my name got to do with him? Again I felt the stab of anger with which I'd heard him ask me how long I thought I was going to stand "this"—the Land Army and roughing it in camp. Impertinence! Anyhow, I was at the end of my tether for tonight. Aching with fatigue, I got up and approached the laughing Vic.

"Please," I asked her, "could you show us where the bedrooms are?"

"Bedrooms?" echoed the big Land Girl, and then burst into a fresh peal of laughter. "Bedrooms? Hear that, girls? Celery-face wants to know where the bedrooms are!" General laughter. "No luxuries of that sort here, dear. As you were! Here's where we all sleep."

Blankly Elizabeth and I gazed about that bleak hall.

"On the floor," added Vic cheerfully.

"Floor!" I repeated, giving an appalled glance down at those hard scrubbed boards.

But here our Cockney friend relented.

"Ah, it's not come to that yet, even in the Land Army," she said. "Here, I'll show you." She put a large brown hand on the arm of each of us, led us to the further end of the hall and pulled aside a curtain.

Behind it an alcove was piled with rolled-up mattresses.

“We drag these out, d’you see,” explained Vic. “Lay ’em in a line along the wall here. Here’s two for you — here’s your blankets. I’ll tuck you up in your little byes. Sleep like tops here, see if you don’t.”

I was amazed to find how cosily I curled up, presently on that mattress without sheets or pillows, set on the floor near that open window through which the air swept sweet with the breath of growing things. Vic tucked the khaki blankets round me with a gesture that I hadn’t seen so near me since I lost my mother.

“Sleep well,” she said comfortably. “Dream of ‘him’ !”

And it was into the profoundest sleep that I’d known since Harry sailed that I presently sank.

My last waking thoughts were a jumble of the train journey, the unfamiliar country, the laughing, rosy faces of the Land Girls. Then clearly there stood out, in front of all, the face of that strange young man who had walked into the camp, looking as if he were searching for somebody. That seaching, disconcerting stare of his at me — why at *me*? — that brusque demand: “How long d’you imagine you’ll stick this?” Why did he say that to *me*?

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST JOB

“Something attempted, something done.”—LONGFELLOW.

NEXT morning at two o'clock — or such the unearthly hour seemed to me — I was awakened by a resonant girlish voice.

“Tumble up! It's late! I left you girls till the last minute. You were so dead asleep you never heard a sound. Up with you!”

Deeply-drowsy, bewildered, but refreshed, I scrambled out of my blankets and blinked about. Where was —

Ah! The hut!

Every mattress but Elizabeth's and mine was rolled up and stowed away. Every “Campite” had disappeared but big Vic and two who were on fatigue. Vic was hooking scarlet stripes to the sleeve of her clean smock. The others cleared breakfast away from the mess-table.

“You buck up and dress,” Vic advised us. “The Timber-Girls and Miss Easton are all off to the woods already” — this was the first I'd heard of so many of the girls here being in the Forestry Corps — “and the other two farm-pupils have gone on.

“It's no use you asking for any bathrooms, Celery-face,” she added good-humouredly. “Here's a basin.

Young Sybil always takes a dip in the pool just outside, but you've no time today."

I also had no wish, at that moment, to go and dip into any ice-cold, fresh-water pools, out of doors and in the chill grey dawn. Brrr!

"No time for you to sit down for your breakfast either," Vic pursued, as we huddled on our unfamiliar garments and struggled with the lacings of our leggings. "Lil! Just pour these girls out their tea, and butter 'em some bread — they must eat as they go along."

In the early sunshine on the road Elizabeth and I devoured the country bread and the real farm-butter. Our guide and mentor, Vic, strode along between us in the slouch hat, holland overall, breeches, and leggings that looked so natural and becoming on her, though my chum and I, glancing at each other, could not yet grow accustomed to our own appearances.

My feet seemed to belong to somebody else, in these boots! They were so very different from the feet in the shoes that had pattered down steets and along corridors on my daily tube scramble in town!

Harry had always "noticed" what shoes I wore, more than any other part of my get-up. But now —

"'Let us go hence, my shoes, he will not see,'" I parodied gloomily to myself as I tramped along that lane.

Meanwhile Vic, cheerful as the morning, was pointing out to us what she considered the objects of interest as we went along.

“See that big white place over there in the trees? That’s the hospital,” Vic told us, pointing. “There’s two o’ the boys coming out now — see? This is the turning off to the town — at least, what they call a town. Mouldy! No pictures, nothing; still, why go to theatres when you can see life?”

“You ought to have been here for the concert at the hospital last week. It was all right. They wanted to give it again at our hut; but Miss Easton and Mr. Rhys said ‘No fear.’ A shame, wasn’t it? Never mind; they are going to have another, some time. See that hill to the right where that smoke’s going up? That’s where our girls work at the trees. And those corrugated iron roofs you can just see over there — that’s the camp for the German prisoners, and ——”

Vic broke off to ask if she were running us off our legs. Certainly she was a quicker walker than either of us. But I enjoyed the tramp through this heavenly air as much as I ever could enjoy anything again, I thought, in this Harry-less world.

So far, I thought “going on the land” was not so bad after all. Eating delicious bread and butter out-of-doors on a glorious morning at an hour when, in London, I should still have been a-bed! Not at all bad. It might even do a little to take my thoughts off the wound that could not help aching for ever.

And besides this, I was conscious that in the whole air of the place there was something as distinctive, as familiar as in the taste of the farmhouse bread and

butter. It was a something that I had not savoured since I was a growing girl. . . .

Other country landscapes that I had since seen had always made me feel the lack of this "something." . . .

That these others were often, in a different way, as beautiful, I did admit. I appreciated their dignity, the prosperity of their wide, flat lands. They had so much that was to be admired, but not —

Ah! Not the "flavour" of Wales!

That wild charm one can no more describe than one could photograph the skylark's song. But, with that in one's blood, other charms leave one temperate. Once tasted, never to be forgotten. . . . I found myself sniffing it up now as if it were some rich and definite perfume, instead of some atmosphere made up of a thousand elusive things . . . the dreams of youth included!

And I was glad — that is, as glad as I could allow myself to feel in the circumstances — that, to take up my new venture, Fate had sent me back to the Land of my Fathers.

"There!" exclaimed Vic presently. "There's the farm!"

She pointed to a square building of apricot red, backed by trees and a gently-sloping green hill. It had a flat slate roof, and its many windows glittered in the sun.

With interested curiosity I gazed upon it as we

came nearer — the farm where my chum and I were to receive our training for this new life which we'd chosen for ourselves — on a toss-up! That farm — stacked with such memories for me now! On that first morning I wondered what it would mean for me.

“Here's our way, round by the back,” Vic piloted us. Up a short lane we went, through a big, red wooden gate, and into the farmyard. It was the first farmyard I'd been into since Dad gave up that farm of his that had swallowed, sovereign by sovereign, all his capital. This other place looked — ah, how much larger and more prosperous!

The big, oblong yard was bordered by buildings that gave the place the air of a homely monastery with cloisters.

By a shed door to the left a labourer in shirt-sleeves and wearing a soldier's cap was holding a horse, and talking to a very big man in tweeds. As this man turned his face I saw it was the kindest-looking one that I had ever seen.

Vic led us up to him.

“Here's our two new pupils, Mr. Price,” she introduced us. “This little one's Elizabeth Weare. This other young lady with the white face is Joan Matthews.”

A very kindly smile was sent down upon us from the top reaches of that farmer's six-foot-four. He was indeed a gentle giant.

“You will soon get rosy cheeks here,” he assured me. “Yes, yes. Vic, now, wasn't so much to look

at when she came here first, a twelvemonth ago. Didn't like it at first!" This with a twinkle. "Couldn't get rid of her afterwards. Shows she likes it here now, doesn't it, for her to want to stay on as instructor?"

"Instructor!" murmured Elizabeth and I together. For the first time we realized this big, laughing Cockney-voiced Campite was also an official.

The farmer turned away with a friendly nod to us; and to Vic he added:

"You will put them on to their jobs of work, then, won't you — same as I told you yesterday?"

"Right you are, Mr. Price," returned Vic briskly. "Now, then, dear," to Elizabeth, "you'd better come along with me. Picking up stones for you. I'll show you the field that's got to be cleared."

I saw an indescribable mingling of expressions cross Elizabeth's small face under that brand-new Land Army hat. Pick up stones! The thing any child at the seaside can do! Was it for this that she had given up her post as an efficient clerk and had joined the Land Army? Such, I know, was her thought. But she only said "Right!" and stood by for our instructor's orders.

Vic turned to me.

"Now you," she went on, with a gesture towards the shed near which that labourer had been standing. "Here's your little job."

Now, I appeal to all you girls who joined up as I did, ignorant and "townified," to work on the Land!

Had you any clear idea of what you thought would be the first task to which you would be set?

I hadn't.

But Elizabeth mischievously declares that I had already pictured my first job thus:

Scene, a shining, fragrant dairy, with roses framing the open lattice. Myself, in a lilac sun-bonnet, looking like a lady land-worker out of some revue, and wielding a snowy, carved wooden implement with which I printed a clover-blossom design off on to innumerable pats of golden butter.

If this was "The Ideal," how different was "The Real" to which Vic pointed now!

My "little job"!

I had smelt it the moment that I'd entered the farm-yard. As a child I'd seen Dad's roughest farm-lad engaged upon a similar "little job," and I'd been sorry for him — it had seemed not only such hard work, but so disgusting!

It involved spade work and a pitchfork, a wheelbarrow and the midden in the centre of the yard, on which a speckled hen and her brood were peering and running about. It also involved a dive into dark and very evil-smelling recesses, with noisome straw underfoot and festoons of grey cobwebs overhead. Never had I thought I should set foot — or nose — in such a place.

But it was in tones of the cheeriest matter-of-course that Vic concluded:

"Yes, you start cleaning out that cow-house."

That cow-house! Start cleaning it out! I——!

Vic gave me my tools, bore off Elizabeth, and left me to it.

There I stood in the farmyard — I, the would-be farm-worker, to whom “work” had always meant sitting indoors and checking papers and clicking a typewriter!

Well, I must make a beginning.

I made the beginning that beginners do make — namely, I went at it like a bull at a gate.

With my hands that had not held any tool heavier than a fountain-pen, I grasped, I clutched the spade-handle, that felt so huge and so unwieldy. Violently I drove that spade into that brown and malodorous mass at my feet. Ugh! Violently I tried to raise the heavy spadeful of that horror. It was too heavy to lift. I struggled.

At the third or fourth effort I heaved the load up. Wildly I cast the foul burden into the wheelbarrow. I missed it by half, though; half that spadeful fell upon my boots and upon my immaculate gaiters. How revolting. I stamped myself free, shuddering.

Savagely I stooped to my loathsome task. I dug, heaved, threw. In ten minutes I was hot, dripping, exhausted. My arms shook and twitched with over-exertion.

And with a sudden more violent lunge than any of the others, I thrust my spade into the half-heaped barrow and left it.

I'd made up my mind. I wasn't going to stick this.

I'd buy myself out. Going back to London offices and tightly-shut windows would be anyhow better than this.

I'd go! Yes! Now!

Hurriedly I began pulling down the sleeves of the smock that I'd rolled up above my elbows. I'd got one sleeve down, when the shed-door was suddenly darkened. A man's shape shut out the glimpse of farmyard. A man's eyes were upon me with an amused and curious stare.

I recognized him.

Yes! He was that young officer who had taken it upon himself, last night at the hut, to ask me how long I thought I should stick this.

Of course, he would — he would choose this moment to come upon me again!

Angry was not the word for my feelings towards the young man!

This was unfair. But it didn't affect him. He looked at me, and at the one sleeve that I had rolled down again. He gave the honeyed smile that every Land Girl at the camp had noticed for its sweetness. And then, in the brusque voice that was such a contrast to the smile, he said — without even a "good morning":

"Any one could see that you had never set foot on a farm before."

"How d'you know I haven't? As it happens I have!" I retorted crossly, and again I caught up the spade that I'd flung into the barrow.

“Anyhow, you don’t know how to handle those things,” he said, moving forward. “That’s not the way to hold a spade.”

Without more ado he took the spade out of my hands, holding it lightly. He drove it without violence into the foul mess that heaped the floor, taking up about half the quantity that I had done.

“You’ll find,” he remarked, “that if you don’t overload the spade it will balance itself. Same with the pitchfork. Let the work do itself. Look.”

He let that spade swing back, and the weight on it swung forward to the barrow with almost no exertion at all.

“Let weight weigh on your side,” he said, driving in the spade. “Let force force. Let gravity grav. You see what I mean.”

He gave me a little nod as I watched.

“You’ll find,” he said again, “that you can’t fight nature. You can make her work for you, though.”

Turning to the wheelbarrow, he picked up the handles of it and trundled it out into the sunny farmyard. Not quite knowing what he would be at, I followed the light figure in khaki towards that mound of unspeakableness, where the grey hen clucked to her young. A board slanted up the side of it. The young man turned to speak to me as he trundled.

“The same with the barrow,” Captain Holiday went on. “You don’t let it stand still at the foot of that plank and then heave it up. You heave it along the

level here, where it's easiest. Then it'll go halfway up by itself. Like this."

Easily he ran the barrow halfway up the plank. Then, when I thought he was going to tip it over, he let it run down again, and wheeled it back with its noisome load to the cowshed.

"D'ye see?"

"Yes. But you might have emptied it for me," I suggested, "while you'd got it there."

"Oh, no," he said coolly, "that's not the idea." Then, quickly: "Won't you roll that sleeve of yours up again?"

This with a twinkle!

I bit my lip.

Of course he had caught me out in the very act of "chucking it." This made me all the more furious because I couldn't show it. Who was this Captain Holiday who permeated this district, asking leading questions of land-workers, and, without encouragement, showing them how and how not to do their work? Surely it was hardly any business of his, after all?

In what I meant to be a crushing tone, I asked him:

"Do you wheel many barrows in the Army?"

He replied cheerfully, and in a disarmingly boyish manner:

"It's just the same principle if you're swinging a bayonet. They're both weights. Now, you try again."

And I actually found myself rolling up my sleeves again and — obeying orders!

Yes! I did as I was told by this incredible young man, as I called him inwardly at the time.

I see now what he meant. Any other man would have gone on doing my work while I leaned against the edge of the stall. He made me do it myself, and at the exact moment when I'd decided I'd had enough of it!

“Take a rest now,” broke in this Captain Holiday after he'd watched me critically for some minutes. “Resting is just as important as thrusting.”

He drew up a long wooden crate near the cow-house door.

“Sit down,” he ordered.

I did, still wondering half-exasperatedly who this tall young captain was.

Did he think that just because I was on the land I was to be spoken to by any stranger who drifted along? If so — well!

I was just wondering how I had better show him very plainly that he'd made a big mistake, when again I was disarmed by the sight of that charming smile. No man with a smile like that could make that kind of mistake. But again the smile was accompanied by the bluntest remark.

“You were jacking up just now, weren't you? Thinking you'd chuck the whole show?”

This nettled me exceedingly.

"No! I was doing nothing of the kind," I replied hotly.

"You know quite well that you were," he retorted quickly. "But you will always contradict me, and I shall never admit what you say. That's understood."

Evidently he meant that our acquaintance was to go on, whatever I intended.

He crossed his legs and pulled a loose nail out of the side of the crate on which we sat. I hadn't asked him to sit down by me. That, too, he'd taken as a matter of course.

Was this young soldier some relation of Mr. Price? Had he anything to do with this farm? Or did he just appoint himself instructor to any Land Girl he happened to meet?

Hoping to find out what his position was, I asked vaguely, but more politely than I had spoken before:

"Are you stationed here?"

"Here in this cowshed?" Captain Holiday asked blandly.

At this I told him, quite shortly, not to be silly.

Whereupon he laughed.

"Well, then, if you mean for a mile or two round here"—he gave a little circular jerk of his head—"I suppose I am. My house is here. You haven't seen my house yet, but you'd pass it coming from the camp. It's that white place in the trees beyond the hill."

"But — that's the hospital. Then you're wounded,"

—I glanced at his gold stripes —“or still sick?”

“That doesn’t follow. What I mean is that it’s my house.”

“Then you turned it into a hospital?”

“No,” replied this puzzling young man quietly. Then added, as if he were speaking to one of his own soldiers: “Come along. Time’s up! Take a turn with the spade again. And see if you can make the wheelbarrow go up easily next journey.”

As I took up the spade again he strolled out of the shed. I thought he was not even going to have the manners to bid me good morning. But he turned his face, and said laughingly over his shoulder:

“Au revoir — unless you mean to jack up before I see you again?”

Without waiting for a reply, he crossed the yard towards the farmhouse.

I went on with my so-far-from-romantic task, a little surprised to find that there did seem to be something in what this Captain Holiday had said about handling spades and wheeling barrows. His was the better way, after all. I tried to follow it. I still found the unusual exercise was labour; but it was not altogether the struggle that it had been at my first ignorant and violent efforts.

I worked, getting more flushed and moist and dishevelled as the cleared space on the slate floor grew — very gradually — larger.

There — I’d managed to tip the barrow over quite neatly that time. I wished I could turn through that

cow-house the canal of which I saw the silver blink between meadows beyond the stack-roofs. That would be "making Nature work for one" with a vengeance!

Now! This time the spade seemed ever so much lighter, and yet I'd managed to get quite a good load on to it.

Presently I was startled to hear a bell clanging noisily across the yard. A woman's voice called to some one "Dinner!"

CHAPTER VI

THE FARMHOUSE MEAL

"Thank God and the Land Army for my good dinner; Amen."

— GRACE (revised).

DINNER! At the word there invaded me an extraordinary feeling, to which I'd been a stranger for months in town. What was it? — hunger, ravenous and primitive — fervently I hoped that this summons meant dinner for everybody!

I glanced at my filthy forearms and hands. Remembering my "blunder" about the bedrooms in camp, I did not look for anybody to tell me where the bathroom was.

I made for the pump in the yard. And then, as I dried my arms and face as well as I could on a comparatively clean piece of my smock, I heard a good-natured Cockney voice behind me say:

"Oh, look at Celery Face sluicing herself in a young cataract!"

Turning, I found big Vic coming up with Elizabeth. My chum's small face was redder than I had ever seen it. It wore an "in-for-a-penny-in-for-a-pound" expression, and her uniform (though not filthy like mine) was no longer the immaculate fancy dress that it had seemed on the road to work.

Vic grinned.

“This little 'un is going to shape fine, only for breaking her back nearly,” she told me. “How've you been getting on, young Joan? Let's have a look at your shed. Yes, that's the style. This 'ere job will be part of your cowman's test, you know. Cleaning out shed, maximum 10 marks. Seventy-five per cent. marks you've got to get in the tests before you pass out of here and get a swanky post somewhere, and be a credit to your instructress, don't you forget it!”

I couldn't help laughing as we followed her up to the farmhouse.

“Instructress, indeed!” I exclaimed. “I was expecting some 'instruction,' and you never came! You never even showed me how to hold the spade.”

Vic flashed upon me her most teasing grin.

“I did come,” she said with a nod. “Only you weren't wanting any 'instruction,' I noticed, from little Me. Went away again, I did — hooked it. You were all right. Never even saw me. You and your landowner!”

Before I could ask what Vic meant by “my landowner” we were all in the big front kitchen, with its dresser, its tridarn (or three-decker oaken chest), its grandfather clock, and its long table set for seven.

This was the first time Elizabeth or I had sat down to dinner in a kitchen. Much we should have cared had it been in the scullery, the barn, or the hen-house! There is no appetite like that which comes from physical toil!

Glorious greed was a delicious sauce — if any sauce had been needed — to the plentiful and savoury farmhouse meal that was provided for us of boiled bacon, potatoes, greens, butter, bread, buttermilk, fruit tart, and cheese.

At the risk of writing myself down a glutton — or of reading like an advertisement for somebody's cocoa — I must dwell on the taste of that loaf, that butter, those other wholesome and delicious things with their suggestion of building healthy bodies and reddening rosy cheeks — the food with which England should be fed.

“Everything home-grown!” we were smilingly told by Mrs. Price, the farmer's wife, who took one end of the table, while her husband carved at the other. Their own dining-room in the front of the house was exquisite with old oak and the silver pots of two generations of agricultural prize-winners; but they elected to share their Land Girls' kitchen dinner because it seemed more hospitable and homely.

“There's nothing here that hasn't come off the farm,” Mrs. Price added. “Those black currants in the tart are my last year's bottling, of course. But they were straight out of the garden here. I expect you find it dreadfully countrified fare after London — those of you that come from there.”

* * * * *

Elizabeth and I here spared a moment from revelling in our second helpings of those home-grown vegetables, so efficiently cooked, to look up and laugh.

What we were both thinking of was our last, farewell, midday meal in town.

It had consisted of:

(1) Hors d'œuvre, highly vinegary and suspect — tasting of nothing on earth.

(2) A morsel of sole that had distinctly not come "straight" out of the sea, and tasting of the fact.

(3) Escalloppes de veau with tomato sauce. I don't know what they tasted of, though they cost us a meat-ticket; they smelt, too, forbiddingly of the substitute fat in which they'd been fried.

(4) A small greyish roll, tasting of sawdust.

(5) One half peach, tasting of tin.

(6) Black coffee, tasting of dish-cloth, with a virulently green liqueur that we hoped might drown the tastes of the other courses, and a cheap cigarette.

England's lunch!

* * * * *

Certainly life was a succession of contrasts. From the dark fugginess of that crowded little Italian restaurant — which I'd loved because Harry "discovered" it — to this spotless Welsh kitchen where the kindly farm people "mothered" the five girls in farm-kit — Vic, Elizabeth, myself and the other two more advanced pupils. One of these was "Sybil," who had played the piano at the Hut last night, and who took her dip in the pool before going to work; the other was a bright-looking girl they called "Curley," though her hair was the straightest imaginable.

That gentle giant, Mr. Price, had a word for each as he carved.

“I like to know something about all you young ladies who’ve come down here to work,” he said to me. “A lot we’ve had down here since the start. Twenty, I think, coming and going; splendid girls — good little workers, all. And some were one thing and some another. From South Wales the two last were who were here; fathers in the collieries. Then there’s Curley,” he nodded at her, “all her people in works, Birmingham. And Sybil here,” with another nod, “from Buckinghamshire, never been away from home before without a maid, she told my wife. Father a general. May I ask if your father was in the Army too, perhaps?”

“No; my father wasn’t in anything particular,” I said. “He used to do a little bit of farming himself.”

A gleam of interest lighted up the giant’s blue eyes.

“Dear me! Farmed himself, did he? How big a farm, missy?” he asked.

“Oh, not big at all. Nor at all successful!” I told him ruefully. “I’m afraid he just lost money over it about seven years ago.”

More interest from this other, prosperous-looking farmer.

“Farming,” he told me gravely, “was no life for a man in this country until just lately. An existence,

that was all. All the food we ought to have grown came in from over the sea. Agriculture, before the war, was simply hand to mouth, hand to mouth." He looked at his wife and added: "If it hadn't been for pedigree poultry and shire horses the farmers would have starved."

His wife nodded across the table; she was the sort of small, dainty little woman that you would expect that great-framed man to choose; her thick hair was prematurely grey, and her well-cut and tiny features, though composed, seemed as if they had looked on struggles in her time.

Then came something that, though it was only talk at a farmhouse table, was significant. It made me think. This new problem of my life on the land was full of old problems to others. Across that liberally-spread board that farmer's wife launched an astonishing remark.

"We nearly starved," she said, "when we were children in my father's time. One New Year he made up his accounts and he was down a thousand pounds. The next year again he was down a thousand. And the third year again he had lost another thousand. That January, I remember, he did not speak for a week."

Her soft voice shook. The faces of the Land Girls were all turned towards her, listening, surprised.

"Then," continued Mrs. Price, "he came into our nursery and said, 'Children, I'm broke. The dear old home will have to go.'"

Here the Land Girl Sybil put in gently:

“But you told me your brother had that farm now. So you didn’t have to leave, Mrs. Price?”

“No! Because of my father fighting for it. He borrowed money at very high interest and went in for shire horses. In ten years he was just feeling his feet again. It was twenty years before he paid off everything. That was a struggle. Those were the hard times for farmers. It makes me feel bitter now, girls, when they say farmers are ‘grasping,’ and ‘make money hand over fist,’ just because the tide has turned at last, and farming isn’t the terribly losing game it was!”

“Well, it’ll never be so again, I hope,” her husband assured her. Then he beamed about the table and added: “Not with all these young ladies here turning out to help like this! And that one,” nodding at me, “a farmer’s daughter herself! Where is your father living now, then?”

I told him the name of the village on the borderline between England and Wales.

“Not so far from here, then. Fifty miles off, perhaps. They’ll be able to come down and see how you are getting on.”

But here Vic broke in mischievously over her bread and cheese.

“Don’t you worry, Mr. Price. She isn’t going to bust herself with any homesickness. She don’t want any more people. She’s got off with a young man of her own down here already.”

Here Elizabeth must needs turn her head sharply, to glance at me with an inquiry full of rebuke; uttering it aloud as well. "What young man?"

I took no notice of her. I looked at the others; the others who did not think (as she did) that I was far too fond of the whole Repulsive Sex.

"There was no young man — I mean, not in that sort of way at all — Vic's talking nonsense to tease me!" I assured the party, definitely.

"It was simply that Captain Holiday — whoever he is, he seems to think he can go anywhere and do anything — came into the shed where I was working and gave me a few tips about my work."

"Ah, Captain Holiday. Yes. It was him you were asking about, Vic," said Mr. Price, his blue eyes interested again. "Yes, he's our landlord here now that poor old Mr. Holiday's gone. Most of the property about belongs to him. The hospital, and your camp, and this farm, and all. A great interest he takes in all of it. All over it he was this morning. So he went and showed this young lady how to set about her job? Very obliging of him."

Vic again retorted teasingly.

"Oh, I don't know so much! I haven't noticed that young men are so nice and 'obliging' over helping girls with their jobs without they're interested in the girls themselves!"

I really failed to see why every one of the other girls should seem to take such a vivid interest in this argu-

ment — particularly Elizabeth, who ought to have known better!

Quite nettled, I put in quickly:

“Personally I shouldn’t call this Captain Holiday a very ‘obliging’ young man.” I was thinking of the way in which he’d trundled that wheelbarrow back with its noisome load, instead of emptying it for me, and I concluded, “Rather annoying, I should call him.”

Then I was sorry I’d said that. Mr. Price, who had unfolded his long legs from under the table and was rising to his feet at the end of the meal, looked grave and gave me a quick glance.

“Indeed?” he said seriously. “I am sorry to hear it. I can’t have anything like that, landlord or no landlord. If Captain Holiday was annoying one of my workers, I shall have to tell him ——”

“Oh, please don’t,” I put in hastily. “I didn’t mean that kind of ‘annoying’ at all. I only meant I was rather annoyed that any one should see I was such a raw beginner at my job. That was all.”

In common fairness to the young man I felt I had to speak up for him to that extent. On returning to my cow-house I forgot all about him, forgot even that it was he who’d saved me from half the difficulty of my task. It was not all drudgery, when one found out the best and quickest way of doing what was so new to me — manual work.

Thankful enough was I, though, to knock off!

But on the way home Elizabeth brought up Captain Holiday again.

“Joan,” she began, “what do you think of that young man?”

CHAPTER VII

AFTER-EFFECTS

Rosalind: "Oh, Jupiter, how weary are my spirits!"

Celia: "I care not for my spirits, if my legs were not so weary."

— SHAKESPEARE.

SEVERELY I looked at my chum.

She and I were walking down the road between the flowering hedges back to camp behind Vic, Sybil, and Curley.

Now the other two pupils — who had wound up their day's work by milking, which we had been sent to watch — had knocked off obviously as fresh as paint. Elizabeth, too, made no complaint of feeling tired after her day's stone-picking. She strode along manfully, and I thought that the rather wooden way she moved was just because of the clumsy land-boots.

So that I vowed to myself that I'd never let her know what I'd begun to feel, after the midday rest, and in every muscle, namely, the relentless strain of unusual physical exertion.

Ah! How it had got me!

The first game of tennis, the first bicycle ride, the first row, the first long tramp of a summer holiday — everybody knows the ache that comes after these. Multiply that ache by fifty, and you'll have some idea of what happens after the first day's land-work.

Personally I felt it would be all I could do to drag my stiffening limbs back to the hut!

I also felt that for Elizabeth to cross-question me at this moment was adding insult to aches. After staring at dinner, too!

"Elizabeth, you are a little owl," I informed her. "I know what you imagine. Can't any sort of young man say a word to me without it's starting some idea of a love-affair?"

Elizabeth, set-faced, said coolly, "Apparently not."

I straightened my back indignantly. Then caught my breath because it hurt me so. Hoping she hadn't noticed this, I demanded, "What d'you mean by that?"

"Wherever you go, Joan, young men always seem to break out," Elizabeth replied rebukefully.

She spoke the words "young men" just as Farmer Price might have mentioned caterpillars in his standing crops.

"You forget that I came down here just because I'd had enough of them!" I said wearily.

Elizabeth, scowling:

"We've only just finished with the eternal Harry. For a year he monopolized you; nobody else existed! Then he went, leaving you without an ounce of go or fun in you — anyhow, he did go; at last. But the very day he'd gone you got a proposal from that other Man-thing; what was his name?"

"D'you mean Richard Wynn?"

“Yes. There was that. Well, you lost his letter. So he was off ——”

“Shouldn’t have taken him, anyhow,” I protested.

“You said you would.”

“People will say anything,” I defended myself, “after a day like I’d just had in that office.”

“I sometimes think you’d be quite silly enough to accept him yet,” declared my candid friend as we tramped past the park trees that gave a glimpse of the white hospital. “But then we come down here. And the very first evening — what happens? A third young man crops up!”

“He didn’t crop up to see me.”

“Curious that you should be the only girl in the camp that he picked out to speak to,” sniffed Elizabeth. “And that the next morning he should make a bee line for that cow-house of yours, and ——”

Here she broke off with an alarmingly sudden little screech of “Ow!”

I stopped.

“What is the matter!”

“Nothing,” retorted Elizabeth, with tears in her eyes.

“My dear old girl, what is it?” I insisted anxiously.

Then she laughed. She blurted out quickly:

“It’s only that — the more I move the more it hurts me! Oh, Joan, I’m sore! That’s why I snapped at you so crossly. They say ‘Cross as a bear with a sore paw’ — but — but I’m sore everywhere!”

“Oh! So am I!” I groaned, laughing with the relief of the confession. “I feel as if I’d got fifty new bones.”

“So do I!”

“All hurting me like mad!”

“So are mine!” declared Elizabeth, hobbling. “Well, I suppose we’ll get used to it. They say this wears off. Let’s hope for the best — and for goodness’ sake don’t let us squabble.”

“I never want to!”

“Righto. And tell me,” continued my chum, “what you really do think of that young man Captain Holiday?”

I couldn’t help laughing. If Elizabeth wants to get at anything, it comes off in the long run. So, as we hobbled stiffly down the road together, I told her as much as I did “think” on the score of this new acquaintance. I described the cow-house scene.

“Such a truly idyllic setting,” I chaffed her, “for any sort of a *tête-à-tête!*”

I repeated the young man’s remarks about the way to “make work do itself, and to let gravity grav.” I told her how he’d made me roll down my sleeves again, and had ordered me about generally.

“I think he’s rather a domineerer. But he is a sahib, of course. He’s rather original, too. And almost the rudest person I’ve met,” I said critically. “He is the rudest, next to you.”

Elizabeth said blandly:

“Yes, and yet you’ve always liked me most aw-

fully. I suppose you'll soon find out how much you like him."

I began to say, "We shall probably never see the man again," but remembered that he was the owner of this land on which we toiled, and that it would sound silly. So I merely said:

"I don't dislike him at all."

Elizabeth shook her bobbed hair against her cheeks. Grimly, fatalistically, she added:

"I know you're going to like him horribly."

"I know your poor little sore bones have affected your brain!" I told her. "Haven't I just had one 'doing' over liking some one too horribly? Yet, in the middle of that, you say ——"

"It isn't the middle," Elizabeth returned very quickly, "it is coming to the end."

"What!"

"It is the beginning of the end. You won't go on thinking of Harry to the end of your days."

"Much you know about it, child!" I said, and as I spoke the wide sun-lighted green lands faded from before me, and I saw Harry's polished black head above the pink lights of a restaurant table — Harry's handsome, straying eyes. "The thought never leaves me, Elizabeth."

"Hasn't it left you once today?"

Here — well, it was the greatest surprise to me, but I did have to straighten my mouth out of a smile. Today? The thought of Harry had certainly been somewhat overlaid by — cow-house. But I said:

"It's there always, worse luck, at the back of my mind."

"Making more room in front," said my impish chum. "You're better about him already."

Patiently I sighed.

"You're better," insisted Elizabeth, "even this little time away in this weird place with this extraordinary job lot of people has done you good. You will begin to forget soon."

Pityingly I smiled at her.

"Harry," I told her, "is not the kind of man who gets forgotten. I wish he were. He is one of those charmers who leave their mark on a woman's life. He'd such wonderful ways. He ——"

"Don't shove me into the wall," begged Elizabeth. "I feel knocked about enough as it is."

"Sorry. I wish I could make you realize, though, about Harry. He once took me to a play where the woman says: 'There are two kinds of love affairs. There are affairs — and there are just loves' Unfortunately this is one of those."

"Oh, yes," said Elizabeth drily.

"If you'd ever had one of either," said I, nettled, "you'd know the difference."

"So that there will always be one thing that I shall never know," concluded the Man-hater, limping along.

I glanced at the small dog-tired but resolute figure in the smock that the evening sunlight was gilding from holland to cloth of gold.

"Wait!" I threatened her again. "Wait until

some great huge ultra-masculine man comes along and begins to bully you in a voice like a typhoon!"

"Like a what?"

"Like a gale! Like a Bull of Basan! That sort of huge brute who'd terrify the life out of you, Elizabeth my child, and order you about like Petruchio and Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*! That's what'll happen! I shall simply love to watch you being absolutely subjugated"—

"Book early, to avoid disappointment," mocked my chum.

"— subjugated by a gigantic, *navvy* sort of person with muscles as big as vegetable-marrows bobbling all over his arms and shoulders!"

"It sounds too fascinating, doesn't it?" jeered the girl whose head reached up to my ear. "I love your prognostications, Joan, especially after a hard day's work! It puts you in train! You really think a bully-ragging Prize-fighter-type will be my Fate!"

"Unless ——" Here I had another idea. "Unless you ever meet the one and only man in this world that you've ever written letters to. What about that old Colonel of yours?" I laughed.

A word of explanation here.

"The Old Colonel" had been for a year a standing joke in our London *ménage*. He was the officer whose furnished flat we had taken over by the week in Golder's Green — and which we'd now left for such very different quarters. His flat was full of neat contrivances, such as the bath-mat, hand-made out of rounds of bot-

tle corks; full, too, of books on "Tactics," all annotated in a neat, old-maidish hand.

We had amused ourselves by making a mental picture of their owner — a methodical, fussy, white-moustached "old" soldier. This had seemed all of a piece, too, with the Colonel's letters; for he and Elizabeth had exchanged much formal correspondence on the subjects of the kitchen chimney and of the tabby-cat he pensioned.

"When he comes back from the Front and sees you," I threatened her, "it may alter everything. If you become an old man's darling ——"

"Brrrr!" shuddered Elizabeth.

"Plenty of girls do. You might like it better than marrying the Lion-Tamer, after all. . . . And don't say I didn't warn you if it does come off ——"

"Give me your handkerchief," said Elizabeth, without ceremony plucking the green silk handkerchief out of my smock pocket. "I want to tie a knot in it."

She tossed it back to me as we went on.

"What's that for?" I demanded. "To remind you of what I said about that old Colonel of yours?"

"No," from Elizabeth. "It's to remind you of something, Joan."

As the corrugated iron roof of the hut came into sight beyond the great white cliff of a hawthorn bush she spoke earnestly, but with an imp of mischief dancing in each of her eyes.

"Whatever happens, however much better you may

feel, however much more you may laugh and talk like your old self, I want you always to remember one thing. I want you to be sure — sure to go on thinking of Harry at least once every day!”

And before I could take the unsympathetic little wretch by her overalled shoulders and shake her, before I could pull her short hair, or even retort by a single word, we were back at the camp among the girls — with a fresh trial awaiting us!

CHAPTER VIII

THE PLUNGE

“Under the glassy, cool, translucent wave.”—MILTON.

YES! Not even yet was there to be rest after the exertions of the first day's land-work.

As Elizabeth and I hobbled into the hut ten minutes after the others, Vic's voice hailed us above the laughing clatter:

“Here, Celery-face and Mop! Off with your spotless — I don't think — uniforms, and come on for a nice swim!”

“Swim?” we echoed, glancing aghast about the hut.

The gang of timber girls, with Miss Easton, had returned from their woods, and they and the farm girls were in various stages of getting out of land-kit and into swimming costumes.

After hard work, here they were all ready again for hard play, for exercise, for plunging into cold water.

I began to say something wistful about embrocation.

“Embrocation? There's a whole pool of something better for you than embrocation outside,” Vic said with scorn. “You get those two extra costumes

out, Sybil, will you? And you, kids, off with your boots."

There was no gainsaying this redoubtable Vic. Big, and brown, and beaming with good-humor, she stood over us. We just had to start unlacing our gaiters.

The girls trooped out into the meadow in coats over their bathing dresses. Vic and Sybil waited inexorably, for us. Reluctantly and stiffly I took off my overall. And I saw Vic's eyes fasten upon the garments that I was wearing underneath.

They were the same "pretties" that I always wore in town under my georgette blouses. I made them myself. The under-bodice that attracted Vic's notice was of bluish-pink crêpe-de-Chine with mauve satin ribbon shoulder-straps, and with the wings of a sky-blue bird — for Happiness — embroidered across the front.

"That's a dinky 'casserole' you've got on there, young Celery-face," pronounced Vic, scrutinizing this garment. "Swanky Royal Air Service crest touch! And a silk 'chim' underneath it, too! My word! You won't be wearing those things long on the farm, though. Look here, Syb!"

Sybil, who had brought out the spare costumes, came up. From her voice and ways I'd fancied that she would sympathize with my own idea of dressing for the Land. This was to make it a point of self-respect that, though I must wear coarse holland and rough stuff for my outside things, my under-garments should still be as dainty as ever.

It surprised me when Sybil, glancing at my underthings, shook her head deprecatingly.

"Those won't do," she told me gently. "Not for cleaning out cow-houses in! You don't find a man-worker — well!" she laughed, "you never find a man wearing pink crêpe-de-Chine all day. But what I mean is that when you're on a man's job you've got to dress the part, not just for the look of it, but for the use. A man works 'in the sweat of his brow'— and of his body. So he has got to have clothes he can sweat into comfortably — to put it frankly. He doesn't wear things that hold the moisture and cling — as yours are doing now."

I glanced down. The crêpe and ribbons certainly were clinging to me. Moreover, they were very chilly now I'd stopped moving about.

"Give you your death of cold, those would," Vic declared, and Sybil, wrapping a towel round my shoulders, supported her.

"Working as a man, you simply can't wear the clothes you wore when you were just sitting still as a girl!" she remarked.

"I can't wear woollies and sweaters next me," I protested. "I would rather die of cold!"

"You needn't wear wool," Sybil said, as I got stiffly into my costume. "Though of course athletes say a sweater next your skin is the only thing. They do scoff at the way women wear four thicknesses of silk or lace, and then a 'sweater' over it all, doing no good! But you must wear a woven vest or one of linen

mesh — or anything that dries quickly, and lets the air through to your skin. I'll lend you something, then you can order more."

"And keep dinky undies
For civvies and Sundays,"

sang out Vic. "Now then, ready?"

Vic caught each of us by an arm, and ran us out of hut and home, down the green and daisied meadow at the back of the camp.

In front of us two girls, with bare legs showing under their ballooning Land Army coats, and a third swathed round with a bath-robe, were gambolling like lambs down the grassy path. From behind the alders at the bottom came sounds of splashing and laughter. We followed to where the bank descended under trees to the Welsh trout-stream, brightly clear as a child's eyes, with little cataracts between mossy boulders from which the girls could dive into the wide, smooth pool that reflected them.

Well! It was all the bathroom the camp had. We might as well get in and treat it as a good wash!

Elizabeth, on the pool brink, said:

"N — neither of us can swim, you know — ooh!" she wound up with her little screech. Vic, gently, but firmly, had shoved her under water.

I dipped before she could catch hold of me, while the others shouted with laughter. The first moment was awful. Then came the glorious glow and tingle of reaction, and we felt quite jolly, as Vic promised

that she and young Sybil would soon teach us to swim.

“In and out with you today, though,” she decreed. “Here’s the towel — have a scrub now. I’ll rub you down.”

Scarified but warm enough, we sat under an alder in our overcoats, watching the others until tea-time or supper-time as we cared to call it. And then — Ah! It was as though one substantial midday meal had never been. . . .

We just legged it (“for the best!” as the Timber girls shouted) back to the mess-table in the Hut!

CHAPTER IX

OUR MESS-MATES

“Whence came ye, merry Damsels, whence came ye,
So many, and so many, and such glee?”

— KEATS.

LATER Elizabeth and I talked to Miss Easton, who, while the Campites played, read, sewed, or danced as before, told us a little about them all — these girls, who were already less strange to us, and who were all to become our friends.

Miss Easton began with her own story. Her last job had been in a munitions factory, where she'd worked ten hours a day on a skeleton bridge 35 feet up in the air, which had danced and quivered with the heat of a row of furnaces below. She said it always felt like Vesuvius going to break into eruption. Not unnaturally her health had broken down.

At the Labour Exchange she had mentioned “Forestry” as a forlorn hope, and they'd given her a trial — in more senses than one.

She had been set to cross-cut sawing with a hardened “old hand.” Twenty-five trees was counted a day's work. Halfway through the twenty-third she had fainted clean off. For a week she'd crept back to her billet, and had just taken her aches and blisters to bed, where she lay like a log until the next morning.

Now she could stand anything — climb like a cat or run like a deer.

“I feel finer every day,” she told us, smiling.

Then she told us of the others, in order of what used to be called “Social Importance.” I suppose Sybil Wentworth came first. She was the country-house girl, who had only known London as the Season, the Park, Hurlingham and Henley. Her own home was lovely, Miss Easton said; there was Georgian wing and a Norman chapel, and it boasted one of those other countless bedrooms where Queen Elizabeth had passed a night.

Now Sybil's mattress was drawn up next to Lil's, who had been maid-of-all-work in one of the million villas that are too small to house and feed a servant decently, but where a servant must be kept because one is kept in bigger houses.

Among Lil's mates were a girl from Somerville, a pickle-factory hand, a student of music, and Vic the Cockney.

In every community of girls is one who will always take the lead by virtue of her vitality and initiative. Here it was Victoria Jelks, the ex-coster girl from Kentish Town, who stood out as one of the handsomest, “goeyest,” and most efficient women I have met.

The forewoman took Vic's advice; Sybil deferred to her. Yet she belonged to the class that we have seen blackening Hampstead Heath on Bank Holidays, grimy and anæmic, made ugly by the life and toil of

town. The country, the air, the healthy work have beautified them back into the mould that Nature meant; have given them back shapeliness and colour.

I pondered over the miracle, as I saw it now.

For these once-town girls, too, the two great drawbacks of the country did not exist. Dulness, loneliness! How could they feel lonely or bored leading this communal life all set to laughter? No wonder if they found it like the very best bits of being back at school again! With fewer restrictions, too, with what wealth of new ideas, fresh outlooks on life gained by the intermingling of class with class. . . .

Kitchener's First Army was not more of a medley of types!

"Why," Elizabeth asked softly, "have they all joined up?"

"Oh! Different reasons they give," answered the forewoman. "One joins because her pal joined. Lil there was tired of domestic service — I'm sure I don't blame her. Another hears what fun the life is — and it is fun, even if we do have to work hard. We couldn't work so hard if it weren't fun! Another thinks it's a shame if we can't do as much as the Frenchwomen do. Another girl just said. 'I've got six brothers serving.'"

Here a lump came into my throat as I listened. I thought of my own brothers. Jack, who went down with his ship in '15 — Guy with his guns — Victor, the youngest of us all, who had just got his wings, and was off to join his air squadron in France. What

sort of sister was I to those fighting boys? Unworthy! Poor in physique and grit, I'd been ready to buy myself out of the Land Army almost before I'd given it a trial.

I was still thinking of that after "Lights out," when all the girls were already asleep.

But Elizabeth, from the next mattress, heard.

She crept near in the darkness.

"Joan! What is it? Why are you crying?" she whispered. "Are you cross because I teased you about that wretched Harry?"

"No! Oh, no," I whispered back. "It's only that I—I felt ashamed of myself! There was I—ready to jack up this morning! I won't now. No, not if I never stop feeling stiff again, I shall stick it. I've just made up my mind this minute."

"You made it up before," murmured my chum, wriggling back to her mattress. "You made it up this morning when that young man said——"

"Oh, bother that interfering young man," I interrupted, "I hope I don't see him again."

Elizabeth, as she rolled over again, said drowsily but firmly, "You'll see him again before three days are up."

CHAPTER X

THE MILKING-LESSON

“I would I were a milkmaid.”—TENNYSON.

ELIZABETH was right in her prediction.

Before the three next days were up I had again encountered this Captain Holiday.

This time it was not in that Augean stable of a cow-house — which, by the way, I had finished cleaning out — thereby earning a word of approbation from Mr. Price, and also hardening my muscles. I no longer felt that my body was full of new bones, all hurting me at once. I felt, already, as if I were gaining a new body.

Quite ready for anything I felt on that late afternoon when Mrs. Price came to me with the two big milk pails.

“Please scald these out,” said the farmer’s daintily-featured little wife. “You can take your first milking-lesson this evening.”

I was delighted as I washed my hands in the back kitchen, scalded out the pails, and followed Mrs. Price in her crisp grey overall into the big cow stall.

Milking! This would be so much easier, as well as more enjoyable, than wielding that pitchfork and bending my back over that heavy barrow to and from that disgusting midden!

How fragrant, after that last job, was the atmosphere of the big stable, where the breath of the cows mingled with the incomparable smell of the new milk that was already frothing and foaming into the pail held between the knees of the Land Girl "Curley"—that straight-haired, smiling brunette.

She was sitting milking the biggest of the seven black-and-white cows that stood tied up in a row. At the stall next to her sat Sybil on a three-legged stool of heavy oak, also milking busily.

"Now, Joan, you shall start away on Clover here. She's the easiest," said Mrs. Price, leading me to a cow at the farther end of the stable—a cow that was snowy white but for the broad band of black that encircled her body and the black tassel of her tail.

The farmer's wife took that tail in her hand and with a twist of straw-rope tied it down to one of the cow's hind-legs.

"That is to stop her flicking you in the eye with it," explained Mrs. Price. "Now Vic always puts the tail to the cow's side and pins it down by leaning her head against it; but you can't manage that yet. Always nervous they are at first, with a stranger. Soon get used to you," Mrs. Price assured me, as the cow looked round, tossed her head, shuffled her little hoofs, and would have twitched that captive tail. "I'll talk to her a little."

Fondling her silky flanks, the farmer's wife spoke to Clover, in soothing, softly-accented words that I suppose were Greek to Curley and Sybil—but I still re-

membered a little of the language that had been chattered about me in those far-off school-room days, when I'd worn a plait and wandered about a Welsh farm, so differently run from this one.

I'd seen Dad's cowman stand to milk on the steep hillside, where the cows grazed. He had called to his cows just like this.

"Little heart!" cooed Mrs. Price, in Welsh. "Heart of gold! Best white sugar, you are! Little Clover, dear! I'll start her, Joan."

She set the wide-lipped pail under the cow, and with that other small, capable hand of hers began milking where she stood. Sharply and copiously the white spurts ran through her fingers.

"Now, Joan," she said in a moment. "Sit down to it. Take your pail so. Now your fingers like this. Now try."

I tried.

Once or twice I'd been allowed to try at home, long ago. But how I'd forgotten!

Heavens! How difficult it was! If Clover were the easiest cow in that stable, I should have been sorry to try the most unyielding one! It was almost impossible to me at first to squeeze out even a drop of milk.

I worked away, and quite suddenly I realized that it was coming mightily hard on my fingers and fore-arms, this work that seemed to be no work at all to Mrs. Price, and easy enough to the two other girls.

"Do you know how long it takes to make a milker,

a really first-class milker? Three years," declared the farmer's wife impressively. "And even then she has to be born as well as made, like. After all, it's an art, same as playing the piano. But you can learn to milk quite well, quite so that the cows get milked all right, in a month, say. You'll do all right, only work."

I worked without much success, but doggedly. I was sweating with effort under my hat and into my mesh garments, lent by Sybil. I was flushed, but determined; terrified of hurting Clover, delighted when a meagre spurt of milk did reward me, attentive to Mrs. Price's instructions, and afraid I was showing myself up as the completest fool, when —

Yes, this naturally was the moment that that young man's voice made itself heard behind me. He must have come in by the other door farther down the stable.

"Good evening, Mrs. Price!"

"Good evening, Captain Holiday. Have you come to have another look round?"

"You don't mind, I know," said the direct, uncompromising tone, which I could guess was accompanied by that friendly and ingratiating smile.

Intent upon my occupation, I went on struggling. My back was to him; but there are times when one can feel a pair of eyes fixed as surely as one could feel a hand placed on the nape of one's neck.

* * * * *

Now, looking back, I wonder at myself.

Was there really that time when I never wished to see him? Was he still nothing to me, then? It seems incredible to me, after all that has come since.

But, that late afternoon, all in the fragrant atmosphere of the milk that rang in the pails, with the sweet grass-scented breath of the cows all about me, he was nothing to me, nothing still but an intruder.

* * * * *

With a sigh of exasperation I tugged at the warm, leathery udder of Clover. Strenuous minutes elapsed. Still Captain Holiday stood by, saying no word to me, but always watching.

Always conscious of his presence, I saw nothing of him but his shadow flung before him, clean-cut blue on the yellow-white wall of the stable.

Then I heard Mrs. Price asking him if he were comfortable at the lodge?

So that was where he lived; Vic had told me there was quite a swanky big lodge to the hospital grounds.

He told Mrs. Price that they were very nice quarters. Then came something I hadn't expected. I heard Mrs. Price give a curiously mischievous little chuckle. It ran through her voice as she asked the next question:

“More than enough room there, isn't there, Captain Holiday, for a bachelor?”

This was a hint, I know, smiling and plainly meant! Not only that, but I felt her smile taking in myself as well as him.

She was as bad as Elizabeth. I was glad my back was towards both of them.

Captain Holiday's cool voice replied:

"Quite. That's why I'm having some people down to stay with me. Must have a house-party for the concert. You know we're getting up a concert at the hospital, Mrs. Price. Yes, I'm expecting a wounded pal of mine down in a day or so."

Mrs. Price's soft voice broke in to speak to me.

"Tired, Joan? Rest a minute, just ——"

I moved into a more comfortable position, giving a look round before I bent to my task again.

The young "Must-know-all," as the nursery phrase has it, was still watching my fingers. What was it in his slight smile that seemed to prompt me to what I did next?

I squeezed some milk on to my fingers, and then, I know, his smile grew broader. It was as though he'd seen that old trick somewhere, and had egged me on to it. But where had this soldier watched milking before?

"That's coming better now, Joan," approved Mrs. Price. "That's because you wetted your fingers. Look — dip your fingers in the milk, my mother taught me. Easier for the cow and easier for you."

I said:

"Yes, I remember now seeing the man dip his fingers in the pail at Dad's farm. I'd forgotten. Lots of things will come back to me presently."

Here, above me, the man's shadow moved quickly

on the wall. It was as though Captain Holiday, still planted there behind me, were listening as intently as he was watching me.

Rather confused, I went on to show that I did know something about this job.

"I saw on the efficiency test papers," said I, "that the examiners from headquarters don't like the wet milking. It said preference would be given to dry milking."

"Cleaner, for some, p'raps," said Mrs. Price. "Fifteen marks, too; but I thought you were no town girl! Doesn't it show now, Captain Holiday?"

A non-committal "Um" came from Captain Holiday as his tall shadow slid away from the wall and out of the farmyard just as Elizabeth and Vic came in.

"Again!" was my chum's laconic comment when we were walking home.

I laughed good-humouredly enough, for I was a little pleased with the way I'd got on with my work.

"Elizabeth, you're getting one-idea'ed," I told her as I strolled along, picking out of the hedge a country nosegay of stitchwort and dog-violets and primroses with one gay pink flower of campion. "I must say I shall be glad when Hackenschmidt the Second turns up ——"

"Who?"

"The hefty Brute who's going to tame you, you Man-hater, when the time comes," I explained, putting a leaf of Herb-Robert, pungent-scented and lacy, as

frill to my bouquet. "I shall be able to rag you about him then, instead of having to put up with *your* nonsense. You wait."

"Yes, I'm waiting," nodded Elizabeth grimly.

I said "All things come to her who waits. I expect he'll take at *least* seventeens in boots! And throw them at you!"

CHAPTER XI

THE LAND-GIRLS' LETTER-BAG

“A word in due season, how good it is!”—SCRIPTURE.

AT the Camp we found the Timber-gang buzzing about what constituted for all of us the great event of the day — the day's mail.

It arrived after the girls were already at work, so that since breakfast they had been looking forward to the letters, wondering about them. . . .

Ah, these letters! Most people realize by this time how much they have always meant to the boys at the Front. They meant as much and more to the war-working girls! You people who “can't be bothered to write much,” you correspondents who “forget”—I wish you could have seen that group of uniformed lasses with the green Forestry ribbons round their hats, clustering about the forewoman who held the packet. I wish you could have heard the eager tone of their “Any for me?”

“Two for you, Curley — one from France. Oh! girls, look at the snapshots of me sister's nippers. ‘To Auntie Vic, with love from Stan’—all right, ain't it?” cried Vic.

“Only these four for me?” exclaimed the red-haired Welsh timber girl.

"And none for me! Isn't it a cruel shame?" lamented Lil. "Here, Aggie, *do* let me have a read of yours ——"

"I say, this isn't for me. It got slipped in among mine. 'Miss Weare'— who's she when she's at home? Oh! The little new one. Here, Mop ——"

Elizabeth took the letter.

I was reading a kind letter from Agatha, my step-mother, who ended with, "Still I hope you will not find that this new venture of yours is a mistake after all," when there was a little sudden laugh and a quick exclamation from my chum at my elbow.

"Joan, I say, Joan!"

"Yes? Who've you heard from?"

"Who d'you think?" she returned amusedly, taking me by the elbow to draw me aside into the porch. "I'll give you three guesses!"

"Man or woman? Ah, I needn't ask. Woman, of course?"

"As it happens, no!"

"What? A man?" I exclaimed. "But you never write to any men ——"

"Don't I? I do."

"Only to one landlord," I said. "Only to the ancient Colonel!"

Elizabeth gave her gurgling boyish chuckle.

"Right in one," she said. "It is the old Colonel again. You know I wrote to him last about that loose scullery tap that we had to leave as it was. Well, he's

home on sick leave now, he says, and he writes from our flat — his own flat, I mean. Only he's coming down here very shortly ——”

“Here?” I exclaimed, glancing round the big hut, with its characteristic grouping of Land Girls off duty.

Some of them were still poring and chattering over their mail; Peggy, with her foot upon a chair, was cleaning her hobnailed boots; Vic, now clad in a bathing costume and her Land Army hat, was sitting on a corner of the table, swinging her legs, whistling, and stitching at a button that had come loose on her khaki breeches.

“This is no place for a dear old gentleman like your colonel! What does he want to come here for?” I added.

“Says he'll be staying with a friend of his in this neighbourhood,” explained Elizabeth, handing me the note with the neat, precise handwriting that we had seen on so many business letters, “and that as I was here he would give himself the pleasure of calling upon me if he might. Antediluvian touch, isn't it? And, of course, he won't be allowed to call here, I suppose, even at his age.”

“Oh, but I hope we shall meet him,” I said, as I prepared to get into bathing-things again for my swimming lesson from Vic and Sybil in the pool. “It will be rather fun, after all our guess-work, to see what the funny old thing really is like.”

Now this was vouchsafed to us in a few days from then. And I admit that this, and what it brought in its train, has been quite one of the shocks of my life.

CHAPTER XII

WE "GET USED TO IT"

"This is the life,
This is the life,
This is the life — for mine!"

—THE BING BOYS.

WE had been at Mr. Price's farm for a week now. In that short time the miracle had begun to work.

Seven bottles of the most powerful pick-me-up could not have worked in that time what was done by these seven natural tonics — fresh air, physical toil, simple, wholesome food, cold water, newness of occupation, laughter with comradeship, and profound sleep o' nights!

"This is pretty awful, you know," we whispered rebelliously to each other half a dozen times a day.

But —

Already we were beginning to enjoy it all! Neither of us admitted this, of course. For my part, I should have felt it was too ridiculously soon to enjoy anything in life again — and such a life!

That rag-time rabble of girls! That lack of civilized comforts in camp! Vic's orders for the day! This routine of jobs only fit for a farm-lad — yet what thrills of pride ran through me at the thought

that I, Joan Matthews, was doing them at all, and that soon I should begin to do them quite well!

I had cleaned out a hopelessly filthy-looking cow-house — thrill of pride number one — all by myself — nearly. No rush of work accomplished at the office had ever given me such satisfaction! Then I'd taken three milking lessons, at the first of which Mrs. Price said I'd made a good start — thrill number two. Now Mr. Price had set me and my chum on to a new job — thrill number three — in which he was instructing us himself.

This was to harness his old white mare, Blossom, to the cart, to take it down to the field of roots across the road from the farm, and to fork up roots, which we were presently to pulp into food for the bullocks, which were still being partly stable-fed each day.

Into that big field, bordered by elms, through which we caught glimpses of a faintly purple range of mountains, Elizabeth and I tramped with the farmer; she at Blossom's mild head, I carrying a fork and listening to that gentle giant, Mr. Price.

“When we have got a cart-load I will take you to the grinding-machine and show you how you mash these things up,” he told me. “Very handy, the new power-engine! Three belts for shafting I've got from the engine to the machine. Put it in this winter, I did. All done by horse-power before that. Wonderful! What they're getting to do now in the farms! Wouldn't have believed it in my father's time — no, nor that I should have little young ladies like that one to

lead the horses for me," he smiled. "Stop her here, missy. Whoa, back! It's up here we'll start."

But before Elizabeth had left the horse's head, before I'd dug my fork more than once into the rich-smelling earth, a "Good morning" sounded behind us, in a deep but gentle voice.

We turned, I saying resignedly to myself in that flash:

"I suppose it's Captain Holiday again — sounds as meek as Moses for once, but he's evidently come to see how the Land Girls get on with their root-digging, and to tell them all about it."

And I found that I was wrong.

The young man who'd been tramping up that field behind us was not Captain Holiday, though he wore khaki and leggings like his.

"Er ——" he began with a hand to his cap, and obviously not sure whether he ought to speak first to the farmer or to me. "I — er — saw you from the road there. If you don't mind, aren't you" — nervously — "aren't you the two ladies from London?"

"Yes," I said, standing there rather astonished.

The young officer went on with his eyes on the cart, that shut out any view of Elizabeth.

"Oh, yes. I hope you don't mind, but I thought I'd come up and — er — speak ——"

At that moment I thought I had never in my life seen anybody so agonizingly timid. Gazing at the D.S.O. ribbon on his chest, I could only wonder if he had won it whilst he was in a high fever and did not

know what he was doing. . . . Miserably shy, too, he looked to me.

But he didn't go away. He went on talking, though stammeringly.

"You know, I know you both quite well — I mean by name, of course. We've — we've exchanged plenty of letters and all that," he went on stammeringly.

"I'm afraid it's a mistake," I began.

"Oh — er — no," he interrupted. "I'd better tell you who I am — stupid of me. I'm — er — my name is Fielding. Colonel Fielding."

Colonel Fielding! — Fielding?

But that was the name of our landlord! That was the officer from whom we'd taken over our Golder's Green flat!

How we'd talked and talked over the fancy picture that we had made up of him — the white-moustached old warrior of a bygone age, as we had imagined him!

Now, here he stood before us — and could anything be less like our preconceived view of him?

Colonel Fielding in the flesh was a young man of twenty-six, slim-waisted and fair. The white moustache of our imaginings was represented by the merest hint of close-cropped golden down upon his upper lip.

I could hardly believe it.

"Do you mean," I exclaimed, "that you are really the Colonel Fielding who let us his flat?"

"Er — yes. I am." He reddened, actually reddened all over his face as he cleared his throat and

added, "Do you mind telling me — are you Miss Elizabeth Weare?"

"No, I'm Miss Matthews," I told him. "That's Miss Weare ——"

For it was at this moment that Blossom dragged the cart a step forward, and Elizabeth, calling manfully. "Whoa-back!" in imitation of Mr. Price, reached up to her head again, and pulled her round.

I suppose to the end of his days one man will see Elizabeth as she was at that moment in the field of roots.

It was a colourful and blowy day. The sky, threatening rain, showed capricious clouds, dove-grey and silver-white, tossing across the blue. A mauve screen of Welsh hills, a nearer fringe of budding elms bordered that big field of lush brown-and-purple-green. Set in the middle of it like a giant's toy was the scarlet-painted farm-cart with the white mare; a small, boyish, crop-haired, smocked and breeched Land-girl at her head.

Colour and sunburn suited my chum's small face. The Land Army hat had been drenched by several showers to a becoming softness over her thick hair. She held herself (even in those early days of freedom from skirts) with a new poise. She was as effective as any poster in the Tube! but with no Tube atmosphere about her; no! the strong scents of earth, the wine-sweet breath of Spring wind that tossed the black locks on her rosied cheeks, and flapped in her smock, billowing it out below her belt or furling it above her legs —

her legs which were at once sturdy and dainty. Briefly, she looked ripping. And I saw that Colonel Fielding saw it even in that first moment of his greeting her.

It was not much more than a greeting and a good-bye; a word to the farmer about "hoping he didn't mind"—which would appear to be the youthful colonel's pet stand-by of a phrase.

"Er—I might be down for some time probably," he concluded, reddening again. "Perhaps I might be allowed to call?"

Elizabeth, without looking at him, answered in a tone like the shutting of a door:

"We live in camp here. Men aren't allowed there."

"Oh—sorry. I hope you didn't mind. Perhaps," he added—faint but pursuing—"I shall see you again—er—somewhere——"

Elizabeth, stony little wretch, said nothing at all. I think I began to say "Are you staying at Careg?" out of sheer pity, but it was Mr. Price, the gentle Welsh giant, who broke in:

"Yes, sure! Any time you like to see over the farm! I'll show you our shire horses! Interest you, those would. You shall come round with me."

"Oh, thanks. I should love to," murmured Colonel Fielding, with one last glance at my chum before he melted away out of the landscape.

Even as he did so, I saw the expression on that fair, girlish face of the man we'd always nicknamed "Elizabeth's Old Colonel." He was unmistakably, unfeign-



Edward C. Caswell

*We agreed that we were simply loving the life and the
people, the work and the play*



edly admiring. It made him show, for a second, quite a determined gleam between his long lashes.

But what a waste of time for him to admire Elizabeth — at least if he tried to show it! He was, anyhow, not the sort of person, I decided, that any girl would fall in *love* with!

Finnicky, I called him. I said so afterwards to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth said she was so busy with the horse she hadn't had time to see what he was like.

Then (as I should have told you) we forgot all about that encounter in the root-field.

For three days we lived the Life Laborious; busy and full, but empty of all young men. Not a glimpse of one.

Then, one evening down at the swimming-pool, I said to Elizabeth, sitting on a mossy boulder and waiting for Vic to come up:

"Do you know we've been here for three weeks now? I feel as if we had been Land Girls all our lives. But the last week has been the quickest ——"

"— And the jolliest!" interrupted my chum.

Then we both burst out laughing together.

Pretence was at an end. We agreed that we were simply loving the life and the people, the work and the play.

As for me, I was such a different girl. I hadn't time to think about how different.

"Ready, Celery-face?" sang out Vic, striding from behind the alder where she'd flung off her coat.

A group of girls watched her — the former star of a London swimming-bath — as she took her plunge into the pool.

Then I waded in after her, and, all awkwardly still, swam the dozen strokes that brought me up to her. Panting, I held on to her. An absurdly short little effort — but it was the taste of a new function to me, the beginner. What years I'd wasted in not knowing how to swim! But oh, the joy of it now!

I looked round to see Elizabeth striking out with arms that were, like mine, milky-white to the elbow and then gloved in sunburn.

For by now I must tell you we had got our "Land Girl's complexion." This asset is gained in three distinct stages.

First stage: A scorching and very unbecoming scarlet that spread itself over the face. The recruit from town, seeing herself with a tomato-nose set between crimson cheeks, flies to her old and true friend, the powder-puff. Useless! To powder over that red is like putting a coat of transparent whitewash over a brick wall.

The second stage: Soreness and blisters; a skin that peels off in flakes like the bark of a silver birch. No help for this! Sybil had given me cucumber and benzoin lotion to cool the smart, but the only cure was that which time brought about.

Stage the third: A smooth, even wash of honey-tan over the newly-bloomed roses of the cheeks; the colour of the ripe glow on a sun-kissed peach.

Elizabeth had reached this becoming stage on the day that Colonel Fielding had seen her first at the white mare's head in the field of roots, and I was scarcely a day behind her. I laughed at the reflection in the pool of the girl whom Vic and the others still nicknamed "Celery-face!"

Rosier than ever after our swim, we dressed and strolled together down the lanes. For "the more you have of a thing the more you want it" applies to fresh air as well as to the other essentials of life.

Now that we were working out of doors all day, we found we wanted to stay out of doors in the evening! How unlike town, where, having worked all day in a stuffy office, our one idea of relaxation was an equally stuffy theatre!

But I did sometimes miss the theatre! Upon this very evening I said to Elizabeth:

"The birds are lovely tonight — listen! But do you know what? I would give anything to be going to a revue tonight; just to see some pretty girls' clothes after these weeks of felt hats and breeches! Just to hear some gay tunes from a good band!"

"Yes," agreed Elizabeth, quite dreamily for her. "I would like to hear a little music again just for once. I ——"

"Who's saying they want to hear a little music?" It was a merry girl's voice that broke upon our ears. "Here's where dreams come true!"

CHAPTER XIII

AN INVITATION

WE looked to the right. On a gate in the blossoming hedge sat the tiny Timber-girl Peggy, she who in the evening always wore a flower pinned by a badge to the breast of her crisply-ironed smock. This evening it was a spray of honeysuckle.

Beside her, leaning his elbows on the gate, stood a blue-suited young soldier from the hospital; he also wore a large spray of honeysuckle in his button-hole, and another in his khaki cap, which was further decorated by a lucky gollywog in pink and green wool! He touched it smiling as we paused beside our little comrade.

“Oh, talking of music, girls,” said Peggy, “look what my boy’s got for you, for all of us! Show them, Syd.”

Syd, who was a sergeant, and had the cheerfullest pink face I have ever seen above a blue jacket, thrust his hand into the pocket of that jacket, and brought out a large envelope which he handed to me. It was unaddressed and open. I took out a sort of illuminated card; its border showed floral designs, a rising sun, black cats, and several regimental crests. In curliest copperplate there was written:

TO THE LADY LAND-WORKERS,
CAREG CAMP.

You are invited to a
GRAND CONCERT,
to be held at

THE CAREG AUXILIARY RED CROSS HOSPITAL,

on the night of June 10.

To commence at
7 pip emma

(Tanks and bi-planes at 9.45.)

“How lovely!” I exclaimed, handing this card back to Peggy. “I heard something about there being a concert at the hospital, but I never knew we were to be asked.”

“Yes, miss,” said Sergeant “Syd” in a husky, boyish voice. “Captain Holiday himself said the invitation was to go to the camp in good time, so that all of the young ladies might arrange to come. He hoped all of you would, of course.”

“Tell him not to worry, we’re all for it,” declared saucy little Peggy from her gate. “I daresay it’ll be a wash-out of a concert”—with a wink at us—“but we’ll have to be thankful for what we can get in the Land Army. I suppose you’ll give us a solo on the comb? And is your Captain Holiday going to oblige at the concert, Syd?”

“Not him! Says he doesn’t know one tune from another,” laughed the wounded soldier. “Sitting in the audience with you young ladies, that’s the job he’s for.”

"I'm astonished at him," said Peggy, with a mischievous smile straight at me.

Syd added:

"I tell you who is a very fine singer, now — we could listen to him all night — his voice is a fair treat, and he's going to sing. It's that officer that Captain Holiday's got staying at the Lodge with him. Colonel Fielding, his name is."

I exclaimed:

"Oh! So he's staying at the Lodge!"

Peggy gave me a quick look and said:

"So he's another friend of yours?"

"No," I explained. "We've just met him." Then, thinking it would be silly to make any mystery about all this, I explained about Colonel Fielding being our landlord in London, and I mentioned the business letters about breakages and drains.

"And we're to hear him sing, are we?" I concluded — and again Sergeant Syd enlarged upon what a treat it would be for anybody who liked good music.

"Oh, but I don't know anything about 'good' music," said Elizabeth, carelessly.

We went on, leaving that picturesque group of Land-girl and soldier by that gate in the hedge.

Presently I found myself thinking of the way Colonel Fielding's delicate fair face had lighted up at the sight of Elizabeth, sturdy and muddy and sweet, in the mangold-field.

How obviously he had admired that sight!

He was probably looking forward to seeing it again. Poor wretched young man! For if he imagined that my boyish, independent, man-hating little chum would have a word for him at that concert — whatever he sang like — a bitter disappointment was in store for him, thought I. I had seen Elizabeth before, when men had been attracted. Prickly as a hedgehog she had become in the twinkling of an eye!

While I was thus musing, she was gazing above the hedge at the hills in the gloaming, purple against a primrose belt of sky. A heavenly evening! No wonder Elizabeth wanted to drink in the beauty of country and sky rather than to talk. I felt as she did.

Suddenly Elizabeth spoke, in a matter of fact tone that sounded as if she had just dragged herself back into the life of every day.

“That concert,” she said, “won’t be bad fun.”

“I expect it will be ripping,” I agreed, as we took the turning that led us back by a roundabout way to the camp again. “Wasn’t that invitation-card for it rather sweet? You know he’d painted all those crests and flowers and things himself.”

“He did?” said Elizabeth, “he or Captain Holiday, d’you mean?”

I turned to her a little puzzled.

“Captain Holiday — or who?” I said.

Quickly Elizabeth slipped out — “or Colonel Fielding, of course!”

Then she laughed, and went on quickly: "What rot!" and she turned aside to pull a wild rose out of the hedge above the pond.

"Of course I wasn't thinking about what I was saying. It is Peggy's sergeant who paints those things, isn't it?" she said.

I looked at her.

With her face still turned to the hedge she went on talking rather quickly.

"Yes; Peggy told me her boy was 'very clever at anything in the artistic line.' He does designs for belts, and mats, and cushion covers himself, and they're sold at Red Cross sales; and the most lovely necklaces made out of beads of wallpaper!" pursued Elizabeth, as if she were interested in nothing on earth so much as in the artistic productions of Peggy's boy.

But why had she coupled the names of Captain Holiday and Colonel Fielding as if they were the names uppermost in her thoughts?

How oddly, how aptly she'd slipped out that Colonel Fielding! Could she — *could* she have been "thinking of him." . . .

Oh!

How could I think such a lunatic thing! In spite of all I'd threatened of her getting "tamed" one day!

Not Elizabeth. Anybody else, but Elizabeth — No! I was sure of *that*.

* * * * *

No sooner had Peggy brought in to our forewoman

that illuminated invitation to the wounded soldiers' concert than there was little talk of anything else in the Land Girls' camp.

The questions of the hour were who would sing; what they'd sing; what refreshments would be offered; which of the boys was going to make the best "girl," varied with which of us girls could dress up as the best "boy"—given, unanimously, for "Mop," as they called Elizabeth.

These things were discussed in twenty voices before the farm-girls and the timber-gang set out for work in the morning, and after they returned in the evening.

A further burning question was whether we went in uniform or in our civies?

At last Miss Easton, the young forewoman, exclaimed in mock despair:

"I shall feel as if I'd been to the blessed concert ten times over at this rate, before ever it happens! When it does come off it'll fall as flat as a committee report. Whatever did they want to send out the invitations all these days ahead for? 'Tisn't as if we'd so many engagements in this"—she gazed out of the hut window at the pastoral scene of lambs taking their evening scamper round and round a daisied meadow—"in this crowded Metropolis that we had to be booked in advance."

Peggy returned demurely:

"Ah, Miss Easton, dear, that's all you know. Some

of 'em at the hospital made up their minds to let all us at the camp know in time, so that nobody should go off on short leave to see their people or anything, by mistake, on the 10th!"

Here Vic sighed stormily, rolled up her eyes in mock emotion, and remarked:

"What it is to be in love!"

The usual laugh went round as at the least of Vic's utterances. Then the talk turned upon the love-affairs of the Campites present. We were given the probable date of Peggy's wedding with her Syd in the autumn. We were told of the disgraceful fickleness of Curley, the straight-haired brunette, who had been engaged to a young gentleman in the Tank Corps, who had shown her photograph to a friend of his, who had taken an enormous fancy to it, and had written to Curley who had broken off the engagement with her first love, and who had been walking out, by letter, with the friend ever since.

"I'm astonished at her," Peggy said severely.

"What's the good of being astonished at anything in war-time?" retorted Curley. "And what's the good of going on writing to a fellow when you are sick and tired of the sight of him before ever he goes to France? Better sense to break it off in time, and see if you like the next one better when he comes home!"

General agreement over this — except from the red-haired Welsh timber-girl who declared in her richest contralto:

“That wasn’t love, then, for if you loved a man, it would be for ever!”

A diversity of opinions upon this, ending in a gale of laughter as Miss Easton reminded the red-haired one:

“Well, Aggie! You used to say in the woods that the birds seemed to call aloud the name of the boy one cared for! And in March you said they sang ‘Dick! Deek!’ And the other day you said they were singing ‘Hugh-ie! Hugh-ie!’”

Aggie, blushing down her milky, freckled throat, retorted with some allusion to some people “getting off with some fat, old, rich timber-merchant, after the war!” To which the young forewoman replied good-naturedly that she didn’t mind at all the idea of settling down with some nice, kind, elderly sort of man!

After the war, and all she’d had to do for twenty odd girls — seeing after every detail of their health, behaviour, outfit, railway vouchers, billets, stripes, rows with landladies, tests, and leaves — she would be glad enough to come in for a bit of “mothering” herself.

“Which,” she concluded quaintly, “a girl gets best from a husband who isn’t too young!”

Chorus of —

“Ah, bah! An old husband would be awful!”

And then Sybil, who had never travelled without a maid before the war, declared that after the war the best husbands for the girls who had been in the Land Army would be the Colonials, the Overseas men.

These splendid-looking outdoor fellows could offer a girl the life — with plenty of hard work rewarded by open-air freedom, and health, and fun — which she had learnt to love.

Hot argument here, following a demand from Lil the Londoner of —

“What’s the matter with our own boys?”

Everybody had a word to say on this perennial poignant question of young men and marriage.

I rather dreaded being asked what my views were. Silently I sat, going on with my work; which was shortening Elizabeth’s second smock for her. The things are made in three sizes only, and the smallest of them was just a trifle voluminous, and long for the little boyish figure of my chum. As I stitched away at the tuck I was taking in it, I wondered when my turn was coming.

It didn’t come.

None of the other girls asked me if I would like to marry a dark man or a fair one, a Colonial or a Britisher.

Then I wondered a little at that. Afterwards, long afterwards, I learnt the rather touching fact that Vic had forbidden the lot of them to tease “young Celery-face” about any young men. . . . Vic had tumbled to it that, honestly, I didn’t like it. And Vic had a good deal of fine feeling, tucked away, upon this subject.

Vic’s own love-affair (her “boy” had died in enemy hands, I afterwards heard) had made her sensitive for others.

So, as Elizabeth had gone shopping in the tiny village known to our mess as "the town," I was left to a peaceful Saturday afternoon.

It was on the Monday after that that a queer thing happened to me.

CHAPTER XIV

THE HEN-WIFE

“When I was a farmer, a farmer’s boy, I used to keep my master’s chickens . . .”—NURSEBY SONG.

AT the close of a day largely devoted to the task concerning Blossom, the cart, and the mangolds, I came up to the farmhouse to get their second feed for Mrs. Price’s chickens. Of these she had eighty, and I know she set great store by them. She well might! The hens, I heard, cost ten shillings each; one speckled grey cockerel was a guinea!

Some of the hens with their brood clucked about that midden in the yard to which I’d added by several barrow-loads; the rest were in a field that sloped quite steeply up the hill. I had fed the first lot in the yard; I had ascended the hill to the field with the coops dotted about it, and I had shut a brood of restless, fluffy, “peep”-ing chicks into the coop for them to feed undisturbed by their marauding grown-ups, when suddenly there brushed against my leggings the fluffy white-and-golden coat of Captain Holiday’s collie.

“Tock, tock, tock!” called the hens about me. And, above me, I heard the captain’s “Good afternoon.”

I rose, straightened myself from putting down the wire door of that coop, and turned to face him.

A little shock of surprise met me with the sight of him. He was — different. What had he done to himself? I wondered in a flash — in the same flash I realized that it was merely his clothes.

For the first time since I'd met him Captain Holiday had changed out of his accustomed khaki. He was wearing tweeds. A hat that might have done duty on a scarecrow, with a fishing-cast about it, shaded his eyes from the late afternoon sun. His Norfolk jacket was a shaggy, grey-green disgrace to a gipsy's wardrobe . . . but it suited him quite well. I wondered why he had never worn these things before.

After this I found myself thinking that I must have seen him in tweeds before now.

Wasn't his figure somehow very familiar — But no. How could that be?

"Good afternoon," I replied to him in the tone that may be translated, "What do you want now?"

As if in answer, he held out to me the tin pail that he was carrying. With his sweetest smile he barked out, "Rotten careless hen-wife you'd make! I had to bring this along to save Mrs. Price a journey. You forgot the milk to put in the chicks' tins."

"Did I!" I exclaimed, disconcerted. "That was stupid of me!"

"It was," retorted Captain Holiday, still with the smile that might have accompanied the prettiest compliment. Characteristic!

I scarcely looked at him, hoping that he'd go.

He did not. He seemed to expect me to have some-

thing to say to him — at all events, he stayed while I filled up those milk pannikins, and followed me round to the other coops.

I said, looking away from him, and with would-be irony:

“You seem as interested in poultry as in the rest of farming.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I’ve always been interested in pottering about with stock of any kind. Always the job I fancied; ‘always my delight,’ as they say here; so ——” He broke off. “What are you looking at?” he asked abruptly. “A penny for your thoughts.”

I was looking up beyond the tall, slight figure set against the background of slanting field and stone hedge cutting a purply-grey sky. That part of Mr. Price’s farm reminded me of a bit of the old place at home.

How typically Welsh were the hilly green and the grey stones, and the rich shifting colours of the cloudy distance! These brought back to me my Welsh-set childhood.

* * * * *

Days of wandering the marshes, waist-deep in meadow-sweet and bog myrtle, dreaming the long, long dreams of little girlhood! Days of sitting curled up like a squirrel in the school-room armchair while the rain lashed the panes and all the world of Every-day was blotted out as I pored over Shakespere, or “Called Back” or “The Last Days of Pompeii” or “Three Men in a Boat”—ah, the omnivorous and profoundly

satisfying reading of the early teens! Meals that to a growing girl were banquets of Welsh mutton and jam roly-poly . . . tea-parties that were events . . . jokes that brought laughter that brought tears to stream down the cheeks convulsed . . . quick fierce likes and dislikes . . . shames . . . delights — ah, over all, delight! Zest in the newness of Life! How many of these things had I left behind in those days-gone-by!

With a breath of the old wild mountain air, fresh and bewildering, bringing unreasoned tears to the eyes, those days were back, for that moment I felt the thick brown pigtail weigh upon my neck as I bent my face down to the face of the whimpering fox terrier pup in my arms. That pup had been given to me by one of my father's farm pupils seven years ago. I was back in that time.

Into my day dream broke a voice that seemed, for a second, part of it.

“A penny for your thoughts!”

* * * * *

With a start I pulled myself together, glancing now straight at the young man. How strange — yet how well known to me, he seemed! Why? The thought persisted; why? Of what did he remind me so elusively at this moment?

Then an extraordinary thing happened.

I do not know how it was that I said what I did — those five quite unpremeditated words. My voice sounded odd in my own ears as I spoke. Yet it was quite in a normal matter-of-fact voice that I did speak.

Standing there on the hill slope where the black and the grey speckled poultry clucked about our feet, I looked up at the young man again and asked him this question:

“Isn't your name Richard Wynn?”

CHAPTER XV

MOSTLY CONVERSATION

“To talk of Love is soon to make Love.”—PROVERB.

AFTER this strange question of mine, there was a moment's pause.

It rang in my ears still, my quick, but quietly uttered,—

“Isn't your name Richard Wynn?”

What on earth had possessed me to say that? The moment after I was as surprised at it as he was himself. Or wasn't he surprised? His face had hardly changed. He looked quite steadily back at me. What did he think? I wondered in a flash. What would he say?

Quite quietly he replied:

“No, no, it isn't. Surely you know my name's Holiday?”

As if I hadn't ever heard it! How absurd I'd been! How idiotic! How wool-gathering!

I pulled myself together.

“Oh, I know,” I said quickly and apologetically, as I caught up a handful of the poultry-food. “Yes. Of course, I know that.”

“Then,” returned Captain Holiday, “why did you ask me if my name was Richard Wynn?”

I laughed a little.

“It was a silly question,” I admitted. “It must

have sounded quite mad! Only for one minute, seeing you in these clothes, I suppose ——”

He looked swiftly down at the shaggy cuff of that quite disreputable Norfolk jacket. “Seeing me in these clothes; yes ——?”

“Tock, tock, tock,” put in the grey hen.

“Well, you suddenly reminded me of somebody I used to know,” said I, and I turned to scatter that handful to those clucking, calling fowls.

Captain Holiday — whose name ought to have been Curiosity — put his hands behind his back, and tilted his head to one side, taking almost the pose of a small boy who is still at the deadly age of questions. Evidently this tall young man had never outgrown it! How simply, but in what a not-to-be-put-off voice he persisted:

“What was this ‘somebody’ like?”

“I’ve just said he was something like you, Captain Holiday. That is,” I added, “I couldn’t really tell you if he were or not.”

“What d’you mean by that?” Captain Holiday asked.

I laughed again. One simply could not feel impatient or annoyed with this extraordinarily inquisitive young man. He took one past that! So, as I walked on with my pail to the next coop, followed by the young man and the dog, I said:

“What I mean — if you must know all about it ——”

“Yes, I must. I mean I’d love to.”

Well! “knowing all about it” must be a sort of

mild obsession of his. Perhaps he'd been Intelligence Officer or something. The only thing to be done appeared to be to humour him!

So I said:

"What I mean about that young man called Richard Wynn, your double, is that I can't honestly say I know what he was like!"

"Why can't you?" barked the catechist.

"Because I don't remember."

"You don't remember?" quite sharply from Captain Holiday. "How, don't remember? Why don't you?"

"Because it's such ages ago since I saw him," I replied. "Seven years! And what is the next question, please?"

The next question was a brusque

"How often had you seen him, then?"

"Often? Why, I saw him every day," I replied, going down on one knickerbockered knee to wrestle with the refractory door of a coop. "He stayed at my father's place for six months."

The voice above me decreed:

"Then, of course, you must know what the fellow was like."

Extraordinary, the constant interest he took in subjects which had absolutely nothing to do with him! But I'd said a man was like himself. That was next door to talking about what he was like himself — which Elizabeth had declared was all young men ever did want to talk about!

"I don't know," I persisted, rattling the wire-netted door. "I've forgotten Mr. Wynn's face."

"You can't have 'forgotten' the face of a man you saw every day of your life for six months," Captain Holiday informed me, authoritatively. "You must have been what? Thirteen or fourteen. No girl 'forgets' a man's face like that!"

"She does!" I declared.

"People don't 'forget' faces," he repeated. "It's nonsense."

"It is not," I cried, half-laughing, half-exasperated, as I rose. "People do forget what they've never taken very much notice of, even when it was there! I've no memory at all for faces. I only know what I thought of them at the time."

I thought his next question would be, "What did you think of the young man you imagine was like me?" But this was not what came. He demanded, more casually. "And what became of him?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I never heard. Except ——" Here I suppressed a half-rueful smile at the thought of what I had heard, only some weeks ago, from this same long-forgotten Richard Wynn.

"Except what?" took up the Inquisitor.

I sighed elaborately. For a moment I felt almost inclined to tell him deliberately the whole madcap story of Richard Wynn's proposal of marriage to me; but for some reason I didn't.

So, looking straight at him, I adopted a tone of

studied and explanatory politeness. I hoped this gentle irony might have the effect of making him a little bit ashamed of all his questions.

“I only heard from this Mr. Wynn once,” I said. “Then he did not tell me what he was doing, or what had happened to him all these years. So I can’t tell you. And I could not write to him, or ask him about anything, because I’d thrown away his letter.”

“Thrown it away?” Captain Holiday exclaimed, quite loudly.

“I threw it away by mistake — with the address. So that was that — and I’m sorry, but I’m afraid that’s absolutely all I can tell you about him, Captain Holiday!”

I scattered my last handful, let the last replete and peeping chick out of the last coop. Captain Holiday — perhaps feeling a trifle rebuked — said nothing further. Swinging my empty pail I ran down the hillside. He and his dog followed me through the farm gate and went on.

At the door of the kitchen I handed in my pail. The rosy farm-servant said to me:

“Miss, you’ll have to run if you want to catch up your friends. They’ve been gone some time.”

I glanced up at the clock.

“Is it so late, Maggie-Mary!” I exclaimed.

I sped through the yard and on to the up-and-down high road, thinking as I went the question that almost every Land Girl asks herself at some time:

“How did I ever manage to walk at any pace at all in the days when I wore hampering skirts to flap about me wherever I turned?”

Before I could find an answer to this question I found Captain Holiday at my side again!

“Let me walk along a bit of the way with you,” he suggested quite nicely. “May I?”

What could I say but “If you like”? My way back to camp did take him past the Lodge, after all.

However, I didn't want another Longer Catechism. So, as we fell into step, walking towards the sunset, down the road with basking green on either hand, I decided to introduce the subject of the forthcoming and much-discussed Hospital Concert!

But I was not in time. It was Captain Holiday who started the conversation, and on lines that I hardly expected, but beginning, once again, with one of his questions!

“Is that little pal of yours engaged to be married?”

Surprised, I replied:

“Elizabeth? Miss Weare? To be married? I should think not! I mean, I don't think she ever means to marry.”

“That's good,” remarked Captain Holiday, cheerfully.

I stared at him.

“‘Good’? Why good?”

He said “Oh!” and fumbled in the pocket of his Norfolk for his pipe.

“Oh, perhaps I meant she'd be all the more com-

pany for you down here. People in love are poisonously poor company, I find!" he went on, turning to me as if with a burst of confidence. Then he twinkled, gave me a swift glance, opened his lips as if to ask a question; shut them.

I knew what he meant.

Quickly and definitely I snapped out the answer to the question he hadn't asked.

"No! I'm not engaged either!" I said. Then, carrying this war of questions into the odd creature's country, I added, "Are you?"

"Why? I suppose you mean you find me poisonously poor company?" he asked, with a defiant jerk of the head in that scarecrow's tweed hat of his.

"Not at all," I said politely. "But are you?"

Instead of answering he stopped and glanced to the right. There was a break in the hedge.

"Shall we take this short cut home through the fields?" he said.

I followed him to the narrow, greasy path, if it were a path.

It seemed to me one of those short cuts home that are certainly the longest way round! . . . How could I — oh, how could I not have realized already that all I wanted was to be walking anywhere — for any distance — *with him!*

That realization was not to come yet. . . .

But to go back to the beginning of this ramble, Captain Holiday, striding and smoking beside me, said:

“Am I engaged? Well, I say! May I tell you something about myself?”

“That would be a change! Generally, you want to be told things about other people!” I said.

He gave a short laugh.

“Yes; well, now you can have a bit of your own back. I want a woman's point of view on a certain matter. You're sure it won't bore you? I don't mind if it does,” he added quickly, with that quicker smile that always brushed any offence out of his words. “Women are put here to listen to men's grousing. However! Seriously, I want to talk to you. You could help me about this.”

“I? Help you?” I said. “D'you mean it?” But I knew he meant it. Sincerity was in his tone. Also a new note — appeal.

I could not help feeling pleased. He did not think me a fool then, even if he had seen me first in circumstances that might have given him that impression. He thought that I could help him in his own difficulty, whatever it was.

This was where I suddenly found I must have skipped whole stages in my acquaintanceship with this young man. He had jumped from being a busybody and a stranger to being a friend — yes! A friend to whom one felt positively motherly — or at least sisterly.

I turned to him as we walked, and said:

“Of course I'd be glad to advise you in any way that would be of any use to you. You tell me first.”

“Righto!” said Captain Holiday. “By Jove, here's

some more of this wire. Never mind. We'll turn off here — I think I struck the wrong field. Well! You were asking me if I were engaged. I am not. I asked a girl to marry me, though, not so long ago."

He stopped. I said, sympathetically:

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Are you? Why?"

I couldn't help opening my eyes.

"Why? I mean — sorry she turned you down."

Now Captain Holiday opened his eyes.

"Who said she turned me down?" he asked.

In spite of how he improved upon acquaintance, in spite of his friendliness, his nice smile and ways, he was very difficult to make out.

"You said the girl wouldn't be engaged to you ——" I began patiently.

"I said nothing of the kind," Captain Holiday interrupted, contradicting me flatly. "I told you I was not engaged — here, it must have been that other turning after all, we'll go back — not engaged, but that I had asked a girl to marry me."

More at sea than before, I retraced my steps down the path beside him, and suggested:

"Then, if the girl said 'Yes' to you ——"

"She," explained Captain Holiday, looking serenely over the evening landscape, "did not say either 'Yes' or 'No.'"

Now I saw his difficulty!

Suspense!

Yes. I understood that. How I understood the

chills — and flames — of that fever! Hadn't I suffered from them myself, in the days when I had had to think in turn. "He will," "He won't," or "Will he?"

"That's horrible for you," I agreed warmly to this other young man. "It's bad enough to know the worst. But not to know which it's to be is ——"

"Quite so," finished Captain Holiday.

"Still, you needn't make up your mind at once that it will be the worst, need you?" I went on soothingly.

"You think I needn't?"

"Why d'you feel you must give up all hope?" I asked.

"Sometimes I don't," he admitted simply.

I nodded, saying:

"It's the other 'sometimes' that's so awful."

"Exactly," he said. "When I think 'after all, why should any girl like me particularly?'"

"You don't often think that, do you?"

"No, not often," said Captain Holiday serenely again, "only occasionally when I've had a bad night and feel off colour and pippy!"

I couldn't help laughing. The sustaining, intoxicating conceit of men! As Elizabeth says, it's the only thing that could keep them going since the war restrictions!

Then he looked quickly sideways at me.

"You think that's neck," he remarked. "Perhaps you think there is no reason why any girl should like me?"

And for the moment his voice dropped a tone, and

there was a wistfulness on his brown face. I stopped laughing. I didn't want to hurt his feelings in any way. Besides, when one came to think of it, he was quite nice enough for a girl to like him — quite much!

Thoughtfully I said: —

“So much depends upon the kind of girl!” and then I asked, “What kind of girl is she?” in a tone as gentle as I could make it, so as to avoid jarring him.

But in quite a matter-of-fact, usual sort of tone the young man replied:

“Oh, well! She's the girl I want.”

Helpful, wasn't it?

“I see,” said I, not seeing anything, of course, except that, as Elizabeth once said, it's quite impossible to get a man to describe anything or anybody so that you know what they are like.

We walked on for a moment in silence, following our shadows on the goldy-green grass; evening shadows that caricatured a giant soldier man striding across the field beside a giantess of a Land Girl.

I began again:

“She might be the type of girl who honestly did not know herself whether it was ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ that she wanted to say,” I said. “Some girls simply have to take lots of time to consider whether they care for the man in that way or not — even after he's asked them! They have to think things over. They have to look at the man from every point of view before they know their own minds about him. I've met that type of girl. I can't say I understand her mys ——”

"Ah," he put in with a quick turn of the head, "you wouldn't be like that! You'd know at once if you could stand the man?"

"I think so," I said, a little shortly. I didn't want to be reminded of what my own views had been about "the man"—that is, Harry. They had led me into making a fool of myself. Hadn't I liked him at once, disastrously, from his first soft dark-eyed glances at me? What I was "like," myself, was not the question. Also I didn't see how it was going to help Captain Holiday.

He, on the other hand, seemed to think it might throw some light upon the subject.

"You'd know at once if it was all N. G. as far as your own feelings were concerned?" he persisted.

"At once," I agreed.

"That would save the other person a lot of trouble, of course," said the young man at my side. "I think you're right. One ought to 'know' at once, about that sort of thing. You would, you say?"

"Yes, I should. But there are such lots of different kinds of girls, Captain Holiday——"

"Of course, I don't see that."

"No. Because you're in love, you see, and people never do see more than just the one person then."

"I expect you're right again," said Captain Holiday. He looked down at me quite submissively — at me, to whom he'd laid down the law in that hectoring fashion every time he'd seen me! He might be right about cow-houses and the laws of gravity and

about stock, as well as about any question in his own profession of soldiering — but at least he saw now that I could teach him something about the ways of human beings!

And I felt no longer a Land Girl who was still months away from earning her first stripe, but quite a woman of the world for once!

Encouragingly I went on:

“Perhaps she is the kind of girl who does mean ‘Yes’ all the time ——”

“And didn’t say so?”

“Because perhaps she put it off to make it seem all the more wonderful to you when it came,” I suggested.

“Ah,” he said. “It would be wonderful then?”

How little he must know about love, I thought, to ask such a question.

“Wonderful?” I said, looking away from him across to the sunset. In the radiance of the level rays a swarm of tiny insects spun enraptured — each thinking, possibly, that the sun had risen and shone only for him and his little winged love, creatures of a day.

“One five minutes of that,” I said, as much to myself as to him, “is worth having lived for twenty stodgy years without it. Even if you lose it again it would have been worth it!”

“You think so?”

“Yes! And I do hope that it will happen like that for you,” I told him. “I don’t mean the losing it again part. I do hope that you will get everything that you want.”

“Yes, so do I,” said Captain Holiday, in that rather disconcerting way of his. “But, look here — you seem to be able to tell one so much — supposing it were neither of those two things that you suggest that kept the girl from answering, as I want her to? What about that?”

“Couldn’t you,” I suggested, “ask her again some time?”

He fingered his small, obstinately-growing moustache.

“That’s an idea. Yes. Well! Thanks very much. I’ll think about what you’ve said, Joan.”

Joan ——!

“By the way, I have decided to call you by your Christian name.”

“Oh! Er — yes,” I agreed, staggered, but feeling that I could not refuse this proof of goodwill to a young man who had just made me the confidante of so much. “H — How did you know it?”

“Doesn’t your little pal call you by it? Mine’s Dick, you know.”

I nodded, not feeling I could use it just yet. If he’d been as abrupt in his love-making as he was in his making friends, there was some excuse, thought I, for the young woman who kept him waiting for his answer.

Then, with equal brightness, he changed the subject altogether.

“D’you know that I’m having a house-party at the Lodge next week? For the concert — yes. You’ve seen my wounded pal, haven’t you? Then I’ve got a girl from London and her mother coming down to stay.”

“A girl — oh! have you?”

And then I could not help it. The question slipped out, as it were, of its own accord.

“Captain Holiday, is she ‘the’ girl?”

But the exasperating man wouldn’t give me a direct answer.

“The girl,” he said with a laugh. “Ah, well, I suppose most girls have got somebody who’d consider they were ‘the’ girl.”

“Yes, yes; but I mean is she the girl you’ve been talking to me about all this time?”

Again he only laughed, and said something chaffing about “curiosity.”

Curiosity indeed! From him! Pretty good, wasn’t it? And not another sensible word could I get out of Captain Holiday for the rest of the walk.

When we did finally reach the field, however, from which we could see the corrugated iron roof of our hut set in the trees, he did vouchsafe to me one more remark about the girl who was shortly coming down from London. Just after his salute and “good evening,” he turned back to me to say:

“I’ll tell you this much: she happens to be my own first cousin.”

However, he’d said enough — or left enough unsaid. I knew well enough that, cousin or no cousin, she was the girl about whom there’d been all that discussion.

CHAPTER XVI

CURIOUS CONDUCT OF THE MAN-HATER

“To maidens’ vows and swearing
Henceforth no credit give.”

—GEORGE WITHER.

IRAN back to the hut.

So late! I found the tea-supper all cleared away, and most of the Campites dispersed about their evening avocations.

Only Elizabeth the trusty had kept back for me milk, a huge plateful of bread-and-butter, and cold bacon.

I expected that Elizabeth would sit down near me while I devoured my meal, and would spice it with comments on the reason for my lateness. Here I had reckoned without my hostess. Not only did she not have a word to say about my having walked — or loitered — home with a young man; but she hadn’t, apparently, got a word to say to me about anything, though we had hardly seen each other all day!

In an abstracted way she glanced at the food disappearing from before me, murmuring absently:

“Mustard? Or don’t you take it?” Then, looking at the clock said: “Slow, I’m sure.” And then, with a curious look on her small face, she left me and strayed forth into the gloaming outside the hut.

I finished my meal, cleared it away, and went out

to find her. No sign of Elizabeth in the field that led down to the bathing-pool. I crossed the tiny bridge over the stream, and wandered into the next field.

Here, through the branches of some hazels growing beside a stone fence, I caught sight of the gleam of a light overall. I went up to it. I found Elizabeth in a nook where it was almost dark under the branches.

“Hullo!” I greeted her. “So this is where you’ve hidden yourself away, is it?”

Elizabeth, turning, gave a violent start. “Hullo,” she said, in what I can only describe as a most unwelcoming tone. To me, her inseparable chum!

I let myself down on a boulder close to her.

“Elizabeth, old thing, what’s the matter? Have you got a headache?” I said.

“Headache!” echoed Elizabeth quite pettishly. “You know I never have headaches.”

“I thought perhaps you were a little tired.”

“Tired! Not in the very least, thanks.” My chum’s tone was discouraging.

I tried again.

“Look here, my dear, are you stuffy with me about anything? Did I rag you too much about getting tamed by Hackenschmidt the Second, or ——”

“Stuffy?” choed the little Man-hater, her tone getting snappier and snappier. “If I were, Joan, I’d tell you.”

“Yes; I should have thought so,” said I, feeling perfectly convinced that something was up. “For you know that if there’s anything I could do for you ——”

Here Elizabeth quite took my breath away by the suddenness with which she spoke.

“There is something you can do,” she blurted out through the gloom. “You can just go away, if you don't mind, and leave me alone.”

I'd only just breath left to say flatly:

“Oh, righto,” and to get up and set off back to the hut.

Elizabeth wanted me to leave her alone! What on earth was the meaning of that?

“To be left alone”—with most girls that means that they have fallen in love and want to pick themselves up before they can assess the damage.

But with Elizabeth? With that genuine Loather of Men?

Never —!

With most girls, to say “I dislike men” means one of perhaps six things.

1. They don't know any men.
2. No men have been known to pay any attention to them.
3. Some man has treated them very badly.
4. They wish to be contradicted and teased.
5. They are fibbing for the sake of fibbing.

With Elizabeth not one of these reasons would hold for a second.

But Elizabeth in love! Reason positively shouted an “Oh, no.” . . .

Yet a mad little suspicion, whispering within me, seemed to defy that voice of reason. As I walked along

in the fast-gathering gloom I remembered I had seen a man look at Elizabeth quite lately. More lately still I had seen Elizabeth most uncharacteristically confused at the mention of that man's name.

Wildly improbable, I told myself. And, as I did so I walked straight into the meaning for Elizabeth's wanting to be left to herself just then.

In fact, I bumped into the young man, who was coming along the path.

"Oh, sorry," said a low-pitched, masculine voice that I had heard before. A hand was put up to a cap. Then the figure which I had run against passed quickly on up the field.

Elizabeth's "old" Colonel! She was meeting him out there!

Him?

There are no words to describe my condition of pole-axed astonishment at this. . . . Why try to find any?

(*Elizabeth* ——!)

* * * * *

In about half an hour she returned to the hut, where the others were turning up again by twos and threes.

Elizabeth, looking about two inches taller than usual, gave a defensive glare round the groups of smiling and gossiping girls. But none of them had seen her except me. The defensive glare was then focussed upon me.

I hadn't meant to say a word to the girl! I really hadn't!

I suppose nobody feels exactly *chatty* when they've just fallen out of a balloon?

But Elizabeth, evidently wishful to speak, followed me up to the mattresses when I went to unroll mine for the night.

“Joan! Er — he told me he met you!”

“Oh, yes!” I said, in a voice as ordinary as possible. I didn't want her to think I was going to “rag,” or make any sort of fuss about this. Why shouldn't Elizabeth go out for an evening stroll with a young man if she wanted to — just like any other girl on the land or anywhere else?

“He knows some of my people,” Elizabeth flung back in that defensive mutter, “and he wanted to talk to me about another tenant for the flat in London, and, as well as that, he's got a mother who's got a friend who's got a daughter who's thinking of joining up for the Land Army. So, you see, he wanted to — talk to me.”

“Yes, I quite see,” said I.

Three excuses for talking, from a young man whom she only called “He”!

“So he wrote to me. I promised I'd see him for a minute after tea tonight.”

“Oh, yes. When did you promise that?” slipped from me before I knew.

Elizabeth gave her mattress a little kick as she lugged it out.

“I met him on the road the other day,” she said in the tone of one who shakes a fist at the world — what it is to have to live up to the name of Man-hater! — and added: “You needn't think there's any nonsense of that sort about it!”

“I never said there was,” mildly from me.

“You’re always ready to think it!” tigerishly from her. “So I thought I’d just tell you, to stop your getting any wrong impression!”

“Righto!” said I, pacifically. “I won’t think anything about it, old thing.”

Elizabeth gave a queer little sigh — was it of gratitude? — as she spread her blankets.

Whether she was just annoyed at the possibility of my thinking she had taken a fancy to a mere man who admired her, or whether she really had begun to take a fancy — well, I gave it up as I settled down to my well-earned rest.

I’d said I wouldn’t think any more about it. As a matter of fact I was too stunned by the extraordinary possibilities of the subject. I left it. I turned to the thought of Captain Holiday’s other guest for that concert, that girl from town who was coming to stay with her mother at the Lodge.

I found myself wondering over her again during the few minutes that elapsed between my curling up on my mattress and my losing consciousness of that and every other question.

It was all very well for that young man to announce so succinctly, “She’s just the girl I want.” What did he think that would convey to me? She would be rather lucky, as luck goes, to have any one so nice and amusing in love with her. But what sort of a girl would a man like that want?

Absolutely no frills about her, I decided. She would

be extraordinarily practical and efficient; very out of doorish; good-looking, but not pretty in any "doll-y" sort of way; thorough sportswoman — only, why hadn't she wanted to say either "yes" or "no" to him? Why not "yes" at once? Why not ——

Here a curious little incident wound up a day of curious incidents. I had, whilst engaged in these meditations, been tucking my wrist watch under the rolled-up scarf that was my only pillow. My hand met a handkerchief that I had forgotten was there. As I took hold of the thing I felt a knot that was tied tightly in the corner of it.

A knot to remind me of something.

Now what was that, and when had I tied it?

Suddenly I remembered.

Elizabeth had tied that knot in my green silk handkerchief days and days ago. And she'd said: "That's to remind you to think mournfully of Harry at least once a day."

I'd forgotten that. More than that, I'd forgotten Harry for the moment — or for how long? Had it really been days since I had given a thought to those bitter-sweet memories of the man who used to blot out every other interest from my horizon? Had the land-work cure progressed so rapidly that other interests were beginning to keep all remembrance of Harry in the background?

I looked back to the obsession that had been the indirect cause of sending me — a love-sick wreck! — on to the land.

And now — was it possible that I'd got over it so well?

In ruefulness, relief, and surprise I drew a deep breath. Then I turned over and slept.

But I never dreamt of what else was coming to remind me of Harry — and very shortly!

CHAPTER XVII

LAND-GIRLS GO SHOPPING

“Quand on n'a pas ce qu'on aime, il faut aimer ce qu'on a.”

— FRENCH PHILOSOPHER.

A FEW days after I had been wondering what Captain Holiday's “the” girl would be like, my curiosity was gratified.

I met her!

This was how it occurred:

I was out in “the town” shopping — fascinating occupation — don't any woman's eyes brighten at its name?

Yes. . . . But the chances are ten to one against her knowing anything about the Careg Land Girl's Camp version of the function.

Not for us the dear delights of window-gazing, of comparing prices and textures in one big, temptingly set-out establishment after another. . . . Well, we got our delight in another way.

Shopping for the girls was a game of chance and skill, I can tell you. It “combined all the charm of novelty with that of big game-hunting!” as Vic put it. It meant diving into the funniest little caves of shops, all garlanded by festoons of such different kinds of goods as picture post-cards, hanks of darning cotton, and onions.

It sometimes included vaulting over the counter ourselves, and helping dear old ladies to forage for what we wanted in a wilderness of cardboard boxes at the back of the shop. And even after our search it generally meant that we went on our way disappointed, to the accompaniment of such remarks as "No, indeed, I'm very sorry! I'm sold out of every bit"—of whatever it was we wanted—"and I don't know when I shall ever see any! It's the war, yes, yes! I haven't got a ha'porth of nothing of the sort, not in the whole place!"

This seemed to be the keynote of supplies in the town, late on that very wet Saturday afternoon when I had accompanied Vic, and Peggy, the tiny Timber-girl, to do the shopping for the rest of our camp.

"Got the list, Celery-face?" said Vic. As we sheltered for a moment in an archway I pulled out the long list of commissions which our colleagues had drawn up for us.

Optimists! They really thought we could get these things for them in "the town"!

I read aloud.

"Last two numbers of *The Tatler*." (I expect the latest number they've got at the station here is April 1, Nineteen Five.)

"Pot of lemon-marmalade; you could get it at Morris's. (I don't think.)

"Sybil wants jasmine soap, 1s. 3d." (Why not the moon?)

"Two skeins of floss embroidery silk, deep cream or nearest." (The nearest is Regent Street, I expect.)

“Reel of black cotton, No. 40, packet needles, No. 9's, brown shoe-laces, broad.” (All asked for, and none to be had.)

“Shocking!” was Vic's cheery verdict. “As for the packets of grey square envelopes for Miss Easton, nothing doing — and there was I pinning my faith to them having a good line in salvage stock left over from the Ark, this being the last place where the Flood stopped — not that it ever has really stopped in Wales, if you ask me.”

“Oh, that eternal joke about the weather in Wales!” I laughed. “Just as if it didn't rain much harder in plenty of other places! Have you ever stayed in Surrey, by the way? *That's* where it never leaves off!”

“It 'ud have a job to beat this beauty-spot today,” persisted Vic, winking the rain from her lashes. “Look at it!”

It certainly was a soaking wet afternoon, Wales running Surrey a good second for once.

For it certainly was a soaking wet afternoon! The clouds were a blanket of indigo, from which the rain poured in millions of white streams, hissing on to the narrow, little, slate-paved street, all shiny with puddles. Tossing the drops from the brim of my Land Army hat, I went on reading the list of ordinary every-day things which we Land Girls in the damp depths of that wilderness found as hard to come by as gold!

I read.

“‘Gramophone needles.’ (No earthly.)

“‘Dri-ped for Curley's boots. (No.) ‘Tin of

toffee.' (No.) 'Sticking-plaister.' (No.) 'Oranges.' (What are they?) 'Writing-pad.' (Bagged the last.) 'Shampoo-powder, any decent sort that smells nice ——' "

"Aha. Who's wanting to make her hair smell nice all of a sudden?" demanded Peggy with interest. "I'm astonished at her! Who is it?"

"Don't know," I fibbed valiantly — for I knew perfectly. It was young Elizabeth who had begun to want to minister to that thick, soft hair-crop of hers in this way. . . . A sign of the times! That fixed it, surely? I exchanged a soulful though still half-credulous glance with the nearest cottage-window, blank with rain.

"I haven't tried Mr. Lloyd, the only chemist's, for that yet," I went on. "Shall we go on and see if he's ever heard of such a thing?"

Cramming the list into my pocket, we set out again down that river of a street.

The chemist's shop was at the other end of it.

And as we splashed down the street we had a little adventure of the kind that had probably occurred to more than one set of land girls.

A group of lads who encountered us began to laugh and jeer at our uniform — they themselves were in "civvies," mackintosh and caps. Farmers' lads from remote places in the mountains!

I don't know what they said, but from the tone it was obviously not complimentary.

So feeling that blank discomfort which falls upon the average girl at any man's incivility, I found myself

clutching Peggy's arm in order to hurry past, and saying hastily: "Come on, Vic ——"

But Vic, to my horror, had paused.

She left my side. She took a step towards the nearest of the lads, a rosy-faced nineteen-year-old with a ragged thatch of black hair showing under his bowler hat. There she stood, firmly planted on the streaming road, handsome head well up in the rain, figure held proudly erect, and she demanded in a voice that rang:

"What's that you're saying about us?" A sheepish giggle from the group; not one of the boys spoke.

"You were saying we ought to be ashamed of ourselves, wasn't it? Something like that, eh? That's what you think of us, is it?" Vic went on.

"I'd like just to tell you what we Land Army girls think of you!" Vic announced. "And that is, that it's you who ought to be ashamed of yourselves! Huh! Why aren't you in France? Can't leave the farm, you can't. You're sheltering yourselves behind the land, you are. You ought to be standing shoulder to shoulder with the rest o' the Royal Welsh Fusiliers.

"You've got regiments. Nobody can say they don't fight all right. Yet here you are at home. Exemption, eh? Indispensables — I don't think. Who's to milk father's cows? Well, we've volunteered to do that. That's what we're here for. That's why you can't bear to see us about the place. You're afraid ——"

Mutters from the boys here.

"Yes, you're afraid that when it's shown that we girls can do most o' your work you'll be pushed out

after all!" went on the relentless Vic. "So you try and bring a bad name on the Land Army, you little blighters, who take jolly good care you aren't in any army at all! You make game of our uniform, you that haven't a suit o' khaki among the lot of you! Nice ones you are to talk!"

Here there was an uneasy movement in the enemy's ranks.

Skulking little wretches! There are some of these in every place, town or country — the dregs of a noble race whose cream was taken first of all. Probably as soon as our backs were turned they would have wheeled round and begun to shout after us again. But this Vic did not mean to allow. She kept her face turned squarely on the retreat.

She called out after them:

"Making fun, were you, because we girls wear the breeches? A good job for the country that we do! As for you, it's a pity they can't take and make you," raising her voice to a shout, "wear petticoats!"

They were now out of ear-shot, so she turned, flushed and triumphant.

"I'm astonished at you," Peggy launched her favourite dictum reproachfully, as we plodded on in the wet. "I wouldn't stoop to answer back a lot of louts like that. I wouldn't speak to 'em."

"Daresay you wouldn't," retorted Vic, good-humouredly, "but if we were all as jolly dignified as you and Celery-face here, those Cuthberts would go through the rest of their natch never knowing what a decent

girl thought of 'em! So I thought I might as well demean myself to tell them off proper just for once in a way!"

With which conclusion we found ourselves just outside the tiny chemist's shop. A dog-cart was drawn up there — little did I suspect at that moment who had driven in it! I only noticed that it was occupied by a little stable-boy who did odd jobs about the Lodge for Captain Holiday.

Well, in we all three dumped to the shop with coloured globes and show-cards and dangling bunches of "baby's-comforters" and sponges of Victorian date. And here there met our astonished eyes that figure that was so utterly and entirely uncharacteristic of "the town," or of anything at all in the country round about it!

It was a girl, in an ultra-smart, white and black rubber rain-coat, with a small black and white rain-hat set at an indescribably French angle on her head. Our first glimpse of her, as she stood with her back to us and her face to the obviously paralysed little Welsh chemist, gave us the impression of some slim and elegant magpie who had flown in there to shelter from the rain.

She was speaking. Her high-pitched, clear drawl seemed to belong to Bond Street.

"But d'you mean to say you don't keep *any* of Roget et Collet's things?"

Then, as we Land girls came clumping and dripping in, she turned with a little stare that seemed to say, "What figures of fun have we here?"

Our rainy-day kit is scarcely dainty. That brown Board of Agriculture mackintosh with the flappy cape-sleeves seemed to amuse the pretty townified girl.

Ravishingly pretty she was in her small-mouthed, big-eyed, Lily-Elsie style with an authentic curl twisting in front of her pink ear, and eyelashes to which the rain-drops hung. How perfectly suited, too, by the costly simple "rightness" of her clothes. Girl and "get-up" composed a type one would scarcely have expected to see here.

The last person I expected to see — for I had seen her before!

With my second good hard look at this fashionable vision I recognized her.

"Hul-lo! You here? It is you, isn't it!" I exclaimed.

She opened her eyes at me, while Peggy and Vic stood by in amazement that this chic magpie apparition should be known to me.

I hadn't been mistaken, even though I could not imagine what should bring her here of all places in the world. It was she all right.

It was Muriel Elvey, the girl who had taken Harry from me!

Muriel opened her big eyes even more widely upon me.

"Good gracious! Is it? Yes, it's Joan Matthews! How priceless!" she exclaimed in that pretty drawl of hers. She glanced from me to the other two Land Girls and back again. "Of course! How d'you do?"

Here she extended her small, perfectly-gloved hand towards my sunburnt paw, that I saw for the first time was irremediably roughened by farm work.

I saw that Miss Muriel took in this and every other detail of my appearance, while she went on gaily:

“Isn't this too funny? The last person I'd ever dreamt of seeing! Of course, I'd heard you'd gone on the land, Joan, or something quaint like that ——”

“Why ‘quaint’?” thought I, while the same thought showed on the faces of my two mates.

“But I didn't know at all which bit of ‘the land’ it was supposed to be,” concluded Muriel. “Isn't it appallingly hard work? Can you stand it? It would kill me,” she went on. She always could chatter nineteen to anybody else's dozen. “I get fearfully done up, with my own war work.”

“I didn't know you did any.”

“Oh, dear, yes. I go round to no end of hospitals in town and play the piano to the men. They adore it,” declared Muriel. “Only the nurses are such cats! Women never can be decent to me, somehow I had a fiendish row with one ward-sister — all jealousy on her part, of course. I simply came away. But what a place to come away to, isn't it?” She gave a tiny grimace about the musty village shop, and towards the glimpse of streaming wilderness outside. “And imagine my meeting you here!”

I spoke up.

“Well, but imagine meeting you! I thought you were never to be seen away from London or some civil-

ized seaside town? What brings you to Careg?"

For even yet the whole situation hadn't broken upon me. Only, I was sore and ruffled, and utterly upset by this meeting with Muriel.

It was opening an old wound. I'd thought I'd forgotten. But, brought face to face with this girl for whom Harry had left me before he sailed, my heart throbbed as painfully as it had on that ghastly morning when I'd got that note to say he'd gone.

Now I wondered with a stab if she were actually engaged to him? I hadn't heard that she was.

She, the unexpected one, gave a pleased little laugh.

"What brought me to Wales?" Muriel replied. "You may well ask, my dear. I was positively dragged down here. Pestered out of my life to come! By a man, of course. No!"—laughing again—"you needn't look as if you thought it must be a romance. He is merely a cousin. My cousin Dick Holiday——"

"What — ?" I echoed, thoroughly petrified by this. Her cousin? He was Muriel's cousin? He, who had been talking to me of "the" girl — and who had allowed me to leap to the conclusion that she and the girl-cousin who was coming down to stay were one and the same person! Violently I had leapt to that conclusion. Quite violently, in my haste, I thought now:

"Oh! The man-snatcher! She took my Harry. Now she's annexed Captain Holiday. She takes everybody!"

"I promised him I'd come down with mother and play the piano for his soldiers and things at some priceless

concert or other that he's giving," Muriel Elvey went on. "His big place down here is turned into a hospital, you know. That is," with a glance at my muddy boots and uniform, "I don't suppose you've met him, of course, but he's ——"

"What, Captain Holiday?" Vic broke in, undressed and heartily. "Not met the gent what's giving the concert? Met him? Huh! I should shay sho!"

Muriel, with an indescribable stiffening of her pretty, well-turned-out figure, stared up at the big Cockney Land Girl who thus accosted her.

Vic leaned against the counter, beaming. She might have stood for the symbolical figure of Young Democracy, gazing tolerantly down upon costly Convention.

"All us girls'll be turning up at Captain Holiday's concert," Vic told her. "It's going to be some beano, I give you my word. So you're going to oblige, too, are you? See you then!" She gave a little nod, and turned to the chemist who had been listening with the concentration of a male gossip to every syllable of this conversation.

"Now, Mr. Lloyd! What about this shampoo powder we've heard so much about? . . . What's in that box, there, to the right? . . . There we are! Egg and lemon — and very nice, too. Sixpence? Right! Good-bye-e-e-e!"

Vic marshalled us out of the shop with a friendly grin divided between the chemist and Muriel Elvey, who was

left standing there — utterly pole-axed, I am sure by this glimpse of the sort of companionship into which one was launched when one joined the Land Army.

I could see that she found Vic “too impossible for words!”

This hurt me for my messmate and pal, though I am convinced Vic knew little and cared less about the fact that she had just been looked upon as a young female hooligan! I tramped back along the “puddlesome” roads to camp in a state of mind that I had not known since I’d shaken the dust of London off my feet in the spring.

Still “minding” so dreadfully about Muriel Elvey and Harry?

Why be surprised because men fell like ninepins before her expensively-shod feet? Yet I was astonished. Not at Harry. At that other man for whom she was “the” girl — or so I’d convinced myself.

Surely, though, Captain Holiday should have been the exception to the rule that men adore the Muriel type?

Yes; I’d made up mental pictures of this girl of whom he’d talked without mentioning her name.

To think that the girl he wanted could be a Muriel!

She was the girl of whom one couldn’t think without setting her in the background of restaurant-lights, hot-house flowers and Bond Street dressmakers.

When one saw Muriel, one saw always her “things”: Muriel and her pearl-string; Muriel and her gold-mesh

purse with tiny powder-box and lip-stick attached; Muriel and her mauve leather dressing-case; Muriel and her ivory manicure-set.

Each was a lure, each was a mesh of the net for a man like my lost admirer Harry. . . . His people were now exceedingly well-off, but there had been no luxury in his boyhood, which, as he'd told me, had been passed in a bleak little house behind the shop where the money had been made, penny by penny, to give him his chance.

At twenty-five, luxury was still rather a new delight to him. He could not take it for granted, poor darling; he who had never seen his mother with any "pretty" things of her own. Hence the reaction. He loved a woman to have "possessions." He adored her to "fuss" incessantly about her nails and skin and hair.

But Captain Holiday, I thought, liked such different things!

Him one couldn't think of without a background of out-of-doors; woods, mountain, field — and perhaps a manure-heap with a Land Girl working there.

And now (so I persuaded myself) he had become infatuated with and wanted to marry a boudoir-type of girl, who hated to go out in a wind!

Ah, the tricks that are played by the charm of Contrast! . . . and why should I feel sore about them?

CHAPTER XVIII

THE NIGHT OF THE CONCERT

AT last the great day of the long-discussed Concert arrived.

At last the burning question was decided whether we Campites were to attend in uniform or "civvies."

Popular opinion had been in favour of Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes. Some girls had wired home to hasten their parcels. The red-haired Welsh timber-girl had been all delight over the prospect of adorning herself in a blouse of rose-pink voile with flowers embroidered in coarse white cotton. How entirely it spoilt her looks! In fact, there was scarcely a girl in that camp who didn't look a thousand times more attractive in uniform than she did in an ordinary hat and frock.

Uniform does manage to be always "right" in a way that only the most successful "other clothes" ever achieve. But only one woman in twenty can ever be persuaded to see that.

Elizabeth and I were highly pleased, however, when the verdict came from the forewoman that uniform was to be worn at the concert after all.

That concert began early, in order to finish early. We should never have time to get back from work, have our tea, and change into civilian clothes before we set out again for the hospital — particularly the gang of

timber-workers, who were now in the woods, two miles beyond the training farm. And it wouldn't look nice to have them in uniform and the farm-girls out of it. We must be all alike, decided Miss Easton, and smarten up our working kit by getting into a clean smock and giving our boots an extra polish.

Grumbling broke out — what camp in either the women's or the men's armies could go on without its grouse? But the girls agreed to lump it, as it had to be.

“After all, the boys'll have to be in their everlasting hospital blue, with those chronic red ties o' theirs that I'm getting fair fed up with the sight of, so we'll be fellow-sufferers in distress,” pronounced Vic cheerfully as she swallowed her tea, left the table, and then got to work on another pair of brogues.

“After you with that brown boot-polish, young Mop” — to Elizabeth — “and when you've finished with the glass, Peggy, p'raps you'll find me a clean handkerchief, the thieves in this place having pinched the lot of mine. Ho! Why do I talk in this unfemin-nine style? Most unwomanly I call it. Effects of this here life in camp,” she rattled on good-humouredly.

“I shall have to mind myself presently, before that refined pal of Celery-face's. Her what's going to play the piano. She didn't half give me a nasty look in the chemist's. Sure she thinks I'm no lady. Now what's her little game? Is she trying to get off with the Captain, Celery-face?”

I said a trifle bitterly:

“If she likes people, she does not have to ‘try’ for them.”

“Ah, is she one o’ those lucky ones,” said Vic, cheerfully shining her brogues. “Well, I’m going to watch the young lady tonight, and see what she makes of ——”

“Hurry up, you girls!” urged Miss Easton from the porch. “The concert starts at a quarter to. It’s time we were off!”

* * * * *

Well! As Vic said, we were to “see life” that evening at the concert.

The scene was that big comfortable country house transformed into that jolly hospital for the boys from the Front. Its enormous double drawing-room must have witnessed plenty of “county” dinner-parties; dull and formal functions, no doubt. Nothing dull or formal about tonight, now that it was turned into an impromptu music-hall!

The wounded lads buzzed about it like a swarm of blue bees giving an At Home, welcoming the visitors, showing them into the rows of seats set in the lower half of the room.

“Here you are! Land Army to the right!” a cheery voice hailed us as we trooped in — twenty-odd girls in uniform.

It was Peggy’s sergeant who greeted us. His hair was varnished brighter than the parquet floor; he wore the largest rose I have ever seen in his button-hole, and the gaudiest lucky golliwog decorated his red tie.

"I was to reserve these seats for you young ladies. The best, of course!" he beamed upon us. "Stalls this way, if you please. Peggy, you sit at the end of the row so that you can pop out quick in the interval."

"I'm astonished at you," came a Timber-girl's retort as we settled into our seats and looked about the bright, crowded place.

The farther end was occupied by the stage platform with the piano set near the wings. A curtain had been made of what looked like all the spare quilts in the house.

Standing in front of this (as I saw directly we came in) was our host, Captain Holiday.

Evening-dress made him taller and different, both from the smart soldier he was in khaki and the country sportsman he seemed in those dilapidated tweeds of his. Suddenly he seemed a stranger again to me. It chilled me.

He was talking to one of the soldiers, a red-haired Blue Boy, with a good-looking, clean-cut, actor-ish face. I heard Captain Holiday saying:

"Righto! I'll tell the Colonel to let you fix him up. That's in the second part."

"Yes, sir," said the red-haired boy.

Captain Holiday, looking down the room caught sight of our party. I heard him give an "Ah." He smiled, nodding at me. This was somehow cheering after that slight chill. He made a movement forward, I think — I'm sure he was coming to speak to me.

But at that moment a pretty, coquettish voice called "Dick!"

And there entered, by a door nearer the stage, Muriel Elvey and her mother. Mrs. Elvey, the sort of mother who never is anything but an adequate "background" to her daughters, looked placid and pleased in well-fitting black, with diamonds.

As for Muriel, she was lovely, yes, lovely! in her Frenchiest little frock of pinks and mauves, and mingled heliotropes. The girlish, low-cut bodice of it had no sleeves, and was held up over her white shoulders by strings of palest coral beads. She was a vision such as Careg had never seen. No wonder the Blue Boys gazed! No wonder the Land Girls, in their clean but coarse overalls, bent forward and studied her with the rapturous, envying sighs they would have heaved over some exquisite fashion-plate! No wonder that she was followed by a slim masculine shape in black-and-white that was Colonel Fielding.

He, too! No wonder, indeed, that her cousin, Captain Holiday, was at Muriel's side in an instant, bending his dark head over her golden one, with its fillet of coral-pink buds.

Now, curiously enough perhaps, that sight spoilt the whole first part of the concert for me.

At first I didn't know why. Such was my incredible self-deception that I gave myself quite the wrong reason for the fact that Muriel Elvey came between me and any enjoyment of the playlet "Poached Eggs and

Pearls," excellently acted by a company of nurses and wounded. I was beset, I told myself, by the promptings of jealous memory.

I pictured that golden, rose-filleted head of Muriel's close to another dark head. Harry's! That was what I couldn't help thinking of. I watched Muriel — the centre of all eyes as she sat at the piano — and I realized what she'd meant to Harry. Not a thought had he had for me after that evening when I introduced him to her. And now history was repeating itself. Now Captain Holiday hadn't a look for anybody else.

It hurt.

Oh! Not the Captain Holiday part, of course! I assured myself hastily — the other. I'd thought I was getting over that. How queer are the workings of that most painful passion — jealousy! Brooding, I sat there with my mates, enjoying themselves on each side of me. I laughed with the others, with the others I watched the stage, and clapped when the curtain fell — to Muriel's music — for the end of the first part.

Then Captain Holiday, still standing by Muriel at the piano, called out:

"There will now be an interval of fifteen minutes! War-time refreshments will be found in the dining-room."

So, with a scraping aside of chairs and a babel of voices, the audience surged out of the "theatre." I went with the others. But that black mood of mine had swept my mind away out of my new and joyous country

life, back to the bad old days of London after Harry left.

I sat on a big chair near the door, and watched.

Each Land Girl had found a wounded soldier or two to attend to her. Vic, with Elizabeth under her wing, was the centre of a group of blue. Then a long glass of lemonade was brought to me by the pleasant-faced, red-haired lad I had noticed with Captain Holiday. He talked to me in a gentle, but curious, voice, husky, yet high-pitched. For he told me he'd been shot through the lungs.

"Done me in for the profession if I go back after the war," he said cheerfully. "Spoilt my singing voice." He told me he'd been on the stage from the time he was ten until he joined the Army in 1914.

Here Sergeant Syd, coming up to us with an arm through Peggy's, broke into the conversation.

"Yes, and you'd have been all right, you silly blighter, if you'd have stayed where they wanted to keep you, down at the base singing to the boys in rest camp. You needn't ever have left there! But no. He would go up the line, Miss."

The red-haired actor warrior agreed in the husky voice that was spoilt for song:

"I wanted to go up the line. After all, I didn't join to go on singing."

Another aspect of life: the obscurely heroic that is taken for granted every day!

"Corporal Ferrant," said a voice at his elbow. It was Muriel again.

“Oh, will you go to the Colonel's room now?” she said pleasantly. “He's ready for you to make him up.” Then:

“Hullo, Joan!” she said. “What do you think of this priceless show? My hands are dropping off with playing so hard.”

She glanced around. Then she let herself down lightly on the arm of my chair as if she wanted to say something particular to me.

“I say,” she said, with a sudden little shrewd glance at me. “Wasn't it funny about Harry Markham?”

“Funny?” I echoed, startled. “What — which was funny?”

Muriel, adjusting her pink shoulder strap, answered:

“Oh, just his getting brought back to Blighty again after he'd had only three weeks in Salonika!”

Harry? In England? The first I'd heard of it. Yes; naturally she'd know and I shouldn't. But it was bitter!

“Apparently the General can't do without him,” she went on. “I expect Harry's jolly glad to get back to London. I had a note this morning from him; forwarded. Of course he tore up to see me as soon as he arrived.”

“Of course he would!” said I, with quite a successful laugh.

Muriel, watching my face, said:

“I expect you know I saw a lot of him after that night you introduced him at ‘Romance’——”

“Oh, I knew.” Didn't I! I nodded quite cheerfully

at this pretty, prosperous girl who had written that letter to me in the spring.

Through the confused chatter of the crowded room Muriel spoke confidentially.

“He —— Well, between ourselves, he went absolutely mad about me, you know. Proposed and proposed ——”

“Really,” said I, with another composed nod. Every word drove straight into my heart. Harry had proposed. Several times! Were they actually engaged, then?

I was too proud to ask, but how I wanted to know!

“He’s quite nice,” Muriel remarked critically. “Quite good-looking. Quite amusing to go out with. One enjoyed Harry’s taking one out. But marrying him might be another matter; because ——”

Here she stopped. The stage-bell was ringing. People began to scramble past us out of the room.

“I must go,” cried Muriel. “The second part’s beginning now.”

But I held on to an end of her mauve sash.

“Wait ——!” I said.

I felt I must know about Harry. “Because,” she said — and stopped. Did it mean because she meant to marry her cousin? I simply must find out, for Captain Holiday’s sake. Remember, I still believed she must be the girl of whom he’d told me “she hasn’t said ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to me yet.” She must mean “Yes,” I thought excitedly.

I kept close to her as we moved out of the doorway.

“Do tell me, Muriel,” I urged, “what you were going to!”

She laughed, enjoying her power to tease.

“Oh, you want to know if I am going to be engaged to Harry or not?”

“You said ‘not.’”

“No, I didn’t. I simply said marrying him might — only ‘might’ — be another matter.”

“Yes, yes,” I agreed hurriedly, “but why?”

Muriel’s answer was not one I should have dreamt of hearing from her.

Tilting her fair head, she smiled over her white shoulder and said:

“Oh, well! Because, after all, he isn’t a gentleman, is he?”

This remark was a shock to me.

Harry Markham — “not a gentleman —” To hear *Muriel* say it!

Just because Harry’s father, that self-made man, hadn’t “made” himself in time to send his son to a public school? Didn’t that seem rather like . . . well, *hideous* snobbery?

Further, for a girl to let a man take her out to the theatre, the opera — for her to accept innumerable dinners and taxi-drives from him, and then for her to sum him up to another girl as “not a gentleman” — didn’t it sound like . . . to put it kindly, ill-breeding?

It surprised me so from Muriel because after all she was a lady!

But ——

Would any girl who was a gentlewoman at heart have been guilty of such a remark?

And did Captain Holiday, who also — as I believed — wanted to marry Muriel — did he know that she was the sort of girl who would say such a thing?

I was resentfully wondering over that as the pink and mauve figure of Muriel slipped back to her seat at the piano. I returned to my chair next to Sybil, and the second part of the soldiers' concert began.

Now the opening item was a clog-dance by a merry-faced, one-armed Lancashire Fusilier. It was good; but I could not fix any attention on the stage just then.

Was Muriel going to marry Captain Holiday, who had now drawn up a chair close beside hers at the piano? Or did she mean after all to take Harry? Which? Which? Did she know herself, yet?

And — here an odd thought came to me as those clogs pattered faster than a shower of summer rain — did I myself know which of those two young men I least wanted Muriel to marry?

“Clicketty clicketty clack clack!” went the clogs on the stage; I watched, with the others, while the light twinkling feet within them danced on and on.

I was thinking all the while. Of course it would break my heart if I saw that pretty girl at the piano actually married to the man she had already poached. Yes, of course it would, I told myself resolutely; but at the bottom of my heart I was stifling a mad little imp of an idea. This whispered: —

“You wouldn't mind if Muriel married Harry now.

Although it was a stab, it wasn't a deep one. Don't pretend! For you are really through with Harry. It is not about Harry that you are worrying any more!"

— Ah! Now I was getting nearer the truth. I was coming to it, coming . . . But I still told myself it was Harry whose engagement would hurt me. Why should I mind if ——

Here a storm of applause broke out all round me. It was the end of the clog-dance, but in the midst of the din I went on revolving my own little problem.

I told myself that, of course, it was comparatively nothing to me if Muriel chose to marry this devoted cousin of hers, Captain Holiday. He (I considered, personally) was rather too good for her. Still, most other people would consider that no man could be too good for a girl as lovely as Muriel Elvey.

Anyhow, it was no business of mine. Who was I? Merely a Land Girl, sunburnt and coarsely clothed, a worker in training at a farm on Captain Holiday's estate. Why should I care twopence about this whole question? I didn't care. Of course, I didn't care.

Here Sybil, who had secured a programme, leant over me to look at mine. The next item read: "Song: 'Until!' by Sergeant Sydney Escott."

"Ah," said Vic, with feeling, "now we are going to hear something. Eh, Peggy?"

All the Land Girls were leaning towards the smallest Timber Girl, chaffing and smiling encouragement. Peggy, to whom this was "the" item of the programme,

popped a piece of toffee into her mouth, and assumed a look as if she had never heard the singer's name before.

But just as we expected to see her sweetheart jump up on to the platform, one of the other blue-coated, red-cravated boys came up in answer to a nod from Captain Holiday, bearing under his arm a large cardboard placard. This he put up, carefully, in the number-stand at the side of the piano. The word upon it in large scarlet letters was "Extra."

Everybody in the hall murmured it aloud. Vic's carrying voice rose above all the others.

"'Extra'? Now what's this goin' to be? Surprise turn, eh?" she said.

She was right.

With an arresting jerk it brought me out of the mood in which I was beginning to forget that there was a concert going on about me at all. It brought me straight back to where I was, in the entertainment hall of Captain Holiday's Hospital, in the middle of a crowd of eager, enjoying people.

Truly it was to be a startler to me, the surprise turn that came on next!

CHAPTER XIX

THE SURPRISE TURN

“Cold eyelids that hide like a jewel
Hard eyes that grow soft for an hour,
The heavy white limbs and the cruel
Red mouth like a venomous flower,
When these are gone by with their glories,
What shall rest of thee then, what remain,
Oh wicked and sombre Dolores.”

— SWINBURNE.

THERE swept down towards the impromptu foot-lights an apparition tall and beautiful. Dressed as a Spanish lady, it was a study in black, white, and red. Black was the mantilla draped so filmily over the glossy black hair, black was the sequined gown that clung to the slim shape, black was the fan that waved, beckoned, hid, revealed and hid again in a series of gestures, each more perfectly and subtly coquettish than the last.

White was the handsome face, whiter the proud shoulders above the cut-out bodice. Scarlet was the carnation worn just under the ear, and vividly scarlet were the made-up lips of this new performer.

“Whoever is it?” ejaculated Peggy, loudly, and then clapped a hand over her mouth. But there was a perceptibly louder buzz in the talk all over the hall.

“Say; who’s she?”

“Isn’t she beautiful?”

“Lovely figure ——”

“Little bit o’ Dixie, eh?”

“Sssh —— The Captain’s goin’ to make a speech about her!”

For Captain Holiday had stepped forward from his place by the piano and had, with a sort of little laughing flourish, taken the lovely creature’s black-gloved hand.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, “as an extra, my friend Signora Dolores has kindly consented to sing an old-fashioned song, entitled ‘Carissima.’”

He went back to his seat. Muriel at the piano, with an unexpectedly sweet smile towards this rival beauty, this wonderful stranger who was to sing, struck the first rippling chords of an accompaniment.

Then, from those vermilioned lips there broke out in a low contralto voice the first notes of the song:

“Carissima, the night is fair ——”

What a voice! It was not powerful — indeed, it seemed to me as if the singer were using only part of it — but to what purpose! It was sweet as the deepest brown honey, and of a quality that — well! even as the water-finder’s rod goes straight home to the hidden spring, so that kind of voice, “finds” the listener’s heart — finds tears.

Surprised at myself, I blinked those tears away. I glanced from the black, white and scarlet beauty on the stage to the audience for a moment. All spell-bound, all a-gaze.

I saw little Mrs. Price — a row back — slip her hand into that of her gentle giant beside her. I saw Vic's face without a smile, full of brooding tender memories. I saw Elizabeth all tense . . . the soldier-boys were serious, intent; the country people behind them looked as full of solemn, poignant enjoyment as if this were not a mere Concert, but a funeral itself.

As for me, I was ashamed of myself. I had to bite my lips and clench my hands as the syrupy Victorian melody was crooned out to the inanely Victorian words: —

“Carissima! Cariss — ima!
The night and I wa-ant oh-oh-oh-only thee!”

Yes; I was having to fight those senseless tears away from my eyes as I listened.

Oh! It wasn't “cricket” for that woman to sing so that she could reduce a healthy matter-of-fact Land-worker to this state of — of mushy sentimentality!

She did more than that. Before the end of the second verse she made me realize something that left me gasping.

I was just thinking, while I listened:

“Ah, if her voice goes so straight home, unconsciously, what must be the effect if she sings ‘at’ somebody?”

Then I saw her do that very thing. Slightly, raising the fan with a little studied gesture, the singer tilted her head and launched from under her eyelashes a deliberate glance at Captain Holiday. I saw him raise

his brown chin out of his hand and look back at her hard, too.

Then I saw the Signora's reddened lips tremble, even through the song, into the very wickedest of smiles that would not be suppressed. It dimpled her powdered cheeks; it almost shut her long-lashed eyes; what a tantalizing and lovely sight! But everybody in the place must have seen that she was singing "at" him; must have heard it!

"Carissima!"

cooed that wooing contralto with its invincible appeal,

"Cariss-ima!

My boat and I will come to thee."

And with "thee" the glance was more unmistakably "at" Captain Holiday than before.

Then I knew.

This Spaniard — if she were Spanish? — this stranger with the voice and the fan and the shoulders, and the slim hips and the witching glances that surely no man on earth could withstand, must be "she" of whom Captain Holiday had spoken to me!

Not Muriel, after all. The blonde prettiness of Muriel looked positively ineffectual beside this vivid brunette. She, yes! she must be "THE" girl he'd meant.

Here was a discovery.

But the annihilating part of it was this — that I minded horribly.

For in a flash I felt that I could not deny it to myself. No longer could I pretend to my own heart. Jealous I was, more so than I'd ever been before. But now it was not because of Harry at all. It never would be Harry again.

It was mad pain to me to see a woman — any woman — bent upon attracting Dick Holiday.

Yes, I'd come to the truth now. This had shown it to me.

At last I realized that I was in love with him. . . . Here was a discovery, wasn't it?

* * * * *

In love with Captain Holiday! Of all people in the world!

What in the world had he ever done to make me in love with him?

That first time at the hut he had been hideously rude to me; had come up to me and, unIntroduced, had asked me how long I thought I was going to stick life in the Land Army!

I remembered his smile as he said it.

Then that next time in the cowshed. He'd come upon me in the act of chucking work, and he'd let me know that he knew it. Then he'd laid down the law to me about the way to "muck out," as the country phrase has it, the way to hold a pitchfork, and the way to trundle a barrow up to the manure-heap. Nothing in that to make a girl take any sort of a fancy to him!

Later on, he had informed me that I should make a rotten poor hen-wife, just because I'd forgotten the

milk for the chickens' food! Not very endearing, that remark!

That same afternoon, however, he had been friendly. He'd walked back with me, talking all the way. But what about? His own love affair. The problem of the girl to whom he had proposed, and who had said neither "yes" nor "no" to him. And I — not realizing that I was getting too fond of the sound of his voice whatever it happened to be saying — I had asked him what sort of a girl she was. He'd said the words that had been ringing in my head ever since: "Ah, well! She's just the girl I want."

* * * * *

And now here she was; I saw her before me, the beautiful Spanish-clad singer, on this very concert platform, not more than arms' length from him.

I found myself simply hating her! The last words of her song — oh! how that tune of "Carissima" was going to haunt me — melted away. Muriel played the last chord, and again the racket of applause broke out.

She smiled with all her white teeth; she bowed, gracefully enough but put her hand with a curious little jerk to her side as she did so.

How the boys clapped her! So did I, of course, and, holding myself well in hand, I exchanged comments on the lovely voice with the other girls through the clatter and the cries of "'Core! Encore!"

The Signora gave a little nod that she would take the encore to Muriel, who was clapping as enthusiastically as any of the audience.

And the second song she sang was the revue success: "For the First Love is the Best Love!" which she rendered as perfectly as she had the Victorian ballad. I could have murdered her for that!

Half in anguish of jealousy, half in rapture because of the performance, I sat listening again. She had the low, throaty deliciousness of some of Miss Violet Lorraine's own notes; very wisely, she was imitating her as closely as possible in her rendering of her best song.

"The new Love
Is never the true Love!"

she carolled, and again I felt the keen stab of seeing her mischievously tender glance at Captain Holiday.

Oh, yes. She must be going to take him — after that!

And at the end of the song, when she stood still again, swaying her fan to the applause, she maddened me by a further piece of deliberate coquetry.

Putting up a hand to the coal-black hair under her mantilla, she took out the scarlet carnation that was tucked close to her ear. She kissed the flower with those lips, painted so red. Then, holding it for a moment, she smiled from the carnation to Captain Holiday, as if saying, "Shall I let him have it? Shall I?" She made a little, quick gesture as if to toss it to him, across the platform. Then, with a lightning-swift shake of her lovely head, she took that flower and threw it down into the auditorium for any to catch who could.

A dozen hands went out for it. I don't know if she

were specially aiming at the row in which we Land Girls found ourselves, but at all events the carnation dropped almost straight into the small, brown, competent paw of Elizabeth, my chum, who had always been used to catch and throw a cricket ball just as a boy does.

She, Elizabeth, tucked the scented souvenir into the breast of her overall. The signora, standing tall and slim just above the footlights that beat up on to the vivid white and scarlet of her make-up, sent down one more smile — a specially witching one. Then she withdrew. Captain Holiday set up another piece of music on the piano, and the concert proceeded.

It was Peggy's sweetheart, the sergeant, who sang next.

At least, I fancy it was. For, to tell you the truth, I have only the most confused impression of the various faces and figures that appeared, one after another, close to Muriel's piano on that stage.

Sometimes it was one of the red-white-and-blue wounded boys. Sometimes the slim, white-frocked figure of the village schoolmaster's daughter, for whom they brought in a harp.

I was drawn away from it to the drama in my own mind.

I — to have grown to care for Captain Holiday! Fool that I was to have allowed myself —

But, then, I hadn't allowed myself. I had not known it was happening. Now it had irretrievably happened. Tonight had shown me that too plainly.

What fate was upon me? Twice in my life I had

been doomed to fall in love with the wrong man. First with Harry Markham, who certainly had done all in his power to bring it about. Now with Captain Dick Holiday, who had never flirted with me for an instant.

Well, I must try to cure myself as soon as possible — that was the only thing.

I must, somehow, take myself severely in hand and refuse to let myself mind so horribly because a woman with a voice to match her lovely face had got Captain Holiday at her feet.

But for the life of me I could not help wondering who the singer was. Signora Dolores — was she really a Signora? Or was she an English girl of an arrestingly Spanish type? Where had she come from? And when had she come to Careg? How long was she going to stay in the house?

I wondered how Muriel liked that Spanish girl who had so completely taken the shine out of her.

I wondered if she — the wonderful singer — were going to sing again.

She did not.

I realized that this was more of her coquetry; to make one marvellous appearance, to reap her success, and then to refuse to reappear until the last note of "God save the King" had been sung, with all the wounded soldiers, and ourselves of the Land Army, standing to attention.

Yes; at last it came to the end of the concert. Votes of thanks had been proposed and seconded. Cheers had

been given for our host, Captain Holiday, for the performers, and for "the pretty young lady who had so kindly consented to act as accompanist," but there was no further sign of the lovely lady who had sang "Carissima."

I supposed that she, with the rest of the house-party, would be having a merry little supper afterwards, presided over by Captain Holiday. I am afraid that at the thought of this I felt myself literally trembling with passionate envy.

The audience, laughing and talking, began to move slowly from between the rows of chairs out from the concert-room. I found that I was deadly tired; an evening of emotion takes it out of a girl considerably more than a day of farm-work! I turned for comfort to the sturdy little boyish figure of Elizabeth.

I made myself say, "It has been jolly, hasn't it?"

Elizabeth nodded her bobbed head.

I glanced at the red flower she had tucked into her overall, and said: "That woman, you know, who sang those two songs, she was the best of all."

Elizabeth, with a very quick look up at me, asked brusquely, "Which woman?"

I had opened my mouth to answer, "Why, the Spanish lady, of course," but the words froze on my lips at the picture of which I had caught sight at this moment.

In the vestibule, at the foot of the wide stairs, stood Captain Holiday, laughing whole-heartedly; a group of

people were clustered about him and about another figure standing close to him waving a big black fan. This figure was the sight that arrested me.

It was tall and slim-hipped, clad in a black and spangled gown with a low-cut bodice that revealed noble white shoulders; it was, as far as the figure went, that of the Signora Dolores who had appeared at the beginning of the second part of the concert; but — where were the mantilla and the glossy black tresses over which it had been so artistically draped? Gone — one with the other! Above the white shoulders appeared the laughing face and the small mercilessly-groomed golden head of a young man!

“Topping girl he makes, doesn't he?” I heard the voice of the red-haired actor-soldier say just behind me. “That's when I make him up; his own mother wouldn't know him. Why, the female impersonator we had in our Brigade troupe isn't a patch on him; not the professional who used to get fifteen quid a week salary! Asked me for a few tips, he did. But there was nothing I could teach him; only lace him into his 23-inch ladies' corsets ——”

I was gasping as I looked. Now that I saw the black wig dangling from the hand that held the fan, now that I knew — oh, I felt I ought to have guessed before.

The things that give away any masquerading “girl” were there. Bert Errol and Co. have not yet learnt to hide the thickness of the wrist, the muscle down the neck just under the ear, the checked and conscious movements of limbs that know no medium between

mincing and the normal stride, and (most unmistakable of all) the angle of the male arm at the elbow, which makes "V" instead of "U," as in a woman's soft arm.

All the rest was — what an excellent disguise!

"Elizabeth!" I exclaimed stupidly, "look!"

"I know," said Elizabeth briefly.

"But, my dear," I said, still aghast over the revelation that Dolores was not "THE" girl, not even "a" girl, "did you know when she — when he was singing?"

Elizabeth, with a hand at the red flower in her smock, said: "I knew days ago. Colonel Fielding told me himself that he was going to."

Colonel Fielding!

The "lovely" stranger was — Elizabeth's "old Colonel."

CHAPTER XX

LAND ARMY TESTS

THE discussions of the concert, after it had happened, went on for as many days in our camp as the pre-concert discussions.

I'll skip those. I'll skip the days which suddenly seemed to have "gone flat," with all the thrill gone out of Land-work, for the time being. I'll skip my own broodings — which were those of just any other girl in love with a man who prefers another woman! For since it could not be the "Signora" I concluded that it was Muriel after all.

I'll come to the next excitement in the Land-worker's life — namely, the test-exams.!

You see our time was nearly up at the Practice Farm. Our six weeks' training was drawing to a close. If, at the tests, we gained a certain percentage of marks, Elizabeth and I would be considered "finished pupils," and we would be passed out and sent off.

Where?

Heaven and the Organizing Secretary of the County knew where that job would be found.

I told myself that I only hoped it would be a good long trail away from Careg, away from the farm of bitter-sweet memories.

Vic was instructive on the subject of the changes to come.

“Any people ought to like the look o’ you two, now you’ve shaped to the work,” she kindly remarked. “Still, you never know whether looks is going to help a girl or to stand in her way in this world. A nice thing it would be if you was landed like one of the smartest-looking girls I ever saw join up, Chrissie Devon!”

“What happened to her?” I inquired.

“Chrissie was fine with horses,” Vic said, “all her people having ridden. She was a clever girl, well educated, and a beautiful figure on horseback. I-T, she was. The secretary got her a job with a brother of our Mr. Rhys, the bailiff, who keeps a lot of horses. Thought it would be just the right thing for her. So it would have. The only thing was, our Mr. Rhys’s brother didn’t consider himself half-artful. He ——”

Vic broke off to laugh.

“He turned up at the station before the one that she was going to, and saw her in the train. And,” Vic concluded with an impressive nod, “sent her back to the depot by the next one. Then he strafed our poor little organizing secretary till she didn’t dare see him for a year. ‘The idea!’ says he, ‘of sending me a girl that looked like that! Me, a widower. She would be owning the horses and me inside o’ six months!’”

“So then,” Vic told us, “Chrissie was sent to a very old married couple up in the hills. The old man was about ninety, and the old woman p’raps a shade more juvenile. Chrissie worked her hardest for them. But,

if you'll believe me, she didn't give satisfaction there neither. The old woman asked our secretary if she couldn't be removed. And when the secretary asked what was the grouse, it turns out that the old woman was certain that the new Land Girl had taken it into her head that she would be 'his second.' I ask you!"

"And where did she go to next?" Elizabeth asked.

"Chrissie? Oh, now's she going in for motor-tractor driving. She don't stay long enough in one place to put anybody's back up with her fatal beauty. That's the story of her. I wonder what they'll do with you and Mop?"

The day of the tests arrived.

It should have seen the arrival also of the examiner from London. Of this unknown personage we were all, including the gentle giant, Mr. Price, in a state of terror. However, a telegram came to say that this magnate was unable to attend.

His place was taken by the local examiner, who turned out to be that other Mr. Rhys, the widower who had strafed the organizing secretary for sending him a too-good-looking Land Girl. Now he and that secretary, a little bright-eyed Welshwoman who had been a school-marm, had evidently made up their difference.

She, the secretary, had come over to help with the tests, for which we had in the big farmyard an audience that I had not expected. Not only these examiners and the two Prices looked on while I brought in the cows to the stalls and set to work with stool and pail, but also the visitors from the Lodge!

Heavens! how my heart sank into my clumping Land Army boots as I beheld the little procession coming through the red-painted farmyard gate. Captain Holiday, in those disgraceful but becoming grey tweeds of his, was walking with Mrs. Elvey in her smartest toque! Behind them the slim-waisted, uniformed figure of young Colonel Fielding, escorting Muriel Elvey.

“We’ve come to look on at the tests, if we may,” Captain Holiday announced cheerfully to the Prices.

Greetings were exchanged with the ladies, and though I kept my eyes quite steadily upon the work that I had in hand, I could not help seeing Muriel’s amused stare and smile, just as I couldn’t help hearing her treble twitter to the men of “musn’t it be too quaint to have to wear those clothes and things — and how wonderful not to be afraid of all those great animals — I should be terrified of cows, I know I should.”

Indulgent laughter came from all the men. I remembered one of Elizabeth’s contemptuous axioms about the sex — “a pretty girl can’t be too helpless or too afraid of mice to please a man, even now!”

Elizabeth, at this moment sitting beside the cow, Blodwen, wore her most man-hating looks upon her small, set face. As for me, I felt that now, on this occasion of all others, when, as a Land-worker, I ought to have been at my best, I was absolutely at my worst, nervous, flurried and awkward.

I had a hideous presentiment that I should overturn my milking-pail, or some fiasco of that sort!

Raging inwardly, I approached the black-and-white

cow who had become my friend. She was the easiest in the stable, as Mrs. Price had said on that first time of all when I had milked her. But now, to my horror, I realized that she was going to fidget and to be difficult. She was going to "let me down" before all these people!

Suddenly I heard Captain Holiday's voice, not brusque as usual, but quiet.

"I say, Muriel, my child," he said, "stand outside the door, will you? If strangers go and stand close up to the cow when she's being milked she gets bad-tempered and there's no doing anything with her."

"Oh, isn't there? I didn't know. I'm so sorry," said Muriel, airily, and she fluttered out to stand beside Colonel Fielding.

Feeling grateful beyond words to the man who had helped me thus, I went on milking with more assurance. The nervous flurry melted away from me. I succeeded in forgetting that I was doing what I was with a maximum of so many marks for "approach," for "time," for "quantity," for "clean-stripping."

I forgot Mrs. Elvey's lorgnette upon me from the cow-house door; and the eyes of the others, and the chatter of Muriel to the two young men.

I just did the best I could.

Presently Mr. Rhys, the examiner, had taken Elizabeth and me into an empty shed, and, looking doubtfully upon us, began to ask us simple questions as to our everyday work. I was glad to realize that — as is so

often the case with the male examiner — he was more nervous than we were. Or did he think that we, too, had designs upon his widowerhood?

At all events, the marks that Mr. Rhys put down upon his papers seemed to be satisfactory.

“Well, after all, I may have squeezed through!” I thought.

And half an hour later Mrs. Price came to Elizabeth and me in the kitchen, where she had insisted upon our having a cup of tea after our labours, and told us that we had both got through our tests with nearly full marks in all subjects.

Pride filled my heart, as you may imagine. Surely it was not an unnatural thing for the thought to flash across me:

“Well, now Captain Holiday will hear that! He’ll know that I am not a complete imbecile at my job after all, even if he did go away this afternoon before he saw that I had got over my nervousness!”—for the whole of the Lodge party had disappeared towards the farm before I had begun upon my second cow. “He’ll have to think that I am some sort of a credit to him after all the tips he’s given me. And perhaps he will say so to Muriel, even if he is in love with her.”

And then I put away those thoughts.

As Elizabeth and I tramped back to camp with the glad news that we were now fully fledged Land-workers, I turned resolutely to the future and the new job.

The little organizing secretary had promised to let

us know in a day or two what she had settled for us. She had also promised to arrange that Elizabeth and I should be sent somewhere together.

For the meantime we were to stay where we were in camp, as it seemed scarcely worth while to move us to the depot. The secretary said she was almost certain she had got us our job — at a rectory with a farm attached. It was at the other side of the county.

“That’s a good thing!” thought I.

I did not say so to Elizabeth. I hadn’t confided a word to Elizabeth of what I felt. I had taken my confidence away from the once-intimate chum.

And then suddenly her confidence returned to me; in fact, I had it as I’d never had it before.

It was on the afternoon after we’d passed our tests — Sunday. (On the Monday we were to hear for certain about that new job of ours.) I’d missed Elizabeth shortly after the midday meal, and I found her in that old haunt of hers on the wall under the bushes.

Crouched up there she was sobbing as if her heart would break.

I was afraid she would be furious that I’d come upon her like this.

But the unexpected happened. She turned and clung to me.

“Oh, Joan! I am so unhappy,” she sobbed. “Oh, it’s so awful. We are going away from this place, and I shall never, never see him again!”

CHAPTER XXI

THE MAN-HATER DISCUSSES MEN

“Man delights not me.”—SHAKESPEARE.

“And the täable stäained wi' his äale, an' the mud o' 'is boots o' the stairs,
An' the stink o' 'is pipe i' the 'ouse, an' the mark o' 'is 'ead o' the chairs!”

—TENNYSON.

I DIDN'T ask for any explanation.

I had the sense not to show any surprise at the self-abandonment of this usually so sturdily reserved little chum of mine.

I just plumped down on the stones beside her and slipped my arm about the sobbing little overalled body. I suppose it comforted her. For presently she left off sobbing, drew a long breath, blew her nose, and began, in a resigned little voice, to open out her whole heart to me.

“You know who I mean, Joan?”

“Yes, old kid.”

The name of “*Colonel Fielding*” seemed to hang in the air above us as tangibly as those hazel boughs against the sky, but neither of us uttered it.

In rueful little spurts the truth began to gush from the once silent and matter-of-fact Elizabeth.

“I guessed you'd guess. Oh, Joan! I'm idiotic

about him. Crazy! As silly about him as you ever were about your precious Harry in London.

“I used to laugh at you!”

“Everybody starts by laughing at people in love,” I said, settling myself on that wall. “And everybody ends by being quite as silly themselves. You’re no worse than anybody else.”

“Yes I am, much,” declared Elizabeth.

“Why? Because you’ve always thought you couldn’t like men, and now you find you can?”

“No!” declared Elizabeth, shaking still more vigorously. “I still can’t like ‘men.’ It is still true enough about *that*. I still hate *them!* . . . You don’t mind my talking, do you? I’ve bottled myself up so ever since I met *him*. But as for ‘*men*’——”

She talked, setting out plainly and sincerely what I do believe is the attitude of a certain type of girl.

* * * * *

Men seldom hear it. If they do, they disbelieve it. But let them — if any of them are reading this story — be reminded that this point of view exists. Here’s its creed as told me by my bonniest and best of little pals, Elizabeth Weare.

I’d heard lots of it, in scraps, already. Tonight, when she was stirred and troubled, I got it in swathes, which I scarcely interrupted.

“I don’t think men are amusing,” she declared. “Perhaps I *have* no sense of humour. If it is sense of humour that makes their smoking-room stories funny, I am glad I haven’t. They think those stories funny,

I think them far-fetched; as if they'd been thought out with lots of trouble. It's not the improperness of them that I mind, those that are supposed to be so 'naughty.' *It's the ugly sort of pictures they nearly always make.* Think of any you know; don't they mean something rather horrid to *look* at? Men haven't enough imagination to see that's what one hates. Men laugh at those 'jokes,' with a noise like the Prices' old Jack, braying. And they tell some of them to their wives. And the wives pass them on. And the girls tell *me*; pretty girls, with their soft red mouths, repeat these hideous stupid Limericks and things. And I feel like *crying*, Joan. Only I have to laugh, or they'd think I didn't understand. What I *do* understand is that every time *I've been put a little bit more off men!*

"Then, I think men are dull. They don't hear what you say quickly enough. They don't see what it means half the time. And they aren't noticing what's going on around them. They're wrapped in a *fog* of newspaper print and tobacco. They're slow. Slow!

"I think men are so ugly, too. Look at them in omnibuses and trains. Look at them anywhere! Are they attractive? Not to me. I don't like their nubbly knuckles and their huge feet (not that I need talk in these land boots, but still) — I can't bear those great wrists they have. I hate their horrid skins where they shave — all nutmeg-graters! How any girl wants to be kissed by them I don't know. I don't suppose she does really; it's just the Idea. Bristly moustaches, too. Awful!

“They do such hideous things, men. What can be more revolting than the sight of one of them knocking out a dirty, smelly black pipe? Or wolking down a plateful of half-raw steak? Or mopping up — as they call it — a fat pint of beer out of a pewter pot? I could not love one after seeing him do those things!” declared Elizabeth.

“Yet women do, my dear,” I reminded her. “They like a man to be even rather rough-hewn and coarse-fibred, so that he is unlike them. They don’t mind his smelling of tobacco, and wearing scratchy tweeds, and tanks on his feet. They like him rugged. I — I speak for myself and for the majority of girls, I think. They like him ‘manly.’”

“Heavens!” ejaculated Elizabeth, with equal fervour and truth in her voice. “How I do loathe what they call ‘a manly man’! All lumps, and a bull’s voice, and irregular features!”

“But,” I suggested mildly, “you wouldn’t want a man to look like the picture off a chocolate-box lid?”

“I should adore it,” declared this exception in girls. “When I was a little girl, once, I was given a box of sweets with a picture on the lid called ‘The Falconer.’ He wore a golden-brown hunting-dress and he had a hawk on his shoulder, and golden hair and soft eyes, and, oh! such a pretty face! I thought at the time, ‘If only I could ever see a young man looking like that Falconer!’ And now I have. Colonel Fielding is exactly like that picture. Oh, Joan, I think he’s the most beautiful thing I’ve seen.”

How true it is that when a really reserved person breaks down the barriers it will babble out ten times more than some one who is more expansive in every-day life!

I, for instance, should never have dreamt of calling any young man "the most beautiful thing I'd seen." Not Harry, handsome as he was. Not Captain Holiday, though he was good-looking enough for any girl to rave over; manly good looks, too. Very different from the namby-pamby prettiness of Elizabeth's young Colonel! Personally, I considered that it would take more than his D. S. O. and the devotion of his men to their officer to make one forget that he could dress up and look exactly like a girl!

Yet here was the boyish, resolute, no-nonsense-about-her Elizabeth glorying in the fact!

Again the force of Contrast, I supposed.

Well! Well, if the Man-hater were drawn to him I could only hope it was for her happiness. She didn't look happy at the moment, sitting there on that wall, her chin on her knees and her hands hugging her gaitered legs.

"To think," she mourned, "that at last I've met the sort of man that I could care for — even I who never do care for them! — and that it's no good!"

"Why 'no good,' my dear? Because we're going away? But he's not going to stay in Careg himself for ever! Besides, he'll write to you. He always did about the flat, and he will more now," I comforted her. "I know he likes you."

With her characteristic gesture my chum shook her head till her hair danced about her face.

“He does like you,” I persisted. “I saw it when he met you first! And at the concert he threw that red carnation straight for you to catch! I suppose you’ve kept it?”

A rueful laugh from Elizabeth, a movement of her hand to the breast of her smock. Kept it? It was her treasure. Oh, yes. She’d got it badly.

“Besides,” I went on, “he met you. He came to talk to you. He wanted to see you ——”

“He used to! But not now!” broke despairingly from the little figure on the wall. “That’s the worst of it! To begin with, he — he did like me! I was almost sure of it! But not since that girl came down here to take him from me!”

“Which girl?”

In a tone of passionate despair Elizabeth pronounced the name.

“Muriel Elvey!”

“Muriel — oh, my dear girl, no. That’s absurd.”

But nothing would persuade Elizabeth that it wasn’t true. She had seen Muriel, who was so lovely that every man must fall in love with her. She had seen her at the concert, where Colonel Fielding was talking to her every minute that he was not singing. She’d seen her at the Tests, still with Colonel Fielding in attendance. She, Miss Elvey, was staying at The Lodge, where Colonel Fielding was also staying. Oh! Elizabeth knew what would happen.

I wished I did! Personally, I thought it very unlikely that Muriel meant to look at Colonel Fielding; but was she going to marry her host, Captain Holiday? In the meantime she was causing the bitterest jealousy to both me and my poor little chum!

To think that this was Elizabeth who had strafed me about fretting over what any young man had said or done!

"I wish I hadn't come," she mourned; "and now it will almost kill me to go."

Here she stopped, starting as if shot. She lifted her head from her knees and sprang off the low wall.

There had been a rustling of the leaves that I'd thought was the breeze; but Elizabeth had heard and recognized the light footstep that accompanied that rustling.

Another moment and there appeared before us the slim figure and half-girlish face of the man who was the cause of all this agitation.

I looked hard at him as he saluted and said "How do you do?"

He blushed — yes, he had that trick of blushing which camouflages some of the effrontery of some of the least diffident of men. I realized now that it was all a "put-on" — his quietness, his nervousness, his seeming shyness.

"Er — er — I'm so glad I happened to come across you," he said. "The fact is I've something I — I rather wanted to ask you — you two people."

How deprecatingly he spoke, but what a gleam of

mischievous there was behind those ridiculously long lashes of his! What did he really mean?

I saw him again as I'd seen him at that concert, dressed up in that successful imitation of a Spanish beauty, singing in a contralto that would have lured the bird from the tree, taking in half the audience by his mock "glad eye" at Captain Holiday, and finally tossing that red flower into the little brown paw of the Land Girl whom he most admired. Not too milk-and-watery, all that! And as Elizabeth herself defended him later, "It's not by being namby-pamby that a man gets the D. S. O." In spite of his distressingly — to me — pretty-pretty appearance, there were depths in this idol of Elizabeth's.

Now what had he come to say?

"Er," he began, "I've heard you finished your training and are going away from here."

"Yes, we're off on Monday," Elizabeth said quite steadily.

He tapped against a moss-covered stick with his cane, and went on, as if shyly:

"Er — Holiday told me something of the sort. Do — do you like the job you're going to?"

"We don't know yet," said I, cheerfully enough. "I expect we shall."

"Oh! Holiday didn't know — that is, I expect Holiday might be rather annoyed if he thought I'd said anything to you about this," returned this maddeningly puzzling young man. "But, still, it was an idea of his.

And — er — I don't see how he could find out if he didn't ask you himself, do you? ”

Together Elizabeth and I demanded, “ Ask us what? ”

“ Well, Holiday wondered if you two would care to stay on at the farm,” suggested Captain Fielding.

I saw Elizabeth's head go up.

“ Stay on? ” I echoed. “ But we've finished our training! ”

“ Er — yes. But the Prices want two more land-workers to take the places of two more men they've had called up. And Holiday thought that — er — since they're pleased with you, and you've got through the exam.— well, it could be managed,” concluded Colonel Fielding, diffidently. “ It depends upon whether you'd like to stay on jobs there. Would you? ”

Here was a question!

To go — or to stay on?

In less time than it takes you to read about it I'd revolved it rapidly in my own mind as I stood there by that wall under the hazels, glancing from Elizabeth to the young officer who had made the suggestion.

To go meant good-bye to so many things I'd come to care for. Good-bye to the Prices, the gentle giant and his dainty wife, to whom her silvered hair gave the look of a little French marquise; good-bye to their kindness and interest — not every land-worker finds employers as helpful and as considerate. However charming the Rectory people might turn out to be I

could not hope that they would come up to these kind people.

It meant good-bye to the Practice Farm, of which I'd become attached to every field, every distant view, every shed — even the celebrated cow-house that I'd cleaned out on that first morning! Good-bye to the merry midday meals in the jolly kitchen! Good-bye to the dear old white mare, and the cows who now knew me well! Good-bye to the morning tramp to work through the dew-spangled, ferny lanes! Good-bye, too, to the life in camp; good-bye to Vic, the irresistible Cockney, to Sybil, and little Peggy with her "I'm astonished at you!" — to Curley, to the red-haired Aggie with her rich Welsh voice, and to the young forewoman who had mothered the whole mixed lot of us!

We had been one big family; I had found sisters of every class and kind. Now I had to leave them all, after sharing their life and their hearts, for six unforgettable weeks. To part — with the chance that we should never meet again! It's the fate that breaks up so many a cheery mess, both in the Army and the Land Army! To go meant all this.

But to stay meant, for me, seeing Captain Holiday still. How could I grow to forget him and thrust him out of my mind, as I hoped, if I knew that round any corner I should meet him still, the golden-and-white collie trailing at his heels? How could I grow resigned and philosophical, and all those things which I meant to be, if I had the constant pain of seeing him with Muriel? (The Elveys, by the way, seemed to be staying on in-

definitely at the Lodge.) Oh, I thought that to stay was the very worst thing I could do for myself!

But then I hadn't only myself to think about.

At the very sound of the words "stay on" I'd seen Elizabeth's small face lighted up as if by a ray of sunshine from within. She'd turned it hastily away again. But well I knew what her sentiments were!

So I decided in an instant.

"Oh! If it could be arranged! Of course we'd both prefer to stay on here. We'll stay!" I said, without hesitating.

Enormous relief appeared in the very tilt of Elizabeth's Board of Agriculture hat. As for the young Colonel — what did he think or feel? Was he interested in my little infatuated chum, or wasn't he? Was he just another slave at the chariot wheels of the all-conquering Muriel? And what had he said to Captain Holiday about our staying here? Or had it been the other young man's idea? Afterwards I wondered very much about this.

Why had Captain Holiday thought of us? The Practice Farm was on his land but what had the actual working of it got to do with him, he being merely down in this part of the country on sick leave like his friend, Colonel Fielding?

Further, I wondered how much longer Muriel and her mother would be here, and when the coy, uncertain, and hard-to-please Muriel would make up her mind whom she wanted to marry?

CHAPTER XXII

HAY-HARVEST

“Go see the wholesome country girls make hay,
Whose brown hath lovelier grace
Than many a painted face,
That I do know
Hyde Park can show.”

ALL these questions were still there, unanswered, a fortnight later.

That date found Elizabeth and me settled as permanent Land-workers under our friend Mr. Price, but still living in camp, whence we walked to our work. It found Curley gone; she had taken the Rectory job; Sybil, too, was away. She had got the post of garden-girl at a country house outside Careg that supplied the hospital with extra vegetables. The Elveys were still at the Lodge, for poor Mrs. Elvey had had a rheumatic attack and could not move. Very probably, thought I with a pang, Miss Muriel did not want to move!

All this marked the date of the beginning of one of the farm's biggest days — the gathering in of the second hay crop.

I shall never forget this as one of the greatest scrambles that I've ever rushed through. A “thick day” at the office was nothing to it!

It was intensely hot. The sky was cloudless, not blue, but a sultry mauve.

Now at dinner-time Mr. Price strode in on his inordinately long legs that he had given no rest since early morn; his blue eyes were alert and excited.

“The glass is going down,” he said. “And I heard thunder beyond the town. I’ll tell you what. I believe it’ll be a race between a big storm — and us getting in that field of hay!”

Little Mrs. Price lifted her tiny, dignified face as she sat at table.

“We’ll have to do it then,” said she. “Everybody will help.”

“Everybody it’ll have to be,” declared Mr. Price, dispatching his dinner full speed ahead. “Everybody on the farm. And I’ll see if some of the wounded boys can take a hand. And you get every one of the workmen’s wives, too. Tell them to leave their washing, leave their baking, bring their babies to the corner of the field and all come!”

Off went Mrs. Price to mobilize these volunteers. Out we dashed — the Regulars.

It was indeed all hands to the pumps — that breathless afternoon.

The big field seemed to hold half Careg; farm hands, old men, boys in hospital blue, rosy-faced women in sunbonnets — these last were the workmen’s wives whom Mrs. Price had fetched. They worked like niggers. And as we toiled the air grew more breathless; the pale mauve of the sky deepened to an angry indigo, and far

away we heard a muttering of thunder. The storm was gathering slowly.

I felt myself becoming part of a regiment, part of a willing machine that walked quickly down the rows raking the fragrant swathes.

Should we do it? Should we get in that hay in time, beat the on-rolling field-grey clouds that were coming up, massed like German divisions?

It was exciting. It was for the moment the most important thing in the world that that field should be cleared before the thunder-rain came on to spoil all.

I raked, handling the rake with ease and rhythm; I scarcely realized who walked just in front of me, or that the two shirt-sleeved figures — one with an absurdly slim waist! — were Captain Holiday and Colonel Fielding.

Steadily the storm was coming up, but steadily we worked.

“We shall do it!” declared little Mrs. Price, as she passed me once, “we shall have time for tea and all!”

Presently, as I raked in front of the road-gate, I saw our organizing secretary fling herself off her bicycle and run up.

“Mrs. Price!” she called. “What can I do to help?”

“Cut bread and butter if you like!” laughed the farmer's wife. “It's tea-time, and we've earned it! I'm just going to bring out a white cloth and two big loaves, and a huge bowl of butter, and the kettle, and tea in bags! Yes, come on!”

Twenty minutes later the last load of hay was carried. The haymakers sat down on the grass in the corner of the field to feast their achievement, farmfolk groups and little clusters, friends, families together. Mr. Price seated himself in triumph on the cutter, waving a cup at the threatening purple skies.

“We’ve done it!” he cried. “We have, indeed!”

I had cast myself down in the nearest shady patch, had thrown off my hat, and dried my streaming forehead. Life was extraordinarily good at that moment; I felt it surging in fulness through every vein. I was heated and spent for the instant; but how happy! Work is an anodyne; but it must be the right kind of work. This had been splendid. I’d forgotten everything else!

I stuffed my handkerchief into my sleeve, and came to myself to find that in my shady corner I was one of a group of four.

Elizabeth had thrown herself down close beside me. Next to her the slim Colonel had sat down. Opposite to me, holding out bread and butter on a large burdock leaf, was Captain Holiday.

The quartette of us devoured our tea together with an enjoyment which was, as Captain Holiday presently said through a mouthful, barely decent!

“Why?” demanded Colonel Fielding, with that misleading diffidence of his. “Why shouldn’t we — er — enjoy this? I — I may tell you that this” — he drank more tea, reached for another hunk of bread and butter,

and looked sideways at Elizabeth — “this is going to represent one of the meals of my life!”

I said, rather tritely, “That’s because you worked so hard for it!”

“Oh — er — no. I don’t think I like anything I’ve deserved,” said this young man, with (outward) mildness. Much faith I put in that as he began on his fourth hunk, eating by tiny mouthfuls as he must have been taught in the nursery. “Anything one’s earned makes one feel — er — one doesn’t want it any more. At least, I feel like that ——”

“Not often, my dear chap,” put in his friend, Captain Holiday, brusquely. “If you were dependent upon what you earned or deserved — by gad, you would be fairly destitute!”

Now it always amuses me the way in which men will show warm regard for a special chum by insulting him in public. But Elizabeth, over her white japanned mug of tea, shot a really furious glance at the man who had dared to say this thing to her idol!

Colonel Fielding just laughed through those eyelashes, nodded good-naturedly at his friend, and took up the conversation again as he lounged on the grass.

Hoping for Elizabeth’s sake that what he said might tell something about him, I prepared to listen to every word of it!

CHAPTER XXIII

COLONEL FIELDING DISCUSSES "ENJOYMENT"

NOW, as we sat in that field, between the blond stubble and lowering purple sky, there was one thing the others didn't guess.

I wouldn't have changed places with a Queen. Just to be so near Captain Holiday, rested and feasting after work, was sheer joy to me. He would never know.

But it was odd to find his friend, Colonel Fielding, suddenly putting my thoughts into words!

He repeated his own words of a moment before.

"Yes, this is one of 'the' feasts," he said softly. "Tea and bread and butter in a hayfield. And — er — absolutely topping. It's Enjoyment; *pukka*. It's what people are always chasing. They flock to — er — the most expensive restaurants in town for this. They go on to boxes at theatres, supper clubs. It's what they order champagne for. Jazz bands. Dressing up to the nines. All to get it! They — er — they don't get it," murmured the young Colonel, in his meekest of meek voices. "You can't buy it. It comes to you — or it doesn't. Fact."

Nobody said anything. Fielding continued:

"When people look back on the best time they've ever had, they don't find that those are the times that — er — that have swallowed up every stiver at Cox's. No. Nor the times when they set out deliberately to do

themselves well, and — er — dash the expense. No! As often as not, *that* is a wash-out. Er — I don't know why. But somehow the best time nearly always comes down to something that costs hardly anything."

Captain Holiday, smoking, gave a sort of non-committal grunt.

Meanwhile Elizabeth was listening spellbound to the homily on Life's Good Times, given by the young officer, who talked as if he were the shyest of the shy — but whose shyness did not stop him from holding forth.

"A woman once told me," the Colonel began again.

Here I saw Elizabeth prick up her ears even more, if possible!

The Colonel saw it too. The smile he gave might have been the smile of some coquette who, deliberately "playing" her lover, sees him "rise." Ah, if Elizabeth looked like that Princess who on her bridal-night was metamorphosed into a lad, this slim Colonel might have been the bridegroom who, to keep her love, was bewitched in turn into becoming a Princess. . . .

He went on:

"Yes, a woman who's taught me rather a lot about women once told me that the most delightful lunch of her life was — er — was in a poisonous little musty coffee-room of a country pub."

Here Captain Holiday put in: "What induced you to take her *there*?"

A gleam of mischief behind the Colonel's lashes, but no reply to this.

"It was stuffy with the smell of bygone chops," he enlarged dreamily. "It was hung with huge dark oil-paintings of spaniels, and horses, and wild duck and things, and there were umpteen hulking sauceboats on each sideboard; all very plated and dirty ——"

"How fascinating," snapped Elizabeth.

"The table decorations," pursued Colonel Fielding, "were five napkins arranged as mitres and a tall 'fluted ruby' glass vase full of dead daffodils ——"

"May one ask what the unfortunate lady was given to eat?"

"She was given cold ham, Miss Weare, tinned apricots, and black Indian tea at three o'clock in the afternoon ——"

"How extraordinarily nasty," sniffed Elizabeth, obviously wrung with jealousy of the woman who had thus lunched.

Deprecatingly, Colonel Fielding smiled. "This woman told me," he said, "that she knew now what was meant by the expression 'A Priceless Binge.' It was that lunch. She would not have exchanged a crumb of it for two years of living at the Ritz."

How well I understood that woman's point of view! I opened my mouth to say so; then I saw that Captain Holiday, leaning up on his elbow on the grass, was watching me hard behind a cloud of smoke.

Why? Curiosity again? I said nothing.

"I suppose that woman meant that the person she was lunching with made all the difference in the world

to her?" said Elizabeth, whose small, brown paw had been pulling quite viciously at the grass during these last remarks, in the voice of bravado.

"Well," he replied, "I believe that she did happen to be lunching at the time with 'the person' she cared rather a lot about. He was — er — an old love or something she hadn't seen for ages. At least — I think it must have been that."

"You 'think'!" I said exasperated. "You don't know?"

"No," returned the young Colonel, "I couldn't ask her, could I?"

"Why not?" demanded Captain Holiday, with his abruptness.

"How could I ask her if she didn't choose to tell me?" Colonel Fielding answered very gently.

Here I thought there had been enough of this hair-splitting; besides, I couldn't bear to see Elizabeth's afternoon being spoilt.

So, bluntly and directly, I blurted out:

"But, Colonel Fielding, wasn't it you that this woman was having lunch with when she said that?"

"I?" He opened his eyes at me just as Muriel might have done, and I thought exasperatedly what a lot of girl's tricks he had. Still, one girl adored him for them. I saw poor Elizabeth sitting there doing it at that moment.

"I?" he said. "Oh, no. I — er — wasn't there, that time. I wasn't — the fact is I wasn't born. My mother only told me about it lately."

Elizabeth stopped pulling up the stubble with a jerk, and at the same moment I said sharply, "Your mother — but what's your mother got to do with it, Colonel Fielding?"

"She was the woman who had lunch," explained the young man simply. "She — er — is the woman who's taught me most things, I think. I always think men might learn more from their mothers than any other woman allows 'em to — er — know. '*You'll get a sweetheart any day, but not anothah mothah!*' D'you know that song, Miss Weare?"

Villain! He had simply been "trying it on," "playing up"! He was quite "up" to the fact of Elizabeth's jealousy. And now he was equally "up" to the look of exquisite relief that was lighting her up again — just as it had done when she found she was not to go away after all.

All this, I thought, was cruel.

I turned to Captain Holiday, who was just laughing — at this rate I should soon change places with my chum. I should become the Man-Hater. Men were too irritating, too little worth all this trouble and affection that we lavish upon them!

But, in the meantime, we had forgotten the storm. Suddenly it broke out, deafeningly, over our heads.

"Ah!" exclaimed Captain Holiday sharply, springing to his feet.

We followed his example.

"Here it is," he cried. "The storm!"

CHAPTER XXIV

STORM

“Lightning may come, straight rains and tiger sky.”

— MEREDITH.

I TURNED up my face. Splash! came the first huge thunder drop upon it.

“Run for it. Run for the farm!” exclaimed both the men. I saw Colonel Fielding’s slender hand dart out and catch that sun’burnt paw of Elizabeth’s as they dashed after the farmer’s wife. Hand in hand they ran over the field like children, laughing like children too — and I knew this would be another of “THE” moments of life to my little chum.

I was legging it after them when I was stopped as if by a shot. From behind me there was a sharp cry.

“Joan! Joan!”

I turned to the corner under the elms where we had been picnicking. Every one had left it in their dash for cover before the rain came on. Only Captain Holiday was there; he stood, his back to the biggest elm, his hands spread out behind him on the trunk, his face ghastly white.

“Joan!” he called like a child.

I ran back to him.

“What’s the matter?” I asked anxiously. “Has your knee let you down?” — I knew that one of his

wounds had been in the knee — “Where are you hurt?”

“I’m not hurt,” he said, and tried to smile. “Only I ——”

Crashing thunder drowned his voice. Then I saw an odd thing happen. His whole body seemed to shrink and flatten itself against that tree. He caught his hands away from the bark and covered his face. He was in an agony.

I hurried to him. He clutched my arm.

“Don’t go,” he muttered. “I say, I’m mad sorry, but I can’t help it. I thought I was right again. I’ve been like this ever since the Somme. Those guns — I’m afraid you’ll have to stay with me. I can’t move from here yet. You see I ——”

Crash! came the thunder just above us again. He shook as it rolled away. Then in a whisper that seemed torn from him I heard him say: “I’m frightened of that.”

I could have cried. For in a flash as of the lightning now playing above the hills I seemed to understand all.

Shell-shock! This healthy and normal young man had been through every horror of war, and I knew how bravely. Some of the wounded soldiers at the hospital had been in his old company; they had had plenty of tales to tell. He was as plucky as any lion — but he was “done in” now. Thunder, that brought back to him the guns of that hell in which he had been last wounded, found him paralysed and helpless with shock.

I took both his hands.

"I'll stay with you," I said as comfortingly as I could. "Come to the other side of the tree, it's absolutely sheltered there." I sat down, leaning against the trunk. "Sit down by me."

I remembered how often I had been told as a child not to shelter under trees in a thunderstorm, but what else was there to do?

The big warm thunder-drops, that had been coming one by one, were now pattering faster and faster on the leaves. Again the thunder crashed; Captain Holiday crouched up close to me. I found myself slipping my arm about his neck—he was trembling. What else could I do? I heard him say "Thank you, dear." And he put his head down on my shoulder. He buried his brown face against my overall when the next crash came.

Yes! He clung to me for comfort as if there were no other help for him in the world. At that moment there was no other.

What a half-hour! I felt I must be dreaming. Could it be I, Joan Matthews, Land Girl, who was sitting there? Yes; here was my own overalled arm round the quite solid-feeling neck of the young man; it was my own shoulder against which his head was refuged. Once I was nearly, nearly sure I felt his lips against the rough holland of my smock—but that was a chance touch. Once I found myself wishing wildly that the storm need never stop, and that I could stay here like this for ever, not moving, not speaking!

To speak would mean a drop out of the seventh

heaven and back to Britain in war-time, to a world full of disappointments — and Muriel.

Even Muriel would never be able to take this one little half-hour from me when I had been Dick Holiday's only help in distress, when he had just once said "Dear" to me; even if he hardly knew in his agitation to whom he was speaking!

I should always have one perfect memory.

It was he who spoke first, in the lull that came after thunder that seemed now receding.

He lifted his head at last, and said huskily:

"Joan, I'm afraid you'll think I'm the limit. I mean you'll never think anything of me again! Cold feet — a coward!"

"A coward? You?" I retorted.

Tears rushed into my eyes again. I was red with conflicting emotions.

The young soldier beside me was still pale. I looked at his downcast face.

"You think I think you're the kind of man who gets cold feet?" I cried.

My voice shook with reproach.

"Oh!" I exclaimed, "how horrid of you to say such a thing."

At this he sat up straight under that tree and looked at me. A more normal expression came over his face.

"Horrid?" he echoed.

And then in quite his own brusque, ragging voice he declared:

"Mention any subject on earth to a woman, and she'll

always find the unexpected comment. Always! Anyhow, this woman will. I don't understand why you've just called me 'horrid,' Joan!"

"You don't understand me at all when you think I understand so little," I said bitterly. "As if I didn't realize what it meant for a man to be wrecked by shell-shock. As if I thought it was the same thing as his being frightened, cowardly! Good heavens! As if I didn't know how you'd behaved out in France, Captain Holiday?"

Resentfully I wound up: "But you will persist in thinking me a fool!" I said bitterly.

Now he was quite himself again.

"Why should I think you a fool?" he barked.

"I don't know!" I barked in return.

Staring at the now abating rain, I suggested sharply: "Perhaps you laugh at me for being on land work at all?"

Captain Holiday turned, looked hard at me. I thought he would snap again. Instead of that he replied gently.

"Land work? Honestly I think its the noblest work women can do today."

He glanced at the hayfield, cleared only that afternoon, gleaming under the rain.

"Cramped occupations, unhealthy city life, flat chests, specialists' fees — all swept away!" he said musingly. "Land work would help us to that, you know. Land work would give us rosier wives, better babies" — then he turned upon me with his abruptest

question —“ I suppose you think it's odd of me to think of such things? ”

“ Certainly not. I agree with every word you say,” I assured him. “ Only —— ”

I was thinking of Muriel. Land work and she were as the poles apart, yet he loved her (or so I was driven to suppose). And yet he clung to his ideals of a country life!

“ Only — what? ” he took me up. “ What were you going to say? ”

“ That girl you spoke to me about the other evening,” I said, “ that girl who won't say either ‘ Yes ’ or ‘ No ’ to you — ‘ the ’ girl — what does she think about all this? ”

He paused for a moment and glanced at the sky.

Presently he turned those grey and friendly eyes of his upon me again. They smiled very sweetly as he answered my question.

“ She? Oh! She thinks as I'd like her to think.”

So then I knew he must be completely under Muriel's sway. That lovely, super-civilized girl could “ take him in ” about her views on any subject. If she wanted him to believe that she hated town and luxury and only loved roughing it on the land, he would believe her.

He was all hers!

Suddenly chilled, and sore at heart, I got up. I took a step outside the shelter of those elms that had seen my wonderful half-hour. It was over, over. All over!

CHAPTER XXV

AFTER THE RAIN

“And the world grew green in the blue.”

FOLK-SONG.

“IT has stopped raining,” I said. “What is the time?”

He turned his wrist.

“A quarter past six,” he said. “You’re supposed to have knocked off?”

“Yes, but I expect Elizabeth is waiting at the farm. Good-bye, Captain Holiday.”

“Good-bye!” But he was walking by my side across the field. “I haven’t thanked you yet for being good to me.”

“Please don’t.”

“All right! I won’t!” said he serenely. Striding by my side, he came on as far as the farmyard gate.

He opened it for me.

Then, leaning on the gate, he lingered. In quite his old manner he launched a question.

“D’you miss town much?”

I laughed.

All about me there went up that sweet incense of the country earth after rain; the ever-vivid colours of the Welsh landscape were heightened to brilliance; each



Still leaning on the gate, Captain Holiday said: "I'm glad the country won that toss"

twig of the hedge had its hanging diamonds. Across the green breast of the hill behind the farm there lay, striped like a medal-ribbon, the end of the rainbow. Hope and gaiety smiled from every inch of the rain-washed country; and I echoed: "Miss town? Not now, thank you."

"But you did at first, Joan."

"Oh, yes," I admitted. "Badly."

"Then why did you ever leave it? I've often wondered," said Captain Holiday. "Why did you come away?"

I hesitated. How could I tell him about Harry?

"It was a toss-up whether I stayed or came," I said. Still leaning on that gate, Captain Holiday said:

"I'm glad the country won that toss."

Sweet of him, and friendly! But it meant no more than mere friendliness.

I fought down a sigh.

"Good-bye," I said again.

He did not move from the gate. He just went on with the conversation.

"So you came here; left London. Sometimes one hates leaving — places, I mean, of course."

I said rather bitterly, "Yes — places."

"Not people?" he took up, with a very quick tilt of his head.

What could one say? I agreed.

"Oh, people are hard enough to leave sometimes."

"Are they?" he said, looking down at me. I could not meet his friendly eyes. I moved to go on.

Then at last he took his arm from that gate and followed me through it, shutting it behind him.

“Perhaps there were people who were hard to leave in London?”

What right had he to say it? I was angry with him. Considering he had his own love-story to attend to, why should he question me still — try to find out how love had treated me? What business was it of his?

Temper flamed up in me.

“No! When I left town to join up there was nobody I minded leaving. Else I should not have left. The — the people I should have hated to leave had left themselves!”

My voice grew harder as the memory of Harry Markham surged back into my mind. Black eyes, red tabs, soft caressing voice that promised “all things to all women,” tender ways — how I had adored him. And how completely that adoration had died away now!

Oh, the unexpected things that happen in life; nearly always in our own selves! But I didn't intend to give any of that away to this other young man who stood beside me, quietly attentive to what I was saying, outside that closed green door.

I put out my hand; but his was on the latch before me. He held it there as if he were just going to open it for me.

“Oh! So ‘they’ had left.” He took up, in his quiet steady voice.

“Yes,” I said defiantly. “If you must know, and it

seems as if you always must know everything about everybody ——”

“Not everything,” he assured me seriously, “and not about everybody. Only some things, and about my — well, I can say we are friends, can’t I?”

This, of course, melted me again to him. I had to look away, back over the yard, the cloister-like sheds, the now-smiling country beyond.

“Friends? Oh, yes,” I said.

“Then tell me what you were going to say when you began, ‘if you must know’?”

Still looking away, I finished the sentence.

“If you must know,” I said, “‘they’ sailed for Salonika days before I left London.”

Very quickly he said.

“That was why you left?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

The main lines of the story were known to him now. I didn’t care.

Speaking as lightly as I could, I said:

“Well! That’s that. D’you think you’ve had enough questions answered for one day, Captain Holiday?”

“‘Dick’ is my name really,” he observed for the second time that day; “and I’d like to ask one other question, if I may. Don’t imagine that I don’t know it’s neck my asking. I do know better. But I’m going to ask. Do you ——”

Even he hesitated for a moment. Then went on:

“Do you hear from — these people?”

“These people in Salonika?”

“Yes. From him,” said Captain Holiday.

There flashed into my head the thought that had I been Muriel I should have replied neither “Yes” nor “No” to this question. It's the successful type of girl who always “keeps a man guessing” about everything she does, or means, or is. But I was cursed from my cradle by the fairies with the quality of truthfulness. Out it came now.

“Write to me! No,” I replied definitely. “Not a line! Not a word! I shall never hear from him again. I shall probably never see him again as long as I live!”

And to avoid being asked more questions on this sore subject, I looked meaningly at Captain Holiday's hand holding the latch of the back door. At once he opened it.

“I want to speak to the Prices,” he said, and followed me through the slate-paved scullery into the big light kitchen.

It seemed full as a railway station of people gathered about the wood fire, sheltering or drying after that storm.

On the settle a dainty but ruffled figure in pale mauve was sitting and holding out tiny silk-stockinged feet to the blaze; her drenched white kid shoes stood on the range. Muriel caught in the wet!

She turned as I came in.

“Hullo, Joan; talk of angels!” she said.

Talk of angels, indeed. My eyes had flown past her

to the man's figure standing close to the fire that lighted up his red tabs.

There he was, the very man of whom we had been talking. The man of whom I'd said I should never see him again as long as I lived!

I was face to face again with Harry Markham!

* * * * *

After the first moment of blankest astonishment, I realized that this was not so very startling after all.

Harry, here?

Well, I knew he was back from Salonika. I knew he had a staff job in town. Town, after all, is still within a day's journey from these depths of mid-Wales. I also knew that Captain Harry Markham had always had a bit of a reputation as "a leave-hog." I need not be so amazed that he had secured a week's freedom out of that old General of his.

As to why he should spend it in Careg — well, I think trout-stream and a jolly little inn were the explanations that the young man offered in those first hectic moments, filled by spasmodic hand-shaking and those inevitable remarks of: "I say, fancy coming across you here!" and "You're looking jolly fit," and all the other things people say on these occasions, whether they are thinking about them or about something totally different, or wondering how soon they can get away.

It was a curiously mixed crowd in the Prices' hospitable kitchen!

It was like the collections of people you sometimes meet in a dream. I felt as if it were some dream that

brought me there to the man whom I had adored, with the man whom I adored now, and with the girl who had taken them both away from me!

With very mixed feelings I let myself down on a kitchen chair near the big grandfather clock. I felt as if I must be "looking," as Vic might have put it, "all ways for daylight." Fortunately nobody there had much time to notice me.

There were Harry and Captain Holiday ("my cousin, you know, whose place this is!") to be introduced by Muriel Elvey. (A characteristically questioning look, here, from Captain Holiday at the new man; at whom he stared before whilst I was shaking hands.)

Then I watched Harry being introduced to Colonel Fielding, who, by the way, had left Elizabeth's side and was now sitting on the arm of the oaken settle by Muriel, in an attitude suggesting that she, Muriel, was the only girl to whom he'd paid any attention in his life. Wretch! It had wiped all the joy and sparkle out of my chum's face once again.

Then there was more tea suggested, more cigarettes handed round, spills lighted at that comforting blaze. I listened, just as detachedly as if I were in the auditorium of a theatre, to the buzz of talk that went up around me — chatter about the hay-carrying, the recent storm, and the weather prospects for the morrow of which Mr. Price, looming tall against the window, seemed rather doubtful.

"Miss Elvey's sweet little white shoes!" Mrs. Price's

cheerful voice broke in. "Don't let them scorch. I do hope they are not ruined ——"

"You will have to take to boots and leggings, yet, Miss Elvey," demurely from the young Colonel.

"Oh, can you imagine me!" from Muriel, toasting her mauve-silk clad toes. "Colonel Fielding, think of little me in those clodhopping things! Of course, I think it wonderful of people to wear them!" with a glance at Elizabeth. "I ought really to be on the Land myself — now, why do you laugh, Mr. Price?" with a pout at the farmer. "I believe you think I shouldn't be very useful!"

"Well, indeed, I don't think you would," declared the gentle giant with an indulgent smile. "Only ornamental!"

"How horrid of you! I've a good mind to join up and show you! It's only that I can't leave mother. But I adore the country really, don't I, Dick? I was longing to come and make hay. I brought Captain Markham out on purpose, and then the rain came and we had to fly in here.

"If you only knew how I admired all these splendid girls who are so brave and strong, and who simply don't mind how they get themselves all burnt and rough for evening dress!" declared Muriel, with a glance at me as I sat mum. "I should look a perfect fright! I know I should!" twittered Muriel, glancing at Harry.

I saw Harry smile back at Muriel as he'd often smiled at me. He murmured something about sunburn being sacrilege in some cases.

Muriel laughed back.

“Of course, if you're a man you can get as burnt as a brick and it doesn't matter,” she said. “You're so brown I hardly knew you at the station!” Then casually to me: “Joan, don't you think Harry's got frightfully much thinner and sunburnt since he went out to Salonika?”

At that word I met Captain Holiday's clear straight glance.

It was directly upon me.

I saw that he'd seen. He knew! Yes! He'd tumbled to it that this Captain Markham who had lately come from Salonika was the man to whom I'd referred as “people” that had sailed for Salonika before I left London.

Why had I ever opened my mouth about that?

For now Dick Holiday, who was in love with Muriel, knew the whole of my silly, humiliating little tragedy.

I felt that it was written on my face anyhow.

I turned away, wishing that the tiled kitchen floor would swallow me up.

As I turned Elizabeth was at my elbow.

“Let's go home,” she muttered forlornly.

We slipped out of the party without any leave-taking. Silently we made our way back to camp. And I am sure that to hear us laughing with Miss Easton and Vic, to see us fox-trotting together to the rowdiest record on the Camp gramophone, you would never have guessed that the Man-hater and I were about the most miserable pair of girls in the Land Army that night!

CHAPTER XXVI

COLONEL FIELDING DISCUSSES "LOVE AND THE LIKE"

"'Tis Love breeds love in me, and cold disdain
Kills that again."

— DONNE.

WITH the morning we had pulled ourselves together again. Not a word did Elizabeth address to me on the subject of our having met my old love in attendance on Muriel. Not a syllable did I say to her about the object of her own misplaced affections, that finished and unscrupulous flirt, that philanderer more accomplished than Harry — Colonel Fielding. The name of Captain Holiday was not mentioned. In fact, there might not have been "such a thing as young men" in our world that morning.

A wet morning it had turned out! Hay-culling would be out of the question. This we knew even before we scrambled into our brown Land Army mackintoshes and splashed away down the road.

Elizabeth congratulated herself on the nice dry indoor job that would be hers, for Mrs. Price was going to let us take turns at helping her on baking-day, and this was the turn of my chum.

As for me, I found that I should also be kept out of the wet. My morning's work was in the big shearing-shed, turning the shearing-machine for Ivor, the shep-

herd. He held down the fat lambs on a wooden bench set on the great black floor-sheet of tarpaulin, and went slowly and methodically to work with a sort of twelve-pointed clipping-knife over the body of the lamb, while I turned the big red wheel with its belt and pipe attached to the knife. It was not hard work, but quite soothing — rather like knitting!

And I was at this occupation when I had a visitor, brought in by Mr. Price. It was none other than young Colonel Fielding, who asked diffidently whether he might take a turn and give a hand either to Ivor or Miss Matthews.

Ivor, a blond, quiet man in a dark-blue linen coat, looked up and smiled benignantly upon this slim young officer. Ivor had no English, Mr. Price explained, but he understood pretty well everything else. Especially everything about sheep.

“Then — er — you’re lucky to have had him turned down by the doctor, and to be able to keep him on the farm,” said Colonel Fielding.

“Oh, he would make a very poor soldier,” was the Welsh farmer’s verdict. “Very reserved man; very reserved indeed!”

Ivor smiled again as the lamb upon which he had been operating dropped the last of his heavy coat upon the sheet and, shaven, shorn, and freed at last, scrambled out into the adjoining shed.

The shepherd seized another struggling and woolly one, downed him into his place, and took up the shearing-knife once more.

“Now,” he said in Welsh, with a little nod to me, and I continued to work the wheel.

Mr. Price in his oilskin coat had stepped out again into the rain. Colonel Fielding did not go with him. He unfastened his brown, trench-worn mackintosh, threw it on one of the big wool-sacks, and took a pace nearer to me and my wheel.

I wondered if he had expected to see Elizabeth in the shed. Taking absolutely no notice of him I worked on.

“Let me have a turn, won’t you?” came the meek voice of the intruder — for I felt, as I never had with Captain Holiday, that an intruder he was. “You take a rest, Miss Matthews.”

“Thank you, I am not in the least tired.” I said it coldly. I thoroughly disapproved of this young man who had been trifling with Elizabeth’s feelings.

Elizabeth, bless her, was too good to be at the mercy of this young scamp with his D. S. O. and his subtle way of flirting so that you could hardly nail it down and say that it was flirting at all. Elizabeth had said hard things of Harry, in the days of my infatuation for him. But she hadn’t thought any harder things of him than I thought now of this slender-waisted ruffian with the moustache that looked as if a pinch of light-gold paint had been rubbed on to his upper lip.

Cruel hard lines that he should turn out to be the one and only exception to Elizabeth’s rule of hating men!

In his meekest of voices he said:

“Perhaps you are not tired. But why are you so — er — poisonously angry with me?”

Before I could reply he answered, still meekly, his own question.

“You loathe me because you think I’ve been heartlessly flirting with your little friend.”

I stared!

He smiled deprecatingly.

“Oh, yes!” he continued, “women think it takes a woman to spot those things. But — er — I knew. Now I’ll tell you — er — something.”

He glanced towards that “reserved” man, the shepherd.

“No English, eh?” he broke off. “I wish no servants knew any! By Jove, how it would simplify life for a lot of people ——”

“But what did you want to tell me?” I said crossly.

“Just this,” replied Colonel Fielding, with his most deceptive, most shrinking bashfulness. “I’m going to marry your little friend, Miss Weare.”

“To marry Miss Weare?”

You can imagine how I stared afresh at this. In fact, I stopped turning the wheel.

Deftly taking the handle from me, Colonel Fielding began turning it in my place rhythmically, easily. I stood there beside him, watching him blankly.

I remembered Elizabeth’s forlorn mood of last night. I went back to her, as I’d seen her this morning, turning to the kitchen, where she was to help Mrs. Price

bake. Her small face under its thick crop had been set with the determination to let work drive away trouble. For trouble, I knew, had been as heavy at her heart as it was at my own. Then was all that altered already?

“What!” I exclaimed. “You’ve seen her this morning?”

His eyes under their long lashes did not leave the turning-wheel. He only said gently:

“No, I haven’t seen her this morning.”

“But ——” I exclaimed. I knew he could not have seen her last night after we got back to camp.

“You haven’t even asked her yet?” I said.

“No,” he agreed. “I haven’t asked her yet.” And he went on turning that big red wheel as if he were a Fate in khaki. After half a dozen turns he added, “But I am going to marry her, for all that.”

Rebukefully I said, “You mean you’re going to marry her if she’ll have you?”

“She will have me,” he said gently, but firmly. He blushed a little, but the girlish blushes that this young man went in for never seemed to make the faintest difference to his cheek — in another sense. “She’ll have me. I know that.”

“How do you know that?” I retorted, sitting there on that sack, and hardly knowing whether I were more glad on Elizabeth’s account, or more indignant or more puzzled by this young man of hers.

He answered: “I know, because I know the — er — the kind of man I am myself.” . . . Here he looked up,

shyly, from that wheel, and said, "Miss Matthews, you think I'm — er — the last word in fatuous conceit."

I was thinking so. How could I help it after what he had just said?

"Er — I'd hate you to think that. You are her pal. I — er — owe you an explanation. Please forgive me if I talk to you for a bit just about myself ——"

I put in "That's a thing all men do."

"Yes. But — er — all men don't ask you to forgive them first, do they?" he said very quickly. "Generally they yarn on and on and on, imagining a woman must be jolly interested to hear it. They don't realize that the woman (unless she happens to be wildly in love with them), the woman's — er — mostly thinking of something miles away all the time!"

I couldn't help smiling. To hear a man himself say such a thing! It sounded more like something Elizabeth herself might give out.

He said, "You have forgiven me? Well, I'll tell you why I know Miss Weare will have me. If she were not attracted enough for that, I should not be attracted. You see I am talking — er — quite frankly; no camouflage at all. Unless a girl liked me, I shouldn't begin to seek her. Not after the first look. I must be liked," he said very simply and with that blush, but very definitely, "I must feel that I am wanted."

He seemed to me extraordinary, from what I knew of men. I said, "But, Colonel Fielding, men always prefer a girl who doesn't seem to want to have anything to say to them! They say men want the chase!"

“I can’t help a lot of the silly conventional things people say,” he declared blandly. “Er — I suppose those things are true enough about people who are all alike, like a flock of sheep.” Here he nodded towards the lamb which had just sprung out of Ivor’s hands, and had made off to join his shorn brethren. “But I say — er — what I feel myself.”

I looked at him doubtfully, the graceful creature whom I personally could not admire.

He said, “It wouldn’t amuse me to try to make — er — love to anybody unless I felt that it would amuse them too, and — er — delight them!”

I objected, “But that’s a woman’s point of view.”

“Why only a woman’s?” asked the young soldier mildly, turning his wheel. “I learnt it from my mother. The woman’s view! I find it useful to look at — er — Love and the like. ‘*Two things greater than all things are, the first is Love and the next is War.*’ The average man has made good on War, these last four years. But — er — I don’t listen to him much on Love.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t think the average man makes a success of it,” declared this puzzling creature coolly. “Give a kid of two a violin to play; what? I think he (the average man) could learn plenty from the average woman — on that one subject. It’s with her my sympathies are, Miss Matthews. . . . Of course I talk too much. . . . And now you’ll call me effeminate.”

His face wore a mask of harmless politeness with a gleam behind his lashes as I looked at him. Effeminate? With that striped ribbon on his breast, with his colonelcy at twenty-six, with all the praise and devotion of his men? These things are not won by effeminates.

He was a man all right, even if he did say and think things which we imagine are exclusively feminine. He was a puzzling exception. And even if he were the kind of man whom I could never have loved I was beginning to like him.

Without replying to his remark about effeminacy, I smiled and got up.

“Let me take a turn,” I said.

I took the handle of the wheel from him and began to work. He sat down on the wool-sack that I had left. And even as we changed places something else changed between us.

He realized it, as I did.

“We shall be friends now,” he said very quickly and gently.

“Yes,” I nodded.

“They say — your dear ‘They’! — that there’s no such thing as Platonic friendship. Here’s the one exception,” he told me. “Where all the Love goes elsewhere. You know you think I’m utterly unattractive. But you want to listen to me. As a matter of fact, you’ll never talk to a *fiancé*, Miss Matthews, as freely as you’ll talk to me.”

“Never,” I agreed.

“ Nor shall I ever jaw like this, to Elizabeth.” . . . He broke off and said affectionately, “ You’re such a pal to her ! ”

“ She is to me.”

“ I know,” he said. “ I knew it before I saw you two girls. It spoke out of her letters to me from the flat. You know, when I got her letters, I — er — wanted to see her ! ”

“ They were mostly about the kitchen sink,” I said, laughing.

“ Yes, that’s what she told me when I told her she put herself into her letters,” said the man whom we had called “ the old Colonel ” in those days. “ Somehow I made up my mind that this girl I’d never seen would be different from — er — most girls. I came down here, you know, to look. And then — when I caught sight of her by that cart in the field — looking such a little picture ! — I could have caught her up then and there ! ”

“ I wonder you weren’t discouraged ; she was chilling enough that morning ! ”

“ No,” he denied. “ I felt she didn’t mean that. That was just the first minute when she had realized I was that distasteful creature a man, and yet that she didn’t dislike the look of me.”

“ Ah ! She’s told you she hates men.”

“ Yes, we’ve had all that,” he admitted, “ and I explained to her that I ought to understand, because, as a rule, I don’t like girls.”

Here I lifted my head and looked severely at this humbug.

"You? Not like girls!" I exclaimed.

"Not usually," he persisted, smiling at me. "I think they're too little."

"Little? But you are in love with Elizabeth. And Elizabeth's tiny!"

"Elizabeth," he repeated, and I heard him give a little laugh of delight over the name of the beloved. "Elizabeth has a heart as big as the earth! I was — er — talking of hearts, natures, minds. So often girls make me feel their minds are rather narrow," confessed this odd type of woman-hater.

"Petty, you know," he went on. "Saying — er — things about other women — oh, brrrr! Spiteful to their own sex. Then being decent and jolly enough with — er — us. *That* puts me off; by Jove, nothing worse! I can say all this to you, Miss Matthews. You're different; like her. But lots of girls make me feel they — they — Well, not enough cold tub!" he wound up ingenuously, "and too much face-powder!"

The last words brought a certain image into my mind; exquisitely-dressed, scented, powdered Muriel!

Thinking of yesterday, I said to the young man, "You're very severe on girls, but I saw you when you were flirting outrageously with one — no, not with Elizabeth. With Miss Elvey."

"To see if it annoyed Elizabeth!" he admitted, so frankly that I had to laugh over my work.

I said: “Now that was feminine enough! That was ‘little’! Anybody would have imagined that you were very much attracted. In fact, I thought you were.”

“Attracted? To Miss Elvey?” he cried out as if I’d said something too wildly improbable. “I? To her? Of all the girls on this earth?”

“Why not?” I asked, surprised. “Nearly every man is!”

“Yes, but I couldn’t possibly be — er — attracted to Muriel Elvey!” he declared, vigorously shaking that small golden head of his. “Oh, no. Not to her! I know too much!”

“You hardly know her at all. You’ve only met twice.”

“I know a great deal about her,” declared young Colonel Fielding, impressively. “Not about this girl personally, perhaps. But about her kind.”

He got up off the sack with an air of “that finishes it.”

Deeply interested, since this was Dick Holiday’s pal speaking of Dick Holiday’s lady-love, I asked: “What do you mean by ‘her kind’?”

“I’ll tell you some day,” the young man promised me, getting into his Burberry again. “I could tell you — er — yards! And I will. Only I am afraid there isn’t time just now. I promised to meet old Dick at the bridge at eleven, by Jove. I must tear myself away. Good-bye. I say, I am glad we had this — er — little talk.”

“Little talk” was good! His tongue had been going at least as fast as the shearing-wheel, or as the clipping-knife in Ivor's hand.

As he nodded to the shepherd and saluted me, I said, in a tone more cheerily friendly than I'd ever thought I should use to him, “Wait, wait; do stop a minute! This is all very well, Colonel Fielding, but when are you going to have that other little talk?”

“Which other?” he asked, standing, a graceful black silhouette, in the opening of the shearing-shed.

“Oh, you know! What a young Pretender you are, always!” I cried, half laughing. “I mean when are you going to speak about this, to her?”

He looked down, tilting his head sideways in a characteristic pose he had, lashes down, a gleam of small white teeth showing between the parted lips under the Avenue-gold smudge that he called a moustache. Oh, he was much too like a coloured advertisement for Burberry's! Still, it was Elizabeth's choice. I was thankful that she was going to be happy with it. Only, when?

He said, laughing, “What a staunch little friend you are to her! You even go as far as to — er — ask people their ‘intentions’ about her. . . . Miss Matthews, you'll be the first person we shall tell!”

Now what did he mean?

In spite of his caring, genuinely, was he going to keep his love guessing a little longer?

“Do you think,” he said teasingly to me, “that I ought to go off and bother her with this — er — on

the nail? In the middle of whatever job she's on? I don't know where she is?”

He was answered — as he deserved.

Not by me!

It was that “reserved man,” Ivor the shepherd, reputed to speak only his own language, who suddenly took us both aback.

Lifting his head from his shearing, the Welshman put in, in his pleasant up-and-down accent, “You looking for that other lady, sir? Miss Weare? I do think it is in the kitchen!”

Here was a bit of a shock.

The young Colonel and I had been chatting so freely, so confidentially! Imagining ourselves quite uncomprehended, we had literally forgotten the presence of the silent, blue-jacketed Welsh shepherd, who knelt there busily shearing, while one of us turned the wheel and both of us talked. . . . How we had talked, to be sure!

And Ivor had not only heard; he had followed the conversation!

This was what he sprung upon us now! Consternation! The blankest of awkward pauses!

Then Colonel Fielding, biting that golden morsel of a moustache, cleared his throat, turned to the shepherd, and said coldly and with as much dignity as could be lent to an obviously foolish remark, “I thought you didn't know any English?”

Ivor blinked mildly back at the officer and answered: “’Deed, I not know only very little, sir.”

“I expect you all know a great deal more than you —

er — give out, you Welsh!” declared Colonel Fielding, half-exasperated, half-amused. “That’s how you get on in the world, isn’t it?”

“Sir?” said Ivor, with a pleasant, puzzled smile.

Impossible to tell whether he understood or not! We should never know, either, how much of the talk we’d had had been eagerly taken in by him! All of it? We couldn’t exactly ask him! Colonel Fielding glanced at me with a half-humorous little shrug. The same thought struck us both at the same minute.

One thing was pretty certain. Very shortly Ivor would retail to Mrs. Ivor in fluent Welsh everything that he had understood of our English. In that gossipy little nest which was Careg, gaping for any crumb of news, it would very soon be all over the place that Colonel Fielding was to marry “that little young lady that’s working for Mr. Price”! Yes; by midday it would be proclaimed. It would run like wildfire up to the Hospital and down to the Land Girls’ Camp. Everybody would know! Before Elizabeth herself knew!

I could not help laughing at the dismayed face of young Colonel Fielding as he stood there, frowning, the wind taken out of his sails. It did serve him right! Mischievous as he was, and full of guile and wile and teasing, sheltering himself behind that pretence of shyness, he found his match in this Welshman who put up that bluff of ignorance! The game was to Ivor the shepherd, who did understand English after all. . . .

But Colonel Fielding trumped that. He turned to me

and remarked: “I am going to find her now, at once.”

And he said it in rapid French!

With which he left me to my soothing mechanical work in the shearing-shed.

I watched his figure (waisted as if he wore corsets always, though to do him justice he never did except for his masquerades) disappear across the farmyard to the red-brick house.

CHAPTER XXVII

A KITCHEN COURTSHIP

FOR the rest of the morning, turning steadily away at that wheel, I found myself wondering rather wistfully how things were going in there.

In spirit I saw the whole setting for this love-scene. Mrs. Price's back-kitchen with the big table, where she "put up" the dough for baking, set under the latticed window. The huge, hive-shaped "batch-oven" where I myself had helped with the baking last week. That oven had to be heated, early, by filling it with a stack of brushwood (some quite big boughs), setting the stack on fire, and leaving it so until the wood was powdery-ash, and the bricks of the domed oven-roof were white-hot. Then in went the loaves which Mrs. Price's tiny expert hands had shown us how to knead and to put up!

They — Mrs. Price and Elizabeth — had reached this stage of the morning's work by the time Colonel Fielding made his appearance in search of the girl he'd decided to marry.

What happened I heard something of later. (Not all.) Partly from Elizabeth, partly from him.

An odd courtship; so entirely War-time and modern! Yet going back hundreds of years; for what could be more old-fashioned than for the young man to seek his love among the warmth and the fragrance and

the homely domesticity of the kitchen on baking-day! There was little Mrs. Price in her crisp grey overall with an old ivory brooch at her throat, busy and brisk and looking with every inch of herself "a Lady" in every sense, including that of the original Saxon "Loaf-ward." There was my chum Elizabeth helping her. With her hat off and her short thick hair rumped about her small flushed face I expect she looked like a rather defiantly conscientious cherub!

To them, enter Colonel Fielding (with his blush!) telling Mrs. Price (with his usual shy charm of manner!) that he thought he'd like to come and help her, since he understood she'd got a busy day on.

Mrs. Price, demurely: "It will be a wonder if the farm doesn't prosper this year, considering the amount of help we are getting from the Army! It's very good of you, I'm sure. The bread is all into the tins now, Elizabeth? That's right; perhaps the Colonel will help you put them into the oven with this."

She gave him the immensely long-handled oven-shovel. On this Elizabeth set loaf after loaf in the tins, and he shoved one after another into the farther part of the hot oven.

Then Mrs. Price turned to get water from the pump which is set just over the spring in the scullery, and then she bustled away on one of the thousand odd jobs that await the farmer's women-folk at every turn. Or did she do it on purpose to leave those two together, working in the cosy, fragrant place?

For some minutes they were silent as a couple of

working ants. Not a sound but the scraping of that shovel against the oven-floor!

Then he began, very gently, "D'you know who I feel sorry for?"

"No," from Elizabeth, setting her last tin loaf on the shovel. "Who?"

"Er . . . People who have to get engaged in town," was his unexpected reply. "Such a beastly rush. All mixed up with — er — taxis, and catching trains and crowds of people in restaurants all watching you! Having to go to the theatre. . . . And then the lights going up, or the curtain. And people all hissing 'Ssh!' when you want to talk to the girl. Everybody jostling you. Not a bit of peace, you know. No room! No — er — time to say anything or feel anything. Don't you know?"

I can picture the Man-hater suppressing her happy little fluster at this; taking up the fruit tarts that had to go in in front of the oven, after the loaves.

Colonel Fielding's shy but deliberate voice went on: "I think one's — er — courtship ought to come in pleasant places. Where there's quiet. And nice things about. And jolly things to do. Making hay. Or . . . bread. Don't you think so?"

Of course she thought so. The fields, the farm; any girl might envy Elizabeth the scenes that set first love for her, without hurry, without artificiality or fatigue! But I expect Elizabeth only flushed deeper and deeper pink, half with emotion, half with the heat of that oven. Little bright beads of moisture had gathered about her

forehead and neck; annoyed, she brushed them away with the sleeve of her overall, hoping that he did not see.

As if anything she did would escape him now!

He moved from the oven and said thoughtfully: "I wish I could remember that quotation properly."

"A quotation?"

"Yes, something I read about the sweetest sight in the world being that of a woman baking bread, and how, even if it were in the — er — sweat of her brow, what man was there '*who would not rather kiss those drops away, than the powder from the cheek of a Duchess*'?"

Having arrived at this stage of the story as told me by Elizabeth herself, I said to her: "And immediately after this, I suppose, the young man proposed to you?"

Elizabeth then told me: "He didn't propose at all."

"What?" I cried.

"He didn't propose," repeated the Man-hater obstinately. "I did."

"You?"

"I had to," explained my little chum, glowing. "He made me."

"What can you mean, 'made' you?"

Elizabeth explained how "that quotation" had made her so embarrassed (being quite unused to these remarks from men) that she hadn't known what to say and had practically snapped the young man's head off.

She told him sharply: "The bottled currants have got to go into the oven when the bread comes out. You might help to fetch them and their tin trays out

of the scullery, instead of just standing there talking."

At that Colonel Fielding seemed positively to wither away where he stood. He looked suddenly miserable (according to Elizabeth). He said in the most unhappy voice: "Have I — er — put my foot into it again? I suppose I must have, somehow. You're angry with me, Miss Weare. I'll go."

Elizabeth begged him not to go (I don't suppose the creature had made a movement to the door), and said she wasn't in the least angry, why should she be?

The young Colonel then adopted a truly pathetic tone (I could hear it!) about his being "very unfortunate with women, who always had a down on him. Yes! They thought he was like a barber's block, and hated him. All of 'em!"

I could imagine his sidwards tilt of the head as he told the tale to Elizabeth, the boyishly-sincere.

She, blurting out "*I don't hate you!*" hurried into the scullery for a couple of those tall glass jars of fruit for bottling. He followed her, carrying more fruit and murmuring that no girl could be got to care for him; not really care!

Elizabeth said he looked more than ever like that picture "The Falconer" on her chocolate-box lid. I can imagine her adoring glance up at him!

This was in the kitchen, again in front of the oven. He had taken hold with both hands of the tray that she still held.

"I shouldn't believe it," the young villain told her, gazing into her flushed face. "Not unless I heard it

out of a girl's own mouth! Not unless she cared enough to say so first!"

Here Elizabeth broke off the story with a defiant "So you see!"

"What did you *say*?" I urged.

Neither of them would ever tell me. However! Before kind Mrs. Price returned (to see they did not repeat that old story of Alfred and the Cakes!) Elizabeth had said whatever it was.

In this proposal-scene she, the girl, had been forced to take the initiative.

That went against all my instincts; I couldn't have done that. How human beings vary! For she, strange little thing, simply loved being made to "make the running." This I didn't understand.

"*He* understood. *He's* not like that great hulking brute you prophesied for me, the one who would trample on me with policemen's seventeens! *You* thought I would be 'tamed' by somebody bullying me. *That's* not what happens to a girl like me; that's all wrong psychology," babbled my chum exultantly, while I realized that the last phrase at least must have come from him. "It's only the frilly, helpless, overfeminized weepers that admire these huge, bullying navvies with ugly faces and muscles like vegetable marrows! I'd have been safe from *them* for ever! But he's so wonderful! *He's* not a usual young man ——"

"And you're not a usual girl," I told her affectionately. "My dears! There is only one thing to be said: *you certainly have found each other!*"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE ONLOOKER

“Hélas, mon ami!

C'est triste d'éconter le chanson sans le chanter aussi.”

—BRETON BALLARD.

AS for me, I was delighted. Let one of us be happy, I thought; let Elizabeth, since I was evidently fated to be lonely!

Yes! Any love-story for me, Joan Matthews, seemed to be something quite past praying for.

Twice, now, I had fallen in love. Twice I had drawn a blank!

The first time I'd set my affections upon a philanderer (Harry Markham) who had given me every reason to think they were returned, but who probably hadn't "meant" anything, even before he deserted to Muriel.

The second time I had lost my heart to a man worth a hundred Harrys. This man (Dick Holiday) had never attempted to admire me. He was just helpful and jolly and friendly, but he'd never pretended to think of me in that other way. Yet I couldn't stop caring for him with all the best that was in me. And now he was Muriel's too; I only waited to hear when their engagement would be announced.

“Really I ought to be phenomenally lucky at cards, seeing the sort of luck I've had in Love!” I laughed at myself.

For I could still laugh; and here I must put forward something in my own defence! *I was taking the second love-fiasco very differently from my first.*

In London, over Harry's desertion, I had let go all ropes, and had fretted and wept myself into a nervous wreck.

Here on the Land, I never thought of behaving like that. I set my teeth to "stick" unhappy Love, which is a girl's equivalent for a soldier's "sticking" his most painful wound. I found I could still enjoy myself among the other girls, I could still be sympathetic over my chum's engagement. I could throw myself body and soul into the work on the farm, where the hay-harvest was now in full swing.

That work saved me, my self-respect, my spirits, and my looks from the ruin that threatens the very being of the girl who is crossed in love. How she endures that is so largely a matter of health after all. My health was now magnificent. Every day I grew fitter, more vigorous, rosier (though my nickname of "Celery-face" would persist to the end of my life here!) and more full of zest for anything that happened along. For on the Land one soon learns not only to take the rough with the smooth, but also to take plenty of interest in both.

Now, after a couple of weeks of strenuous toil, there came a promise of "smooth"; a little treat.

A note arrived for me at the Land Girls' Camp which said:

"DEAR CELERY-FACE —

"*These nice people that I work for suggest that I should ask a couple of 'my young friends' over to tea next Sunday. Will you and Mop be the young friends? They know Captain Holiday and are asking him, so I expect he will bring Mop's 'lovely Spaniard' with him. Do come.*

"Yours, SYBIL.

"P. S.—*These people think the uniform so 'picturesque,' so come in it, even if Mop does want to wear garden-party clothes for the fiancé!*"

By the way, I have not yet dwelt on the enormous excitement that blazed all over our Camp at the news that "little Mop, the Man-hater!" had actually got engaged to be married to "Colonel Fielding who was that Spanish lady at the Concert!"

That sensation could have been beaten by nothing, unless perhaps news had come that same day of the sudden and complete surrender of the whole German Army.

Anybody who has lived the communal life among girls (as most girls have in these days of Women's Service!) can imagine the whirlwind of exclamations, congratulations, questions, laughter that almost carried the newly-engaged messmate off her sturdily-booted little feet. Only, no imagination can do justice to the golden camaraderie with which that Timber-gang and those other Land-workers at our Camp took Elizabeth to their hearts. (I hoped that her *fiancé* would realize

it; for after that he could never again say that girls were usually "little" and "spiteful"! They had always liked my plucky, downright little chum. Now, they couldn't do enough for her!

Peggy, who had started an elaborately crocheted camisole-top for her own bottom-drawer, dedicated it to Elizabeth. Peggy's Sergeant Syd brought an offering of a table-centre, designed and worked by himself in the gaudiest silks with the crest of Colonel Fielding's regiment, as well as with a Land Army hat, a rake and a rifle crossed, the motto "England must be fed!" and other emblems. This was her very first wedding-present, an object that, whatever shape it takes, never fails to stir the heart of any engaged girl! But Elizabeth, who had flashes of defensiveness and of seeming to make (outwardly) little of Love and Marriage, declared that the wedding was not going to be for ages.

"The Colonel, he'll watch that," had been Vic's laconic comment.

"The earliest that it can be," Elizabeth had then announced, "is when my year is up."

"Good idea," Miss Easton, the forewoman, had pronounced drily. "But you might remember that the Secretary is able to let you have a brand-new overall in advance before the six months yours has got to go, if you want it."

"I don't want a new overall," from my chum, glancing down at her already well-worn garment. "What for, Miss Easton?"

“Lots of the girls like to get married in uniform, my dear.”

“I shan't be getting married for eighteen months at least,” had been Elizabeth's ultimatum.

“That's putting a lot of extra work on me and Vic!” the young forewoman had sighed whimsically.

For every evening now Miss Easton had a Thermos filled and a packet of bread-and-butter or rock-cakes ready for “Mop” to take after work, so that she could have her tea out with her *fiancé* in the field, where they met at a stile. (Those were the halcyon hours for them both!)

As for Vic, the big, good-natured Cockney had taken in hand the appearance of Elizabeth. Vic now “shined” her Sunday brogues, Vic saw that she always had a pair of the neatest brown stockings to wear with them, Vic ironed her smock, Vic “saw to” her armlet and badges; Vic, every evening, gave ten minutes to brushing “young Mop's” short, thick crop until it shone and floated out like raw brown silk round her face.

“Must have you looking a credit to US,” the self-constituted female batman said to her. “Remember, all eyes — such as there are of 'em here — are upon you! The girl that's going to marry the D. S. O. You jolly well reflect back on the Camp, my girl, and then some more D. S. O.'s will come round looking to see if there's any more at home like you (perhaps). You let me put your belt straight. Now, got a clean handkie? Like a drop o' Lil's scent on it? No? He

don't care for scent? All right. Now I think you're ready"—all this was just before Elizabeth and I started off for that somewhat eventful tea at the house of Sybil's employers.

"Now, young Celery-face," Vic went on, "how do you look? Yes, you'll do nicely. Of course I may be a bit more particular about the way I turn you out as soon as you get engaged. You'll be the next, I bet ——"

"I shouldn't bet much," I advised her, smiling above the little stab at my heart as I disengaged myself from Vic's kindly hands — and clothes-brush. "You'll only be disappointed. I shall not oblige you by getting engaged from the farm, Vic!"

"Oh! Why ever not, if I may inquire?"

"Largely because nobody is likely to ask me!" I answered as we left the hut.

"Ah, go on!" Vic called after me as she stood in the doorway, laughing and waving the clothes-brush. "F'rall you know, somebody's going to ask you at this Do this very afternoon!"

Now if Vic had heard the story of that Sunday afternoon-party that was coming, I expect her verdict would have been: "There! What did I tell you? Many a true word is spoken in jest!"

That afternoon witnessed my first offer of marriage — No, I had forgotten. It was not my first. My first had been by letter, that improbable-sounding sort of letter that I'd received in the Spring from the young man called Richard Wynn, and that I had tossed away

by mistake into a London County Council waste-paper bin before I'd even answered it. That was the first!

The second was by word of mouth, and it took place under the sun of early July, in one of the prettiest country gardens that ever ——

But I'll begin with the house where we were invited by these people for whom our colleague Sybil was now working.

We walked for a good two miles down a lane branching off, under trees, from the road to our farm; we came at last to a white gate and then up a drive bordered with tall flowers that flourished as they chose in the long grass. The house — which had one of those interminable Welsh names beginning with “Dol” — was long and white, striped green by creepers, and with a wide porch garlanded with heavy-headed roses.

Just to the right of the porch a long window-box filled with black pansies stood in front of an open upper window. A girl's rosy face and wavy hair peeped out; it was the daughter of the house who called to us in a voice which, though pleasant, would have made her fortune as a pilot on the Mersey, “A-hoy! How d'you do? . . . Syb — il! Here are your friends! . . . Come in, will you? Don't stop to ring; it doesn't.”

Elizabeth and I went straight into the cool, shady hall, and into the midst of one of the most welcoming and hospitable, the least conventional homes that I have ever entered.

We were greeted by Sybil's employers, the master and mistress of the house. He, an old soldier, wearing

the hearthrug-like tweeds and the mossy stockings of a country squire of that neighbourhood; she a plump and still pretty woman in spotted black and white muslin, with wavy hair like her daughter's grown grey, and with an egg-basket which she never put down, over her arm. He and she seldom stopped talking, always talked at once; generally in the form of questions.

Thus —

“My dears, won't you come and sit down? Did you walk all the way from Careg? Aren't you tired?”

“Does Miss Sybil know these young ladies have come, Mother? Can't we have some tea for them at once?”

“One of you is engaged to that friend of our friend, Captain Holiday's; is it you? No? You? Isn't that very nice? Will it be a long engage ——”

“Where's Miss Sybil?” (Enter from the back our friend Sybil, smiling, but unable to get a word in.)

“Now, where's Vera, where's that girl Violet ——”

Violet (the daughter of the house) came running down to add her voice to this family anthem.

“Hullo! Did you find your way easily? Daddy, where are the dogs? . . . Dogs!” (loudly).

“Sybil, you're not going to try to introduce everybody, are you? Why are we all standing here? Why aren't we taking these people into the drawing-room?”

We were borne along into the big drawing-room to the right of the hall. It was full of flowers and lovely old furniture and silver-framed photographs and an immense round tea-table and a cluster of other guests.

Here the sun rose again upon Elizabeth's world.

Her eyes had fallen at once upon her *fiancé*, Colonel Fielding. He was sitting there, near his friend, Captain Holiday.

What a merry tea-fight that was in the hospitable and happy-go-lucky Welsh country-house!

To sit in a dainty drawing-room amidst a cluster of strangers wearing "real" summer frocks. To see a winking bright silver spirit-kettle and a snowy cobweb cloth. To drink tea from fragile cups and to spread, with crystal-handled knives, honey upon wafer bread-and-butter!

These little luxuries we never noticed in our pre-War days. But now — Remember! It was the first time for weeks that we Land-girls had tasted such refinement!

"What a treat this all is," I remarked to Captain Holiday as he handed hot cakes in a lordly dish.

He replied: "Ah! Now perhaps you'll have an idea how fellows feel when they get out of the mud and plum-and-apple-with-chloride-of-lime up the Line, and back to Civilization for a few days' leave."

"When I got my Paris leave last year," put in the demure voice of Colonel Fielding, who had dropped into a low chair close to his *fiancée*, "do you know what was the first thing I did?"

"D'you want us to guess, my boy?" boomed the genial master of the house, who was also a Colonel.

The younger man smiled at him. "I'll tell you, sir. I ordered a great sheaf of La France roses and lilac to be sent up, with a huge glass jar to put 'em in, to my

room at the Hotel. And there I lay and looked at 'em, till *déjeuner*, because I hadn't seen a flower for months!"

The other guests then took up that never-failing topic of leave, and how some people always get it and some never; why? A question unanswerable. I thought of Captain Harry Markham, nicknamed in his regiment "The Special Leave King." But the thought of my faithless admirer could not depress me now. For the moment I was perfectly content, sitting at that gay tea-table between my motherly hostess and Dick Holiday.

He chaffed me about "a woman's ineradicable love of luxury, on the Land or off!" and I laughed, glad that I could sometimes see him thus for half an hour, without any Muriel to spoil it all.

On the other side, my hostess's questioning talk flowed on.

"You like the Farm-work, my dear?" to me. "Your people don't mind you taking it up? The Prices look after you? Perfect dears, aren't they? Has Mrs. Price had the Isle of Wight disease? Her bees, I mean? No? How's that, I wonder, when everybody else's bees in the county — oh, she doesn't keep bees? . . . When are your friend and Colonel Fielding to be married?"

"Not for a *long* time!" burst from Elizabeth, but our kind hostess went on, unheeding.

"Couldn't we arrange to have the wedding from this house? I adore weddings, don't you? . . . Vera!" to

a laughing blonde in light blue who was a niece of the house, "you haven't eaten all the light-cakes? Aren't there any more light-cakes for when Captain Holiday's cousin comes in? Dick! You did say your cousin, Miss Elvey, was coming later?"

"Yes!" from my neighbour. "She's driving up presently."

My heart sank.

Muriel Elvey was coming after all?

Even as I thought it there was a crunching of light wheels on the gravel outside. A dog-cart drove up holding khaki and the flutter of a dress.

A moment later Muriel entered. Just a bright-headed bouquet of muslin, rose-sprigged with mauve! Even as she uttered smiling greetings she made every other girl there look comparatively plain at once.

As for me, I instantly became a hopeless clodhopper sitting there in rough breeches and smock, with my thick brogues planted on the soft carpet. Awkward and out of place, all enjoyment was over for me as soon as Dick Holiday's fashionable contrast of a girl floated into the drawing-room.

The man who had driven her up came in a few moments afterwards.

To my surprise, it was Harry again! "More leave, Markham?" I heard Colonel Fielding laugh; and then Harry, "No, I just got down for the week-end."

So he had come all that way, just to be near Muriel. Oh, what it must be to have her power over men! As far as I could see, there was only one man in that

party who wasn't at her little feet as she sat coquetting now with the master of the house. Elizabeth's *fiancé* had said, "I know too much about her! I know her kind!"

What did the young Colonel mean?

However! He didn't count; being engaged, and, as Elizabeth herself said, "not a 'usual' young man."

One thing I noticed about one of the more "usual" young men there. Harry Markham was not himself that afternoon. Something was weighing on him.

I knew it! I knew his face and ways so well. Hadn't I studied them, as only a girl in love has patience to study, for a whole year?

Nobody else out of that roomful of people would detect any cloud. Harry was a young man who could "make himself at home" anywhere. He did so now. I saw everybody — except perhaps Dick Holiday, who suddenly turned silent — summing up Captain Markham as a charming fellow.

He talked pleasantly; to our host of salmon-fishing and of soldiering in the East; to our hostess of bees and poultry. Elizabeth he congratulated prettily, telling her that he (Harry) had spotted Fielding as "a man determined to win" the first time he met him. Even Elizabeth had been slightly mollified by this towards the man she'd once pronounced "a rotter!" He laughed and made himself agreeable. And only I realized that while he did so his mind was not in any of it.

Why?

I thought I guessed.

As they came along in the dog-cart he had been trying to make love to the only girl he couldn't win over at once.

Muriel had been unkind to him. What a revenge for me — if I wanted a revenge, which I didn't.

So far I guessed. But not what was coming!

CHAPTER XXIX

LOVE — AFTER THE INTERVAL

“Let this be said between us here,
One love grows green as one grows grey,
Tomorrow has no more to say
To yesterday.”

— SWINBURNE.

AT last the long leisurely tea of Sunday afternoon in a country-house came to an end.

People strayed out into the grounds, a little green and golden world of peace it was!

I heard Colonel Fielding's velvet voice murmuring “Carissima ——”

This was his pet name for his sweetheart. She called him “Falconer.” The pair of them wandered off together and disappeared with the swift and utter completeness possible only to lovers — or to small boys who are called to have their faces washed.

The others drifted towards the water-garden, or to inspect the vegetables which were Sybil's domain; Sybil, the garden-girl, was entirely one of the family here.

Muriel (of course) called to Dick Holiday to come and translate the motto on the sun-dial for her.

And then, suddenly, I found a figure in khaki with soft dark eyes under a scarlet-banded cap, edging pur-

posefully towards me in a manner that recalled a year now dead.

How often I had longed in vain for this to happen! What fruitless tears I'd shed! And now — Oh, why do people pine, after long years to see their first loves again? It is, nearly always, a mistake to meet them any more. . . . It is a wash-out!

Shakespeare's most characteristic lover puts it all in a nutshell.

“Enough, no more!

'Tis not as sweet now as it was before.”

But Harry Markham, whom I had once thought such a man of the world, had less *savoir vivre* than the Count Orsino.

“Joan,” he murmured ingratiatingly as he came up, “I haven't been allowed a single word with you —”

Presently I found myself having the “word” alone with him at the bottom of the garden, away from the others in a sheltered nook screened by a hedge of sweetpeas.

Harry always was an adept at these arrangements. Strange, to think that he should be making them again for me after all these months!

He began in a voice distinctly sentimental, “It's a long time, isn't it, since . . . last summer? Look here, there's a seat. We'll sit down.”

“Not for long,” said I, matter-of-fact. “I have to get back soon, to Camp.”

“Camp,” returned Harry, as he sat down beside me on the garden-bench. “Sounds odd to hear all

you girls talking about 'Camp' like a lot of Tommies."

"We're rather proud of being like them."

"Of course. But, I say, who are you with all day? What do you have to do?"

I answered his questions as concisely as I could. I, who used to prize every moment with him! felt I wanted to join the others!

He nodded; asked "Don't you mind having to rough it?"

"I don't call it 'roughing it' very badly, thank you. I enjoy it."

"Sporting of you," declared Harry, "but not a bit the sort of thing you used to be keen on, Joan. You've altered."

"Yes," I agreed quietly. "I think I have altered a good deal."

He sent one of those well-known glances of his from under the peak of his cap as he sat. "I needn't tell you how the life suits you, as far as looks go. I've never seen you with such a colour, and your hair's all full of those gold gleams I always thought so topping ——"

For the first time in my life that caressing voice left me cold.

"That kit is jolly becoming to you."

"Yes?" I said politely. "I thought you admired pretty frocks."

"Those suited you, too. But in this you're a young Ceres."

"I'm afraid I've forgotten what those were."

"She was the goddess of Harvest or something," explained Harry, discomfited. "Somebody outdoor and glowing and rosy, with a lovely figure, if I may say so ——"

"Why not?" I smiled at him in a friendly way.

He amused me, now. I was rather tickled to see him not quite knowing how to talk to me after this silence of months in which he'd left me without a good-bye.

I saw him like a precocious schoolboy who has been rude to somebody and who wants to apologize without losing his dignity.

And, as I say, I used to see him as the most wonderful, the cleverest mixture of a man of the world and a demigod!

To think how we can change. . . . But he imagined I was still the adoring conquest of those old days in town.

He thought I was putting up a gallant little bit of feminine bluff. He imagined that my heart was still beating as wildly as ever it did at the sound of his voice, the glance of his eyes that courted and caressed.

Gone was their magic for me! Harry Markham didn't realize that.

That want of perception helped him towards one of the biggest mistakes he was ever to make!

I, who thought I could read every sign of his handsome, rather self-conscious young face, I'd never foreseen it.

No, not even when he began by lowering his voice to its most persuasive pitch.

“Joan! You aren’t being very nice to me. You’re fed with me about something.”

“Not a bit,” I assured him.

Reproachful glance from Captain Markham. “My dear little girl ——”

How long was it since I’d thrilled to hear myself called this? Today I found it the wrong expression; I was nearly as tall as he was, after all, I thought. Also I felt rather bored with the turn that the conversation was taking.

No more flirtation for me, thanks.

“My dear little girl, d’you suppose I don’t know the difference between this and the jolly chummy times we used to have?” he appealed to me. “You’ve forgotten the day we went to Hampton Court.”

“I have not,” said I, looking away. “I remember it perfectly. We came back too late to go to the theatre, and we were so disappointed.”

“I don’t remember any disappointment,” he said softly. “I only remember . . . a perfect day.”

Of course I too remembered that the day at Hampton Court had been the first time Harry had kissed me. My face flamed with annoyance to think I had permitted this. I rose from the garden-bench. What busy centuries I’d lived through since that morning at breakfast with Elizabeth in our London flat, when the universe had been darkened for me by the news of Harry’s going! Now it had come to my turn to want

to go. Uncanny in the light of what had been, but true! The familiar figure in khaki and scarlet seemed to me that of a quiet, strange young man to whom I didn't want to talk at all.

I took a step down the grassy path. He followed me, speaking in the ingratiating manner that was second nature to him. I could not help hearing a note of insincerity in his voice now; yes, and a note of odd impatience. It was as if he'd set himself to play some part and were irritated with me because I did not play up to him.

"Ah, Joan, wait! I brought you out here on purpose to say something to you. Not about Hampton Court ——"

"No; that's all over," I assured him, meaning more than just one picnic.

"But I want to talk about you. How long d'you mean to go on with this farm-business?"

"I signed on for a year. Why?"

"What d'you suppose you'll do after that year?"

I pulled a mauve-and-purple sweetpea out of the hedge as we passed. "Who knows? Perhaps stay on the Land for good."

"A girl like you?"

"Or I might transfer into the Women's Forestry Corps later on. They'll want people for replanting the timber where all the lovely woods have been cut down. The Forester here says girls are particularly good for nursery-work; they're quick and light-footed, and don't trample down the young plants."

Harry seemed to care little about that question, though he'd surprised me by his sudden interest in my own career. This after months of forgetting my existence!

"It's all very well for you to do this in War-time," he told me. "The War, though, will be over before we're old, I hope. You can't go on tramping round filthy turnip-fields and feeding pigs and pigging it yourself in a wooden shanty with Heaven knows who!"

"I like it."

"No," he insisted, rallying. "Now your little friend, Miss Weare, has done the sensible thing. So will you. Of course you'll get married too, Joan."

"I? No," I said with unsmiling finality. "I shall not get married."

At this my old love put back his head and laughed. Then it came.

Standing there close to me on the path bordered on one side by the sweetpeas, on the other by the high garden wall with its fans of plum and apricot, he moved as if to pull himself together for a jump. He gave one very odd glance about him. That glance seemed made up of so many things: resolution, amusement, pettishness, teasing, ruefulness, a certain kindness, and triumph.

Then his eyes came back smiling to mine as he exclaimed, "Ah, darling, rot! I'll tell you something. You are going to get married. I am going to marry you myself."

I suppose no man in this world had ever made that

announcement to a girl feeling more utterly sure of his success than was Captain Harry Markham at that moment. I think no girl in this world can ever have had more difficulty than I had then in conveying to a suitor that his proposal was not to be accepted after all.

How he clung to the conviction that I could not mean what I said, that I was teasing him, paying him out!

“Paying you out? Why should I? For what?”

“Because — well, perhaps because I went away without saying anything that time in the Spring,” was Harry’s idea. “But, darling, I’ll make up for that now, see if I don’t ——”

I put up the hand that held the sweetpea. His arms that he was putting out to me fell to his sides again.

“Don’t, please don’t,” I begged him. “It’s no use. I do mean it. Honour bright, I am not just saying this to make you ask me again and again. I am not going to marry you. I do not care for you.”

His dark eyes stared blankly, as they well might. Last time they had looked deep into mine they had found adoration. And that was only a few months ago; quite a short time, as time is counted!

He muttered, crestfallen, “I thought you cared. I could have sworn it! . . . You were pulling my leg, then, all last summer!”

This from him was almost funny! But I said quite gently, “I wasn’t.”

“I believed you liked me a little then,” said Harry Markham softly. “Will you tell me that?”

Now, is it kinder to tell the man whom one no longer loves that one did really love him once, or better to let him think that he was mistaken from the first? Uncertain, I sniffed at that sweetpea and said nothing.

He lifted his head and asked quietly: “Some one else, then?”

I turned to pull another sweetpea, shaking my head as vigorously as Elizabeth could have done. After all, there was nobody else . . . that wanted me!

Harry’s voice, encouraged, said over my shoulder: “Ah, then! I could get you to like me again if you would only give me the chance, dear! Be kind to me. Look at me ——”

Unreasonably, perhaps, I felt a quick irritation over that caressing tone that held the note of insincerity as a soft flower holds a spoiling insect.

I turned to look straight at him as he asked me. I met his dark eyes. I said bluntly: “Oh! Why do you pretend like this? I know as well as you do that you don’t care for me yourself a bit!”

He gave a quick involuntary movement of surprise. The charming humbug of the Harry-type seldom gives anybody credit for seeing, never for seeing through him. Immediately he pulled himself together to look cruelly injured.

“Not care for you?” he echoed, indignantly. “Look here, I’ve always thought you one of the sweet-

est and straightest — I mean, the sweetest girl I ever met. The prettiest, too. If you knew how lovely you looked now at this minute with the sun on you! Lovely and warm-hearted and true. If you cared for any man, by Jove, he could bank on you! And he'd be the luckiest fellow in ——”

“Perhaps,” I cut him short rather ungraciously. “But I am afraid none of this that you say . . . Forgive me, but none of it rings true to me.”

“Not true? You're trying to make me out a liar?” retorted Harry heatedly. “Not true? A man doesn't ask a girl to be his for keeps, my dear, unless he's pretty serious about it. If it weren't true, why on earth should I ask you to marry me now, Joan?”

“For a reason that I have guessed,” I said steadily. I moved on to the end of the hedge, turned up the path towards the garden gate.

Harry followed. I felt that he was fuming and bewildered. He muttered: “What do you mean?”

Without looking at him I replied: “I think you're asking me to accept you because another girl has refused you too often. You want to show another girl that you don't care; that other people have jumped at you! I know that some men have married for no better reason. You proposed to me out of pique. Now, isn't that the truth?”

With the last word I stopped and faced him again. I saw his face change under my eyes.

I insisted: “You don't want to marry anybody but

the girl I introduced you to myself — Muriel Elvey!”

Slowly the scarlet flush deepened on the young man's face; his eyes wavered, left mine. Utterly abashed he looked, shamefaced, miserably embarrassed; and how much younger in his awkwardness! He was a school-boy again, caught out in some wrong-doing that put him not only in the wrong, but made him ridiculous — a thing no man can stand.

And no woman who is a woman can stand the sight of any man suffering thus! He was at my mercy and my heart melted to him. Not with the old feeling. That, once dead, no power on earth can revive. Only a new feeling filled me; real kindness towards him. Now that we could never be lovers I felt we might be friends.

Impulsively I cried, in a softened voice, “I couldn't help guessing. You needn't mind me, Harry!”

It was the first time that day that I'd called him by his name.

The trouble in his face seemed lightened by a gleam. His eyes softened as they met mine again. I suppose he saw the offered friendliness in them.

Deeply touched, he repeated boyishly, “You are decent, Joan!”

I laughed, repeating, “You needn't mind my having guessed; I shan't say anything!” I added, very gently, “Won't she have anything to do with you?”

Gloomily he shook his head; the handsome head that so many girls found irresistible. “Won't,” he said, curtly. “She's turned me down half-a-dozen times,

but I've always thought that I might . . . might get round her. Until this last time when I've seen her with this fellow Holiday, down here ——”

I had a sharp stab of remembrance. “Ah, yes. Her cousin,” I said as casually as I could.

Harry, more humbly than I had ever heard him speak, said: “He's got that fine old place and everything. My people have only the money they made. I understand her preferring what Holiday could give her.”

He concluded, huskily: “He's the fellow she will marry, I expect.”

We were fellow-sufferers in the thought, Harry and I!

With quick sympathy I laid my hand lightly on his red-tabbed shoulder.

“Poor old boy! I'm so sorry.”

“You're a little brick,” muttered Harry. Dropping his chin, he put a small grateful kiss upon my fingers as they lay on his jacket.

It was this scene that met the eyes of Dick Holiday as he turned the corner of the path, coming to see what had become of us.

CHAPTER XXX

COLONEL FIELDING DISCUSSES "THE MYSTERY-GIRL"

"I would rather scrub floors for a man than dust a table for a woman."—EXTRACT FROM PRIVATE CONVERSATION.

"But for loving, why, you would not, Sweet,
If we prayed you, paid you, brayed you
In a mortar, for you could not, Sweet!"

—BROWNING.

THIS was something I wouldn't have allowed to happen, could I have prevented it!

For Dick Holiday, of all people, to come upon me when I was having my hand kissed by Harry Markham, of all other people in the world!

Of course you see what Captain Holiday thought he had interrupted?

A love-scene!

He'd heard from me about the man who sailed for Salonika just before I left London, and that I'd joined up for the Land Army on that account. He'd tumbled to it that Harry, returned from Salonika, was "the" man. Now he saw, with his own eyes, this young staff-officer pressing his lips to the hand which I had put affectionately upon his red-tabbed shoulder.

Naturally Captain Holiday thought this meant the Happy Ending to whatever misunderstanding I and the other young man had had. In his mind I suppose he was certain that he would soon have to congratulate us!

Of course he never betrayed by one twitch of his face what he thought of what I know he must have seen.

He merely said quietly: "Ah, here you are. The others are going, Miss Matthews."

"Oh, are they? Yes, it must be getting late. Thank you so much for coming to tell me," I said hurriedly. The two young men followed me out of the garden as I made my hasty way up to the house, fuming!

What could be more annoying, I ask you, than to be so "caught out"? Especially when one couldn't possibly explain the meaning of the little incident?

I could not turn round and say to the young man behind me on the path "Captain Holiday, I hope you won't misunderstand what you saw just now. Captain Markham was kissing my hand, and perhaps it did look as if it were an illustration to a magazine love-story! But it wasn't that sort of kiss! It wasn't that sort of thing at all! He and I have never been less in love with one another. Both of us happen to be hopelessly in love with somebody else! For the first time in our lives we were feeling genuinely fond of each other in a friendly way because we were sorry for one another's love tragedies. Nothing could have been more entirely platonic!"

No. I couldn't tell him this, true as it was. For one thing, even the best and simplest and truest explanations have a way of sounding "thin." Hence the golden rule "NEVER EXPLAIN." Following it, I

reached the house with my two cavaliers and found that the whole party were gathered outside the porch waiting for us.

Our host was at the head of the horse in the dog-cart, where Muriel had already perched herself, and everybody was chattering over the great bunches of roses and sweetpeas given them by our hostess . . . it was then that I realized that Sybil's new employers must be almost as hard up as we were ourselves. For how seldom it is that the gardens of the rich spare a single petal for the flowerless guest! But here the daughter of the house had stripped even her own window-boxes of black pansies to make into a posy for me. Muriel, sitting up in the cart, called, smiling, “Are you coming, Harry? I really must get back to poor dear Mother now. But if you want to walk,” with a coquettish glance, “my cousin will drive me ——”

I saw Dick Holiday's quick step forward on the gravel. He was only too anxious, I could see, to respond to this invitation. But already Harry was before him, poor Harry! his face lighting up because his lady who refused him always could still be got to throw him a smile. . . . It was an irony of the Fate that had made so many girls ready to hang on the smiles of a man like Harry Markham. He sprang up, took the reins.

She was driven away, her flower-face smiling over her other flowers, her little hand waving gaily; Disturber of the Peace that she was!

The walking-party — amidst a buzz of kindly fare-

wells and “*come agains*” and a last call from the mistress of the house of “*you won't forget that I should love a Land-girl's wedding from here?*”—set off down the road back to our Camp.

I had been dreading the thought of a walk *à deux* with Captain Holiday; since Elizabeth would naturally stroll homewards at a snail's pace with her adored “Falconer” off a chocolate-box lid.

To my astonishment I found that I was to have this privilege! I found that somehow it was arranged that Captain Holiday was walking with Elizabeth, briskly, in front.

He didn't want to speak to me, then? I was left to follow with my chum's *fiancé*.

Colonel Fielding was remarkably nice and friendly to me for the whole of that walk. I seemed to have reached a stage when men became unsentimental and excellent friends with me. Was it, I wondered gloomily, because none of them ever fell in love with me any more? And as I chatted to Colonel Fielding of the “delightfulness” of the afternoon we'd just spent, I thought with a rueful little sigh of one young man who had been (presumably) a little sentimental about me.

Mr. Richard Wynn, who'd written to ask me to marry him! because he had liked the child I had been, seven years ago. What must he have thought of me for never even answering his letter . . . !

I didn't often remember that shadowy suitor. I forgot him again as I said to Colonel Fielding, walking

beside me, “How sweetly pretty Miss Elvey was looking!”

He looked mischievous and said: “Are you still afraid she’ll make me faithless to Elizabeth?”

“My good young man, I don’t think she’ll try.”

“Oh, no! She’d never want to,” he agreed serenely. “It never was me the young lady was anxious to marry. I know who it is all right.”

I looked at him eagerly. At last I was going to get a little light on the subject! At last I was going to hear another opinion about whether Muriel meant in the long run to say “Yes” or “No” to Captain Holiday.

I nodded towards his distant back as it turned a corner of the lane in front of us. I suggested to his friend “You mean ——?”

“Er —— of course.”

My heart felt absurdly heavy at the announcement. Had I still hoped that it could be otherwise? Silly of me!

I asked, succeeding in not sounding wistful: “Do you think, then, that she is in love with him after all, Colonel Fielding?”

Elizabeth’s young Colonel stopped on the road where we walked. He turned to me as if he hadn’t caught what I’d said. He frowned a little, and yet he was smiling under that absurdly soft golden feather of a moustache. He repeated: “In love? Miss Elvey? Of course not. Miss Elvey isn’t the kind of girl

who would ever be in love with anybody whomsoever."

I stopped too. We faced each other on that road at a dead standstill, as people do when their talk becomes more interesting to each other than their walk. I was more than eager to know exactly what this young man thought of the girl who had stolen my admirer, and who was probably going to marry the other man whom I myself admired. The girl whom all men loved and of whom all women were jealous. What was Colonel Fielding's view of her?

"You told me, the day you got engaged, that when you had time you would tell me all about Muriel's 'kind,'" I reminded him. "Tell me now."

"Oh . . . er . . . I don't know that there's so much to tell," he said, looking at me. "She's just one of the mystery-girls who seem to have everything a girl should have; looks, go, charm, laughter. But . . . er . . . Well! She hasn't got love. That power's just been left out of her composition, Miss Matthews. She's cold; she's null. She's — she's just the opposite to your little friend," his voice grew tender, "and mine."

"Elizabeth? But — except for you — Elizabeth doesn't like men. Muriel doesn't like anything better!"

He shook his head, the only man's head I'd met that seemed full of "feminine" intuitions.

"Muriel doesn't like men," he told me. "She likes

what men can give her. Attention. A good time. Admiration *ad lib.* The cachet of being seen about, queening it over them. The sense of power; the atmosphere of . . . er . . . incense. That’s what Muriel asks of men. Nothing else.”

Puzzled, I said: “I don’t understand.”

“You would not.”

“I’ve always thought Muriel a finished flirt, yet you say she’s cold ——”

“Flirts are,” declared Elizabeth’s lover. “Er . . . I’ve heard that the true drunkard dislikes the actual taste of spirits. Well! The true flirt hates the actual idea of . . . er . . . Love.”

He blushed as if with unconquerable shyness, but went on: “Do you know how the Muriel-type looks upon a kiss? As something to be got out of . . . er . . . or got over.”

“I wonder,” said I.

“I know,” said he. “Plenty of them, the Mystery-girls.”

“Why ‘Mystery,’ Colonel Fielding?”

“Because it is a mystery why they’re made like that. Avid for what they call ‘a good time’—they who can’t *taste* the real good times!”

“You mean the times like — like that tea we had in the hayfield; that lunch of your mother’s with her old love.”

—“And so forth. Yes . . . Ah, how they surround themselves with every outward sign of ‘a good time,’

how they swallow them up into that *gap* that can never be filled in their hearts. I remember one Mystery-girl — but I'm talking too much."

"No, no! Tell me about her."

"Well," said my new friend, "she was one of them, but not like Muriel; a nicer-natured girl altogether, married, and a topping little mother. She said to me once with all her soul in her pretty eyes, 'D'you know, the two wishes of my heart, Colonel Fielding? One is a pearl string down to *here*. The other is about ten silver-fox skins made into a stole.' I looked at her (she was a picture). I said, 'What rum things to choose for hearts-wishes!' She said, 'Beautiful things?' I said, 'Well, easy to get, anyhow.' She said, 'Very expensive!' I said, 'Not they! *They* only cost . . . money.' We both meant what we said. She was sweeter than Miss Muriel, too. Some of them aren't even as sweet. But all of them remind me of those — er — gaily-coloured flowers — without scent. If I like them, I'm sorry for them. If I don't like them, I'm sorry for the Race. Give me the palest musk-rose . . ."

From his face he was thinking again of his Carissima. . . . She meant all sweetness to him.

I said: "But men swarm round those others!"

"Yes; didn't I tell you the other day how weak the average man is on Love? He's all for the lovely . . . er . . . shell of the Mystery-girl. He adores to be tantalized and baffled by it . . . because he doesn't

know what that means, until he’s . . . er . . . married and tied to it for life.”

“And then?” I asked.

“Then he thinks Love must have been overrated by . . . er . . . these fiction-writers. Or he imagines that he’s quite happy, because no one seems to think he isn’t. Or the Muriel ‘pretends’ to love him and he doesn’t know the difference, because he ‘*never, even in dreams, has seen the things that are more excellent.*’ Er . . . I do talk too much, Miss Matthews; I bore you.”

“Indeed you do not,” I said. “All the week I have heard nothing discussed but the feeding of the two baby-calves, and the butter-market. Even the most enthusiastic farm-worker likes to go back to the problems of other lives sometimes.”

“Still, you look as if I’d . . . er . . . depressed you.”

“Oh, no,” I protested. But he had depressed me. If his theories about Muriel were true, she would never make Captain Holiday happy! Wasn’t this enough to sadden me?

In his quick, unmasculine way Colonel Fielding seemed to read my thoughts.

He said: “She — Miss Muriel — has an eye to the main chance. She simply must have the things that people who’ve got . . . er . . . love can afford to do without. She covets that lovely old country-house that’s been turned into a hospital. It’ll be turned back

some day. I really think she'd like to see herself mistress of it. Up to now I expect she's hit everything she's aimed for. But . . ."

He paused and smiled, a curious, encouraging smile, at me.

He went on: "I don't think ——"

He paused again before he uttered the very last words that I expected to hear coming out of his mouth.

"I don't think she's going to get our friend . . . er . . . Richard Wynn."

"What?" I said, sharply. "Colonel Fielding, what made you say that?"

He opened his eyes at me. "Say what?"

"You said 'Richard Wynn.' What has he got to do with it?" I asked, stupefied. "Do you know him? Because I do, and I ——"

"Know him?" The young man looked at me as if I'd gone mad. "Know Wynn? Holiday?"

I gasped. "You said 'Richard Wynn,'" I repeated. "Did you mean to say Captain Holiday?"

Elizabeth's *fiancé* was still gazing upon me in bewilderment. Then he uttered these further strange words; words that took me more aback than any I'd heard since I was a child reading *The Arabian Nights* by the firelight that criss-crossed my schoolroom ceiling with the giant shadow of the wire fireguard.

He asked: "Miss Matthews, do you mean to say that you didn't know Dick Holiday and Richard Wynn were . . . er . . . the same person?"

CHAPTER XXXI

A FEW FACTS ABOUT RICHARD WYNN

“Look in my face, my name is Might-Have-Been.
I am also called No-More, Too-Late, Farewell.”

— ROSSETTI.

SENSATION!

In fact, of all the many thunderbolts that had fallen upon me since I had been working on the Land, this (as Vic would say) had cleft it.

Blank bewilderment was my first feeling.

My next feeling was, curiously enough, that I wasn't surprised after all.

I thought “I knew it all the time! All the time at the bottom of my mind I felt that there was something of the kind . . .” And swiftly my thoughts flew back to that day on the hillside when I had been feeding Mrs. Price's chickens.

That was the first time that I had seen Captain Holiday out of khaki.

As I'd caught sight of his light figure in those ancient tweeds and that disreputable scarecrow's hat I had at once sensed something familiar. Through the mists of forgetfulness a gleam of recognition had struggled, and I had actually asked: “Isn't your name Richard Wynn?”

He'd denied it ——— No. He had put me off with

“My name is Holiday, you know”; leaving me wondering why I had asked such an idiotic question.

And now, weeks afterwards, here was this friend of his letting it out casually that the young man's name was both Holiday *and* Richard Wynn!

What was the meaning of this? Why did he — A hundred questions crowded into my mind. Other questions chased each other over the face of Colonel Fielding as he looked at me. We were standing as if turned into a couple of milestones on that country road, the bright evening sunlight dazzling our eyes. There wasn't time for more than a very few of these questions. I couldn't monopolize Elizabeth's *fiancé* for the rest of the evening! Yet I had to get in my questions first.

Quickly pulling myself together and collecting what senses seemed to be left to me, I began:

“Colonel Fielding, what you've just told me is a great surprise.”

“Er — so it seems,” returned Colonel Fielding, still regarding me in a puzzled manner. “I say, I am sorry if I have . . . er . . . dropped any sort of brick. It just slips out sometimes. I mean, calling old Dick ‘Wynn’ instead of ‘Holiday,’ even now. One ought to be quite accustomed to his being ‘Holiday’ by this time. It's . . . er . . . five years since he took the name, isn't it?”

“Don't ask me,” I returned, bewildered. “I didn't know he'd ‘taken’ any name at all.”

Colonel Fielding glanced at me again as if he wondered whether I had got a touch of sun, and said:

“But I thought you were . . . er . . . quite an old friend of his? And when you said just now that you knew him as Richard Wynn ——”

“This is going to be very difficult to explain,” I exclaimed, helplessly. “But we can’t stand here till ten o’clock. We’ll talk going along.”

We went on walking slowly along the road; Elizabeth having disappeared with that other young man and his two names.

I went on: “Why did he ‘take’ the name of Holiday?”

“Why, because his uncle wished it,” was Colonel Fielding’s reply, still in that voice of not being able to make out why I didn’t know all this already. “You did know — didn’t you? — that his . . . er . . . uncle was that old Mr. Holiday who owned all the property about here; the white house, the lodge, the Prices’ farm, and all the lot?”

“Yes, I’d heard that.”

“Well, about five years ago this old man, who was a hardened old . . . er . . . bachelor, thought he’d like to leave his property to his favourite nephew, who happened to be our friend. Dick was then in Canada. Did you know he’d gone in for ranching in Canada?”

“Yes, I knew ‘Mr. Wynn’ had,” said I.

“Well! The condition was that he wasn’t to be ‘Mr. Wynn’ any more. He was to assume the name that went with the property. It’s . . . er . . . often done; by deed-poll, as they call it,” explained Colonel Fielding, as if to a child. “You pay — I forget how

much, and then you have it in the *Gazette* and the *Morning Post* and things that your name isn't Smith any more, but Jones or Robinson or . . . anything you choose. You understand that?"

"Oh, yes! I've heard about such a thing before, thanks!" I laughed a little impatiently. "It isn't that that I don't understand. It's about Mr. Richard Wynn ——"

"Richard Holiday now," Colonel Fielding corrected me. "Well! He stayed in Canada until this . . . er . . . war broke out. And then . . . Am I just to run over what happened to him, Miss Matthews?"

I reddened a little at having to seem eager to hear all I could about this young man, who was nothing to me. . . . Yet how could I help being eager? I loved him. And I knew so little about him; only the little that I had seen. I must hear, from his friend, all that he would tell me of Dick. . . . Whether Wynn or Holiday, his first name would remain the dearest on earth to me!

"Please," I said.

So Colonel Fielding's lady-like voice took up the tale. "Dick Holiday came over with that first lot of Canadians, I think they were. 'Little Black Devils'—you know the badge? So do the . . . er . . . Boches! It was Salisbury Plain for him that winter . . . er . . . mud and circuses! Then France at last; and Ypres. There he was wounded and gassed ——"

"And gassed!"

“Yes, and . . . er . . . why he didn’t get his commission on the field I can’t tell you. He earned it all right, as well as his Military Medal.”

“I’m sure he did!”

“Then I met him in hospital; hadn’t see him since we were at Haileybury together,” went on Colonel Fielding. “Then we both got out again together. Then he was wounded again . . . er . . . badly, in the knee. Also shell-shock. That was last winter. He did get his commission then. They brought him home and put him on . . . er . . . what they called ‘light’ duty at home for a bit. It meant he had to do the office-work of three . . . er . . . men at Millshott Barracks ——”

“Ah!” I cried involuntarily. A detail that had escaped me for months sprung vividly up in my consciousness at last. “*Millshott!*” That had been the name of the barracks stamping the notepaper of that letter — that fated letter signed “RICHARD WYNN.” . . . Why, why in the name of everything that I most coveted now had I not answered that letter at once? I might have had him. I might have had him. . . .

Little guessing my thoughts, Colonel Fielding went on with his biographical sketch.

“At Millshott Dick had a breakdown. Er . . . not to be wondered at, if you knew half he’d been through ever since the . . . er . . . Somme. It was when he was in hospital that that uncle of his died suddenly. That meant he had come in for all this place here. So when Dick was put on sick leave, it was . . . er . . .

down here that he came." Colonel Fielding gave a sort of little comprehensive gesture about the slanting Welsh landscape, with the blonde squares that meant hay-stubble tilted halfway up the sides of the hills. "And . . . er . . . here he is. He's ever so much better, of course; pottering about the . . . er . . . farm, and all that, suits him down to the ground. He looks practically . . . er . . . himself again. . . . Er ——"

Here the young Colonel broke off and glanced at me, almost as if he were asking the question, "Is there anything else that you want to know?"

I answered that glance by saying, quietly, "Thank you so much for telling me all this. There is only one more thing ——"

"Yes?"

"All that I said was in confidence," I told him, rather confused. "My being surprised about . . . those names. My asking you any questions. I can't explain, Colonel Fielding. Only, it will remain between ourselves."

"But of course!" agreed Dick Holiday's friend, very quickly and quietly.

I am sure I don't know what he thought. I don't know what he said later to Elizabeth, who, surprised at her lover's long desertion, was waiting just outside the entrance to our Camp. I don't know if Elizabeth wondered over the interminable conversation which I seemed to have been having with her Beloved all the way back from the tea-party.

I did not tell that good little chum one word of what it had all been about. I — who had unbosomed myself to her in the old days on the subject of my love-affair until she was sick of the very name of Harry! — did not feel that I could confide to her a syllable about these new developments in the *affaire* Richard Wynn. No! I didn't want to speak to her about him or about Muriel! I didn't want to confide in her the quite staggering news that Harry Markham had proposed to me in the garden; nor what I'd said to him, nor why!

By the way, I am afraid every thought of poor Harry and his perplexities had been swept clean out of my mind by the much more staggering conversation that had followed almost immediately upon his proposal, on that never-to-be-forgotten Sunday afternoon; what an extraordinary "Day of Rest" it had turned out!

But, as every Land-girl knows, the most paralytically interesting Day Off cannot stop the relentless return of the Work-a-day Week.

CHAPTER XXXII

BUTTER-MAKING — WITH ACCOMPANIMENT

“There grows a flower in our garden
Men call it Marygold,
And if you will not when you may
You shall not when you wolde.”

FOLK-SONG.

ON Monday I was churning again for dear life as if I had no thoughts of a world beyond that of the big, cool, whitewashed dairy with its slate floor, its table set with pudding-dishes in which fresh cream was standing, its tall, covered, red-and-black crocks holding two gallons of sour cream for the butter.

Helped by Mrs. Price, I tipped the sour cream into the big brown barrel-shaped churn; I added the hot water; I gave a few turns to the handle of the churn. Then I took the bung out of the hole to let the air escape, having been warned, the first day of my churning, by an alarmed cry from the farmer's wife: “Let the air out! The air out! Mercy! The girl will burst the churn for me. Don't you know it's like you have to hold a baby up when he's halfway through feeding? Don't you ever forget that again, my dear!”

I did not forget again; and now the whole process

was familiar to me of that homely miracle of butter-making.

Round and round went the handle — not violently and spasmodically, as in my early days of setting about any job, but rhythmically and steadily. Oh, yes, I'd learnt my lesson of letting "things do themselves"; never again would I imagine that violence meant strength, any more than one need suppose that some one speaking in a loud voice must be talking sense! It was Dick Holiday who had first taught me that, and had taught the principles of handling anything, whether it was spade or churn . . .

Round and round . . . I glanced at the tiny glass "window" of the churn. No. Not yet was it crowded with any little yellow granules that announce that the butter was "coming." Today the butter was obstinate.

Round, and *round* . . . In my head, too, words that had haunted me began to go round and round.

"Dick Holiday . . . Richard Wynn . . . Dick Wynn . . . Richard Holiday . . ."

I thought, "Am I to let Captain Holiday know I've found out that he is Richard Wynn?"

My first answer to this question of my thoughts was a vigorous "Yes."

I decided, mentally, "Yes, I'll tell Captain Holiday that I know all about it. After all, he has been pulling my leg ever since I met him! All the time I've been on this farm he has known that I am Joan Matthews, the girl to whom he wrote that letter signed by

his other name! And he's never allowed me to know that he was the man who wrote the letter. It will make him look awfully foolish when I tax him with it. Serve him right! I shall tell him, just to be able to have the laugh over him for once!"

And I went on churning after another glance at the little window; no sign of a crumb of butter on it yet. Patience! Churn away. . . .

The butter wasn't coming; but a fresh thought came.

This was a "No" as vigorous as my "Yes" had been.

"No! I can't tell him," I mused. "If I did it would seem like reminding him that he did, under the name of Richard Wynn, ask me to marry him. It would seem as if I were dropping hints that he might try again. Begging him, now that I knew him, to ask me a second time. Oh! horrible thought. For it isn't me he wants to marry now. It must be since the Spring that he's fallen in love with his cousin. I'd far better go on, pretending not to know that he's ever been called anything but Holiday!"

Round and round. . . Still no butter! Mrs. Price would say it was a sign that my sweetheart wasn't pleased. I, who had no sweetheart to please, must work patiently still. . . .

Another thought —

— Will you forgive this chapter for being so much about just my meditations? There are times in one's life when thought brings about changes as big as any

act could do. One of these times came to me in that spotless cool dairy, with me flushed and hatless, toiling at that churn.

— It swung back to “Yes” again.

“I must tell him,” I mused. “I never answered his letter. How rude that must seem to him! He said not to write if he were not to come. But a letter demands a line just to say it’s been received. I must at least explain to him why ——”

I checked myself, remembering.

“Of course I have explained to him already! That day we were feeding the chickens on the hillside! I told him the whole story of the letter I’d had from a young man who reminded me of him! Why, I can hear Dick Holiday’s voice as he barked at me ‘Threw the letter away? You can’t have thrown it away!’ . . . To think that it was his letter! Anyhow, he heard then, without my knowing what I was explaining, what became of his address!”

Here I changed hands without stopping the churn in the way that I was taught by Mrs. Price.

I thought: “He knew everything, did he? I’ve a good mind to let him know that I know now as well!”

Then I thought again: “I would, if there weren’t any Muriel in the case. Muriel stops it all . . .”

And then desperately I thought, still churning busily: “Why does everything happen to me when it’s either too soon — or too late? I fell in love with Harry, but by the time he proposed to me it was too late. Dick wrote to ask me to marry him, but it was

too soon. I hadn't seen what he was like now. Ah, if I'd known! If I could have foreseen! Wouldn't I have written off by return of post to tell him he might come and see me!"

I sighed. "Too late. He doesn't want to, now. Ah, if he did!"

Then without warning or reason there flashed into my mind the queerest thought of all. "Supposing he does want to? Supposing all this about Muriel is a mistake? Supposing it's me he does care for all the time?"

I said aloud, "What lunatic rubbish!" and bent to look once more at the window of the churn.

Hurray! A few precious golden granules were forming on the glass. The butter was coming at last. Cheers! Much encouraged, I went on making the big churn spin round and round.

And as I did so, that lunatic theory spun in my head. Yes! Suppose Dick Holiday-Wynn did care for me. Hadn't he sought me out, followed me, taken the keenest interest in everything I did or said? Hadn't he confided in me? . . . Ah! That story of the girl to whom he'd proposed, and who had said neither "Yes" nor "No" to him! Why had I made so sure that this had meant Muriel? Supposing it had been . . . me? Supposing this had been his way of telling me?

Here a change in the sound of the milk in the churn, dashed round and round, warned me that the butter

was "knocking." I churned with a will, and with a memory suddenly warming my heart.

That day of the thunderstorm in the hayfield, when we had sheltered together under the elms! Hadn't he said "Dear" to me? Had he meant it?

There was a possibility, a wonderful, dizzy, blissful possibility that ——

"How's that butter, Joan?" asked a bright voice that brought me abruptly back from possibilities to facts as Mrs. Price stepped quickly into the dairy and up to the churn. "Yes! That's it, now, my dear ——"

For we had unscrewed the round lid and taken it off the churn.

Yes; on the top of the butter-milk, with its rich and poignant smell there floated what might have been the golden ball cast by the Princess of the fairy-tale into the fountain. It was accomplished, that homely miracle on which town-dwellers have been used to waste never a thought.

England's butter!

For years English people took butter for granted. Pre-war butter was just something that came out of a shop and appeared as if automatically in silver dishes with parsley about it. They never inquired what journeys it had made before ever it reached that shop; whether from Wales, Ireland, Holland, or Denmark. It was there; it happened. ("Pass the butter, please.") Carelessly they spread it between hot toast

and strawberry jam; casually they left it in unwanted pyramids at the sides of their plates. In kitchens they cast it in lumps into pans that concocted sauces; they kneaded it by the fistful into rich cakes. They smarmed it on to the fur of petted cats so that the creatures, licking it from their coats, need not stray. Some of us can even remember laying "wobs" of it (the size of a week's ration) on the school-room linoleum and thus organizing slides for flying feet in Blake-ily protected school-boots. Only at nursery tea-tables, perhaps, was the warning ever heeded "Now, then! Waste not, want not!"

We have paid for our extravagant waste of other things besides butter. . . .

And nowadays perhaps more interest is taken in the process that produces such butter as is allowed to us. As carefully as one who grades yellow amethysts I tipped up the churn, let the butter-milk run out into the appointed crock, and washed, with cold spring water, every granule of my precious butter off the lid of the churn. I collected it in a milk-white wooden bowl with more water; I worked it with that scoop which Mrs. Price called the "Llwy-y-menyn," a spade-shaped thing, carved out of a single piece of pear-wood and having a flat round handle with a simple design for printing the pat. The farmer's wife told me it was more than a hundred years old; how strange to think that more than a century ago — in the year perhaps of Waterloo! — some clever hand

had cut and carved the tool which was to do its tiny "bit" in the war for England's food!

I wielded it happily today, with that daringly happy thought still warm at my heart.

"Salt, Joan," said Mrs. Price, handing me the wooden box. I added the salt; worked the butter again, then put it aside in its corner. I had to leave it for a night to set.

And my thoughts were left, as it were, to set also.

For two days I heard and saw nothing of the Lodge party. By this time I had made up my mind how I should behave to Captain Holiday, alias Richard Wynn, next time that I saw him. I should observe him closely. I should take my courage in both hands. I should say to him: "Captain Holiday, I want to speak to you. Do you know, I don't think it is quite fair to make half-confidences to one's friends! If you confide in them about a given subject you ought to tell them the whole of the story. Not begin — and then leave off midway. For instance, you began weeks ago to tell me the story of that girl who wouldn't say whether she would marry you or not. And you don't tell me how that story is getting on! You simply say 'Good-morning' and ask me questions about myself. I should like to know about your affair, since you did allow me to hear that there was one. And now that the girl is here in Careg ——"

Here I meant to break off. Or rather, here I knew that Captain Holiday would interrupt in his brusquest

tone. He would be quite certain to say "The girl here? What d'you mean by that?"

I intended to answer: "Oh! I'm so sorry if I have said the wrong thing! But I was quite certain that you meant me to guess who 'THE' girl was! I thought it was the one who is staying with her mother in your house now. But if I've said anything I oughtn't to have said, Mr. Wynn ——"

Here I'd intended to break off again. I should not need to emphasize the "Mr. Wynn." I'd just let it drop perfectly casually. He would rise to it all right!

He would say, or snap, or bark "How did you know I had another name?" And I could take it quite lightly by saying "Oh, doesn't everybody know that?"

After which, I thought, it would be his turn to be hopelessly puzzled. He would wonder if I'd known ever since I had been on the farm. . . . He'd ask questions, he'd give himself away, he'd show me what he meant! That was what I wanted! To know what he did mean, whether it was about Muriel Elvey or me or both of us. And now I should find out and put an end to all this hectic suspense.

I had got it all planned by the Wednesday of that week.

But alas for all human plans! Especially those which have anything to do with what one is going to say to young men. I ask any girl who reads this story to bear me out. One never says what one thought one was going to say so effectually. These

brilliant conversational openings are not given. These happy retorts do not come off. Nothing occurs that one had hoped.

Only the unexpected happens; if that. For what did I hear, on the Thursday of that week, about Captain Holiday?

Why, that I was not to see him at all.

He had left Careg. He had gone away!

CHAPTER XXXIII

“OUR” GERMANS

“The Stranger within my gates,
He may be evil or good,
But I cannot tell what powers control —
What reasons sway his mood;
Nor when the Gods of his far-off land
May re-possess his blood.”

— KIPLING.

GONE away!

The news was given to me by Elizabeth, who had it from her *fiancé*, Colonel Fielding.

His friend and host, Captain Holiday, had gone up to London to attend a medical board; also he had business which might keep him away for some time.

He'd be away for weeks!

A great blankness fell upon me, and when it lifted I felt that I had been pushed rudely out of my fool's paradise.

Care for me? Of course, he couldn't care for me. Men don't go away without a single word of good-bye from girls of whom they care at all. I had an example of that in Harry. He and Captain Holiday cared for me about equally! That is, not two straws!

I had been a lunatic to delude myself into the belief that I was the girl of whom Dick Holiday had held forth to me — “Just the girl I want!”

Not Joan Matthews! No, no, Muriel Elvey was the

girl he'd meant all that time. Yes! I was now once more miserably certain of that, in spite of all that Colonel Fielding had said.

“Men,” as Elizabeth declares, “are such poor judges of what girl another man might want to marry!”

Meanwhile Mrs. Elvey and her daughter were still ensconced at the Lodge, where they were to stay, it seemed, until their host returned. I heard all the news about them, for “you know what gossips men are,” says Elizabeth, “men who pretend that we have the monopoly of this fault!”

It was Colonel Fielding who hinted to Elizabeth — who told me — that he fancied those ladies were glad of a comfortable little country place whereat to stay on the cheap now that they had let their London maisonnette. He had an idea that a good deal of Mrs. Elvey's money had gone, lately, in one of the many commercial enterprises that the war had brought down and down.

Which was another reason why pretty Miss Muriel would be glad enough to hook (if she could) a cousin who was also a landed proprietor! Obviously she meant to stay on while there was the ghost of a chance of her being asked to stay for good!

These comments were not mine, by the way, but more of Elizabeth's *fiancé's* opinions. Really that young man had as broad a streak of what is called “feminine cattishness” in his composition as any girl that ever I met!

Still, for those weeks before the harvest, he was the only channel for me to a world that held Dick Holiday. It was through him that I heard that the medical board had decided that Captain Holiday's nerves required another six weeks' rest before he returned to light duty again.

He remained away.

The only gleam of silver to this black cloud for me was that he remained away, not only from me, but from Muriel as well.

Wasn't this rather curious?

Then I decided that perhaps he was giving Muriel time to make up her mind about him while he was away. Perhaps he clung to that hoary-headed, white-whiskered, mendacious old theory that "absence makes the heart grow fonder."

By the time a heart is already involved it is too "fond" to admit of any change! So I found out to my cost. And if there is no heart in the case, as Colonel Fielding declared, how can it "grow" anything at all?

Muriel would remain whatever Muriel was.

I had a note from her one day, scented with her special perfume, to ask me and Elizabeth to come up to tea at the Lodge "as she found that we were able to go out to tea on Sundays."

Elizabeth went. I made a polite excuse and stayed under the trees outside the hut with Vic.

The fact was I felt I just couldn't bear my first sight of The Lodge, Dick Holiday's bachelor abode,

to be shown to me as a frame for the picture of Muriel, sitting there in his easy chair, pouring out tea for his friends out of his teapot, offering light cakes that his old housekeeper had made, ringing his bell, behaving altogether as if everything that was his were already hers — himself included.

This would happen. I felt it! But I didn't — oh — I didn't want to have it rubbed in before the time!

So I stayed away and tried to cultivate a philosophical attitude of mind. A hundred years hence it would all be the same, whether Dick Holiday had married his pretty cousin, or whether I had taken the chance that once was mine, and had written to say “Yes” to Richard Wynn!

Further, it didn't matter to England (who must be fed) whether one of her Land-girls was blissfully happy or was unlucky in love. But it did matter that her harvest should prosper and should be brought safely in.

This last question was one that weighed very heavily, those days, on the mind of that gentle giant, our employer, Mr. Price.

I used to meet him striding over the land on those stilt-long legs of his, or leaning over gates and contemplating the big stretches of gold that were the cornfields, with his grey tweed cap pushed a little to one side over a frown of thoughtful anxiety between those ingenuous, intelligent blue eyes of his.

But that frown would always give place to a smile

for any of his workers that he encountered, and a
“Well, fine day again today. Beautiful weather it is, really! Let us hope it keeps up for another ten days, and then we shall do all right, if only ——”

Ah, that was the cause for anxiety!

“If only we had a few more to help with us, now, to bring it in!”

“Mr. Price, we'll all work,” I assured him one morning, “like two!”

“Indeed, I know that. You are doing splendidly,” he said kindly. “But you can't do more than flesh and blood, after all! And, dear me!”— he pushed the cap yet further to one side —“when I think —— Now, this farm is only just under a thousand acres.” His blue eyes swept the green-and-rusty-gold view of it.

“Sixty acres I used to have under corn,” he went on, “and now what have I got? One hundred and fifty! I wouldn't have believed it if you'd told me in 'Fourteen. And then I had all the men. Even then we considered we had a big enough job on at harvest time. But now —— Who is there? Myself and Ivor and the soldier-substitute, and ——”

He went off murmuring to himself, shaking his tweed-capped head in a worried way over the problem that gave him more than three times the work he had known before the war, but to be done by one-fourth of the staffs that had been his in peace-time!

All over the country, as we knew, that problem stared the farmers of 1918 in the face.

We Land Girls were doing our bit towards helping to solve it. Yes! Elizabeth and Vic and I, with all the other Vics and Dorises, the Aggies and Jeans, and Gladyses, and Eileens of Britain. But even so there were not yet enough of us trained and able to cope with the problem. We were ready to give all our time, and all our strength, and all our good-will.

But all the good-will in the world does not turn a woman, however much else she can accomplish, into a creature that can do a man's day's work in the harvest-field. Ask the farmers, who have nothing but praise for their loyal Land Girls.

They will tell you, as Mr. Price would, that we have been splendid, that we can milk, tend stock, clean out sheds, drive the motor-tractors, carry out the jobs of which there are never any end about the farm, and take the places of the farm-boys now at the Front with the utmost credit to our sex, but ——

But it still takes the strength of two of us to do the work of one of them.

More workers, still more workers, needed on England's harvest! Every day the corn ripening that should feed England; every day the boats going down by means of which England was to be fed!

Do you wonder that my own private worries sank into the background for a space? I was surprised to find that the thought of Dick Holiday could be kept well at the back of my mind; and that I could even stop myself from grieving fruitlessly over the bitter-

ness of the idea that he might have been mine, and from sentimentalizing over my (very vague) memories of him as a lad of nineteen at my home.

I was "seriously wounded" in the love-fight. But I could keep myself well in hand. I reflected that now I knew why men take their love disappointments in a more balanced way (at least outwardly) than women were wont to do. Men have not only work, but more interesting work with which to fill their baffled hearts. As a result of our taking to these jobs, perhaps there would now be fewer women in the world who would allow themselves to be warped and blighted by unhappy love affairs.

At least it was something to hope for! thought I, turning from my own problem to that of the farmers.

The solution came — at all events to Mr. Price and some of his friends in the neighbourhood.

One smiling morning, as Elizabeth, Vic, and I tramped to work along the lanes, the solution overtook and passed us.

It took the form of a big dray drawn by two grey horses and driven by a rather pale-faced young sergeant in khaki with one empty sleeve; on this dray sat comfortably a group of six or seven men not wounded at all, apparently, wearing grey coats and dark trousers patched with big ovals of scarlet and bright blue cloth. On their heads they wore — all except one of them — small round caps having red bands and a button in the front. They were blond, sunburnt, heavy-look-

ing; and they turned an inquiring stare upon us as the dray went by.

With one voice Vic, Elizabeth and I exclaimed involuntarily:

“Germans!”

German prisoners to work on the farms were the answer to a problem serious enough.

But this answer brought other complications, as I will tell you.

* * * * *

Of those German prisoners, four were to be employed upon Mr. Price’s farm.

One of the four was the man I had noticed as not wearing the red-banded military cap, but a sailor’s, having the name of a German man-o’-war on the ribbon. All four, who came from the prison camp outside “the town,” were to be brought every morning to work, and taken away every evening by the dray that came to pick them up after it had called for their comrades, who had been taken to work upon another farm about a couple of miles away.

Sybil’s employers had also taken one of them, and some other people near had asked for one.

Shortly a new topic of conversation in the neighbourhood was supplied by “our German prisoners.”

“Good workers they are, that nobody can deny,” was Mrs. Price’s verdict.

Unanimous was the chorus of praise for the way those fellows went at it, and the amount they’d get

done in a day; a lot more than our own chaps, by George! (said some), and how quiet they were, and conscientious, and well-behaved! No trouble did they give; none whatsoever!

"A Godsend to the farmers, they're going to be," pronounced Mr. Price at the dinner hour one day when the corn was still in cutting. The noise of the motor-tractors filled the country as if with the hum of a hundred giant locusts, while the sheaves fell in lines behind the cutter-and-binder. In one field the Germans were setting up the sheaves in fives.

"What we should do without those boys presently I don't know," declared Mr. Price from his end of the table. "I'm sure we ought all to be very grateful to them!"

"What? To them dirty Huns?" This exclamation burst from Vic as she sat heartily devouring suet-pudding at my side. "Grateful to them, Mr. Price?"

Indignation flushed the handsome, sunburnt, Cockney face that she turned upon our employer.

Mildly his blue eyes met her scandalized dark ones.

"Why not, Vic?" he asked.

"Why! I should think it's they who ought to be jolly well grateful to us," retorted Vic warmly, "for allowing 'em to be alive at all, once we got hold of 'em. After all they done!"

"Huh!" she continued. "Why I can't pass the gang of 'em working in the fields there without thinking, 'Yes! There you are, my lads! It's cost us Lord knows how many of the best to take you, and

there you are alive and jolly in the nice fresh air, working just as you've a mind to, having everybody as decent as pie to you. It's a *woman* they ought to have as Commandant, not a soft-hearted man!”

The gentle giant continued to look mildly across the table at this indignant one. I could see that he could not understand her outburst on this subject. Those four men in his field there — they were Huns, yes, but captured Huns. Fighting no longer against us. Working for us. No longer enemies of ours. They were helpless and in our hands, and we could not be hard upon them! This was how it appeared to him. And his whole, kindly, home-worshipping Welsh heart spoke in his simple answer to Vic's tirade.

“Poor boys,” he said. “Far from their homes!”

I spoke up here. “Plenty of our own boys are as far from theirs.”

“Yes,” put in Elizabeth. “And are they being treated by the Germans one-half as decently as these are being treated by us, do you suppose?”

“Not likely!” with much feeling, from Vic. I knew she'd had a special “boy” who had been a prisoner in Wittenberg during that relentless first winter of the war. He had died of it, Vic's young corporal of the London Regiment.

Other women seem to have forgiven the enemy those horrors of deliberate starvation, cold, dirt, and disease, which destroyed their sons or sweethearts, but not Vic Jelks, the Cockney Land Girl, whose motto is “keep smiling” above the sorrow which was too proud

to wear any black. Vic is one of England's woman-folk who do not forget.

“Indeed some of these Germans seem quite as decent as our own men,” Mr. Price urged. “Why, the other day when I was away selling that horse, I was hearing about some old farmer in Merionethshire who has a German prisoner living in and working. Now the farmer's only son is a prisoner of war in Germany, working on a farm.

“Talking to the German one day about where his home was, what do you think the farmer found out? Why, that it was the father of his German that had got his (the farmer's) son working for him! And what was the end of it? The German prisoner wrote home to his people. ‘Be kind to your Welshman, for these people here will do anything for me.’ So you see, Miss Vic!”

But Vic would not let him have the last word.

“Did you say Merionethshire, Mr. Price? Wasn't it somewhere there that a big potato crop failed, because the potatoes were put in by Germans? The blighters had cut all the eyes out of 'em so that they shouldn't sprout. How's that, eh? That's the way they'll do you in, after all their jaw about ‘kindness’ and the lot. That's the dirty trick they play you — if you'll excuse my language, Mrs. Price!”

The farmer's wife, with her usual briskness, had risen and had fetched two large bottles of milk, a farmhouse loaf and a basin full of the butter that I'd made yesterday.

“Now here’s the lunch for these much-discussed prisoners,” Mrs. Price announced. “You needn’t look as if you thought I were trading with the enemy, any of you girls, because I’m not. I’m sending the men out something to eat because I know it makes them work better if they’re fed right.

“I’m not asking you girls to look at them, or speak to them, or take them their food”—here she tucked the lot into a big string bag used for carrying vegetables—“in fact, I wouldn’t allow it. Mr. Price will do all that. Won’t you, John? Here you are, dear.”

She handed him the bag of provisions and whisked away like a busy little bird.

Mr. Price took the bag and set off across the farmyard and out of the red-painted gate where Dick Holiday had once lingered to talk to me.

I walked beside the farmer now, for Mrs. Price had told me to bring in a cow and her calf, which were to be found in the meadow beyond that cornfield where the four Germans worked. Crossing the road we encountered a charming figure in summery attire, carrying a big green sunshade. Muriel Elvey!

She nodded patronizingly to me. Upon Mr. Price she smiled as sweetly as she did upon all men. Curious girl!

“What have you got there?” Muriel asked, tilting the sunshade to one side and pointing a white-gloved finger at the bag that the tall farmer was dangling. “Bread and milk? What, to feed the German prisoners? What fun! May I come and watch them feed-

ing, Mr. Price? Like the animals at the Zoo sort of thing. Do let me; I'm so bored now my cousin is away. Nobody to talk to. You can't count Colonel Fielding exactly; he is such a milksop!" declared the girl whom Colonel Fielding had so ruthlessly analysed; she was obviously conscious of his opinion. "That is, I only like big men to talk to, that I can look up to!" with an upward glance. "Where are these Germans? Ah, there!"

For we had come into the cornfield now, where the captive Huns were taking their noontide rest. In a patch of shadow cast by the trees at the end of the field they stretched themselves at ease. One was lying face downwards, his shirt-sleeved elbows in the corn-stubble, and reading a letter. One sat leaning against the trunk of the tree, arms folded, cap over his eyes, his ruddy, uncharacteristically dark face turned towards us as we came up.

"He's quite good-looking for a Boche," pronounced Muriel Elvey, with a critical glance, as though this were some exhibition of strange animals — which, to be sure, it was. "But then, of course, some of them that I used to dance with over there were handsome — the officers, at all events. These are all ordinary soldiers, of course, aren't they? One's a sailor, I see. How amusing! What were they all before the war, Mr. Price? Do you know?"

"I can't tell you, Miss Elvey," the gentle giant answered this pretty chatterer. "I'd like to know myself what that dark one is — a farmer himself, I'm

sure, by the way he goes about his work. But not one of these understands a word of English, and there’s none of us on the farm that knows any German.”

Now here my employer was mistaken. I knew German pretty well.

For two years after my people left the old home in Wales I had been sent to the same finishing school in Berlin as Muriel Elvey. That was five or six years ago now. But I remembered, I believed I could have spoken to these men in their own tongue.

Only — no, I couldn’t have spoken to them. I should have hated to think of their being badly treated, these Germans; starved or tortured as they tortured and starved our British soldiers when wounded and helpless in their hands. That would have made me unhappy, not so much for them as for ourselves to think that we Britons could sink to such acts.

Personally, I didn’t want to show any kindness to these men. Let them, now they were deprived of the power to do any more mischief, be of as much use as they could.

I didn’t want to question them or look at them either out of good-nature or curiosity. A sudden hard coldness fell upon me as I saw that big fellow in the sailor’s cap.

A German sailor! What does that say? I had had one brother at sea, mine-sweeping — Jack — who used to sing:

“I’ll sail with the scum of the lowest towns,
But not with such the Likes o’ They!”

He had been shot as he put off in an open boat from his wrecked ship.

No, I didn't want to speak German. I didn't want any German to get a word from the lips of an English girl.

But Muriel Elvey cried with a laugh:

"Oh, call them up. What fun! I'll speak to them!"

Mr. Price beckoned to the group of Huns.

They rose. Two of them, the sailor and the dark soldier whom Muriel had pronounced "quite good-looking for a Boche," made as if to come nearer.

"Now, Mr. Price! Let me give them their rations!" Muriel begged prettily. She put aside her sunshade, took the bag of provisions from the farmer's hand, and stepped forward.

The eyes of all four Germans were fastened eagerly upon her; she was without a doubt the most alluring sight that had met their gaze since last it had fallen on a good, pre-war, "echt-Deutsch" meal of veal and sour cabbage with damson sauce.

In fact, they looked at her rather as if she were something to eat, this dainty English girl, "fresh as milk and blood," as their own idiom has it, with her summery hat shading her big eyes, and her frock one of the usual bouquets of delaine she wore, in colour white and yellow this time, and of a cut that gave generous glimpses of the yellow gossamer silk stockings above her suède shoes.

It was exactly the kind of look with which the Prus-

sian officers had been wont to ogle the school-procession of us as we walked down Unter den Linden in the old days on our way to classes.

I had heard that Germans have only two ways of looking at a woman. . . .

I felt I didn't like them to look at an English girl like that!

Muriel seemed to have no such thought as these Germans took their food from her hand and drew nearer to her, smiling into her face and answering the greeting she gave to them in their own tongue.

“You like working here on the land?” she asked them in the careful German that we had acquired in our Berliner pension.

“Yes, indeed, gracious young lady,” returned the rosy-faced, dark-eyed German soldier. “It is much better here in the country. There is never anything going on in a town!”

“Oh! I do not agree with you!” declared Muriel. “I prefer the town myself. The farmer here wants to know what you were in civil life?”

The young German answered that he helped his father, who had a big farming-estate in the Rhine country. This Muriel translated to Mr. Price, who replied:

“I thought he knew all about the work. He's a nice young fellow, this. Very kind. Very pleasant way with him. Look how pleased he is to hear you talk to him, Miss Elvey! I hope he isn't longing too much after his home, the poor fellow!”

And the Welsh farmer turned his kindest smile upon this son of German farming-folk.

I am bound to say it was difficult to connect that dark-eyed, honest-faced young peasant with the atrocities committed over Europe by his kind. He spoke and bore himself modestly and decently. Every line of his rather heavy, comely countenance proclaimed him a truly harmless soul.

But it is when such thousands of these harmless souls are moulded and driven by those fiends who have cankered a once merely decent, sentimental, dreamy nation — it is then that the atrocities are made possible — the atrocities for which they all alike are paying now — too lightly!

The other man to whom Muriel spoke in German did not even appear harmless to me.

For the blue eyes of the German sailor, even while they smiled ingratiatingly at the pretty visitor, remained hard, watchful, and crafty. From the first instant I mistrusted that man!

He spoke with an accent that showed he was of a class better educated than his companion.

“How excellently the gracious young lady speaks German! She lived, without doubt, for many years in my country?” he said.

“I was at school in Berlin for two years,” Muriel told him, using as friendly a tone as if she were speaking to one of our own naval men. “Berlin was delightful, I thought, before the war! Charming! As long as I live I shall always remember the smell of the

Berlin ‘Conditoreien’—such heavenly confectioners’ shops! As you went by, you always got a whiff of very good cigars mixed with the smell of boiling-hot chocolate; delicious!”

She went on chattering, as she always did seem able to chatter to men, freely and easily. Whether they were Huns or South Sea Islanders, as Mrs. Price put it, men would be men to Muriel Elvey — that is, the atoms which made up the atmosphere of admiration that was her breath of life!

“Berlin and the Tiergarten and the All-darlingest Opera! How I did enjoy them all,” Muriel gushed in German. “I did have a good time; at the houses of my school-fellows where I was invited — everybody was so charming and hospitable to me!”

“That is — yes — very understandable,” put in the Hun sailor, with a bolder glance. “They who would not be charming to such a charming young English lady must indeed without taste be!”

Muriel, swinging her parasol, smiled graciously upon this compliment — from a German!

Standing there in that Welsh cornfield, watching this little interlude between that captured Hun and that pretty English girl, I couldn’t help remembering the fate of other pretty girls, in countries less fortunate than ours, laid waste by these men.

Rosy girls of Flanders, neat black-haired girls of France, have been driven off into slavery and worse under the rule of the Germans.

Germans would have done the same by the girls of

Great Britain! Think of it. Had their long-laid plans succeeded for the invasion of this coveted country of ours, our women — always made much of in the old days by Germans! — our women would have been part of “the loot of cities.” Men like these in this very field would have treated Muriel Elvey, me, all of us! no differently from the way in which they treated the girls of Lille. England's women!

They would never be able to do it now. For that we had our fighting men, our unsleeping Fleet, to thank.

And it seemed to me a kind of disloyalty to those defenders of ours that Muriel should smile upon the German sailor when he told her in that ingratiating tone: “I regret that our countries are at war.”

The retort rushed into my mind: “I hope you'll all be made to regret it a lot worse before the end!”

But I did not speak.

Muriel said lightly and fluently: “I regret it, too! War becomes such a bore, after so long! Really, I do not know what we began fighting for, and I don't think that England wants to go on any more than Germany ——”

Here I could not help putting in, indignantly, in English: “Oh! How can you say these things! To a German! Oh, Muriel ——”

Before I said more, another voice called her name — sharply, too.

“Muriel!”

It was the voice of Captain Holiday.

Standing engrossed in hearing Muriel's talk with

the prisoner, we had scarcely noticed the sound that had broken into it — the wheels of the light dog-cart that had driven up the lane behind the hedge. In the dog-cart sat Dick Holiday driving; his friend, Colonel Fielding, was beside him.

He jumped down as Dick Holiday pulled up the horse.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Price,” said Dick Holiday. My heart jumped to see him as he saluted me; his brown face, however, had never a smile.

“Muriel, get in,” he said, “I’ll drive you back to the Lodge.”

Colonel Fielding, with a more genial greeting to me, held open the field gate for Miss Elvey.

But Muriel allowed them to wait for her.

“Hullo, Cousin Dick,” she called out airily from the cornfield. “What a way you have of popping in and out like a harlequin at a pantomime, haven’t you? Mother and I thought we weren’t going to see you for another whole day. How’s London?”

“It still stands where it did,” returned her cousin drily. He was evidently in no laughing mood. “Get in by me, Muriel.”

Muriel strolled through the gate. “You don’t seem to have come back in very gay spirits,” she said. Then she turned to wave her little, white-gloved hand to the sailor to whom she had been talking.

I saw Dick Holiday give her a very steady glance. She laughed as she stood by the trap waiting before she put her foot on the step.

“Don't look black at me,” she said to him. “I know you did tell me I wasn't to speak to the Germans. But I told you I would and I have. So there, Master Dick!” (Coquettishly.) “And these are very nice Germans, too, as it happens. I've had quite a chat with that delightful sailor-man with the blue eyes. I'm sure he's nothing to do with the people who do the dreadful things. These Germans are different.”

As he gave her his hand to help her up into the trap I heard her cousin say, distinctly and steadily:

“I wish you would remember one thing. No Germans are ‘different.’ All Germans are the same Germans at bottom when you come to it! All Germans are — Germans!”

He took up the reins.

Elizabeth's Falconer (jumping up behind as lightly as any jockey) gave me a smile, an ineffable gesture that was to spell “Pro-German, eh? *She's* in for a good strafing from old Dick; breakers ahead, cheerio!”

And off they drove.

Mr. Price and I, leaving the cornfield, went on to that meadow where the cow and her calf were that had to be brought up to the farm.

“Dear me, Captain Holiday was very hard about letting Miss Elvey say a word to those boys,” remarked the farmer to me as we walked along. “There is no harm in this lot of Germans. No harm, I am sure.”

For the generous-hearted Welshman judges as he would be judged himself. Void of guile, he could not

see guile where it lurked. He was like the best and shrewdest of our own soldiers; clean fighters, they were incredibly slow to believe what dirty fighters these others were. It has taken months and years of bitter experience to show Britain that; Britain with her obstinate dislike to believing anything really bad of the nation with whom she fights!

Even now she does not believe they are as black as they are painted!

Do we not hear that about us every day, and isn't it the trait that our enemy builds on and takes advantage of, to our own sorrow?

Now Mr. Price, of Holiday's Farm, Careg, was of that lovable and broadminded type that believes the best of all men, even Germans! until the very last moment.

His moment of disillusionment about one particular German was at hand.

As he himself said ruefully about the affair afterwards:

“Who'd have thought it? I would not have expected it of that man; I would not, indeed ——”

But let me tell you from the beginning what happened.

CHAPTER XXXIV

HARVEST, NINETEEN-EIGHTEEN

“She stood breast-high amid the corn
Clasped by the golden light of morn,
Like the sweetheart of the sun
Who many a glowing kiss had won.

“In her cheek an autumn flush
Deeply ripened, such a blush
In the midst of brown was born
Like red poppies grown with corn.

“And her hat with shady brim
Made her tressy forehead dim;
Thus she stood amid the stooks,
Praising God with sweetest looks.”

— WORDSWORTH.

ALL this, you must remember, was in harvest time.

Harvest! It spread like a golden smile over the land on which we had been working all that summer. All the country about our farm seemed to be tinted in three broad colours — light green of the carried hay-fields, dark green of the late summer woods, blonde-yellow of the corn. And I wish I could show you who read a picture of the biggest cornfield at the Prices as it looked on a certain memorable day!

This field sloped steeply up to an elm-bordered hedge, and in steeply-sloping rows the sheaves were

set up in fives; some still standing to catch every warming ray of sun, others laid down flat, ready for the forking. This laying down of the sheaves was the job given over to Vic, who had been here on the harvest last year; to no mere 'prentice-hand would Mr. Price allow it, for fear of waste.

She made rather a wonderful little picture, the Cockney girl, dark and glowing against the sheaves, laying one down after the other, steadily, carefully, now, so as not to shake and scatter the grain that was to mean England's bread. The movement of Vic's brown arm, lowering that sheaf, reminded me of the gesture with which a woman "eases" her baby's sleeping head down on to a pillow.

"How sweet Vic would have been with a little child," I thought. "What a black shame that the man she should have married was done to death in that German prison camp!"

But Vic nodded gaily at me as I crossed the field, drew the sleeve of her smock across her brown forehead and called, "Getting on fine, aren't we? This is the way we're going to do in those dirty ——" Here she made a London street-boy's grimace towards the big, red-painted cart that was coming round by the barn towards the top of the field, driven by one of the German prisoners.

That long cart, which started at the top of the hill, took seven people to work it. An odd seven it was, too — a truly 1918 septette of workers!

Two Germans in the cart, one driving, one settling

the sheaves as they came. Two British, the Welsh shepherd Ivor, and the English wounded soldier (substitute) with forks, loading — a strenuous job!

Two Land Girls — Elizabeth and myself — following the cart with the long “heel-ropes” to catch up any loose corn left lying in the stubble. Last, but not least, let me mention the seventh worker — a small but intelligent-looking schoolboy of fourteen, who was giving the last weeks of his holidays from Ellesmere School to helping bring the harvest home. This young Briton walked at the heads of the two enormous horses, leading them, starting them, or calling to them “Wo-beck!” in a voice three times as big as himself.

“Yes! A mixed crew, isn't it?” I heard Mr. Price remark to his wife as the pair of them came to have a look at the workers on the carts before they passed on to the barn. “Welsh, English, Germans! All perfectly friendly, too! All of them with just one object, to get in this big harvest as quick as it can be done. They will; you needn't be afraid!”

“If only that horse doesn't get his great hoof on the little boy's foot, now,” murmured Mrs. Price, anxiously. “That's all I'm afraid of!”

“Wo-beck!” thundered the infant at the horses' heads.

Again the cart stopped. Up went the sheaves on the fork, and into place on the piles of others in the cart. Then on again, while Elizabeth and I gathered into drifts on our rakes the corn that had been left

over. So, slowly down the row we went under the hot August sun, and so through the gap into the field where the roofed stack stood.

Two other Germans — one the sailor on whom Muriel had smiled — were working on the stack. Close by the empty cart was waiting to start at the top of another row. We set out behind it again; the Welsh schoolboy, who had lingered to try to catch a field-mouse that had bolted out of a sheaf, dashed back to his post. This time Ivor drove, the wounded soldier packed the sheaves, and the Germans took the forks and loaded, working with a concentration!

And so, the men changing jobs with each journey we made, the warm and strenuous morning wore away.

After the midday meal there was another change; Ivor the shepherd and the English soldier went off to the barn, and their places on the cart were filled by Colonel Fielding and Captain Holiday, who turned up from the Lodge in flannels. They worked as hard as the Germans, who were their companions in toil, and as silently. After the first greeting, neither Elizabeth nor I had a glance, nor expected one from her *fiancé* or his friend. Fellow-workers we were. Any social matters were left out of it as long as we were on the job together.

And yet — Even while my eyes were fixed upon my rake and upon the stubble whence I meant to take in every good ear of corn that I could gather up, my foolish heart still sought to feed itself with glimpses

of the men who worked so near to me; "so near and yet so far!" as Vic would probably have said with her mock-sentimental glance.

How could Elizabeth still think that "all men were so ugly" (all men except her own adored Female Impersonator with his eyelashes and his girlish mouth)? How could she not appreciate the grace of that other man's light, yet masculine, build in action?

Farm-work did suit Dick Holiday, whom I preferred to call in my heart Richard Wynn. Seeming never to look at him, I yet saw and delighted in every movement of his. What a wonderful gesture it was of his when he pitched the heavy sheaf on to the stacked-up cart, high above his head! I loved him; the play of his muscles, the rim of white that just showed past the sunburn mark on his neck, the easy set of his brown head upon his shoulders, to which his shirt now clung! More, I loved the clean, frank mind that I could sense beyond the lithe, "out-of-doorish" body; I loved his joy in the country, his pluck as a soldier, his simplicity. I liked him for being such chums with that other, much more complex and artificial young man of Elizabeth's. I liked his honest indignation over his lady-love's talking to the Germans. I liked everything I'd ever heard him say, everything I'd ever seen him do. In fact, for me he could do nothing wrong; nothing!

What a friend . . . what a sweetheart . . . what everything that was attractive and sweet and sound at the core . . .

And none of it was for me.

That could not alter the doom that I was his, as completely as was the golden-and-white collie that lay there in the field guarding his coat beside the hedge, her nose between her paws and her eyes of love upon her master.

Fate was settled for me. Life without him meant life without love and marriage — in these things I did not wish for any second-best. But he himself had shown me other things in life.

The land! I would stay on the land that had healed me and made a woman of me. It should remain my interest and my delight to make a proper landswoman of myself. The land should be my sweetheart when Dick (who might have been mine) was married to another girl.

Held up, as it were, by this thought, I worked on steadily through the afternoon.

At the break for tea I was so thirsty that I made my way to the little drinking-fountain in the well behind the barn. Into a mossy stone bowl there fell a thread of spring-water cold as ice and clear as diamonds. A bright tin cup was always placed on a slab amidst the ferns of the well.

But when I reached the place I found the German sailor, who had been at the barn, with that cup to his lips. With a little flourish of politeness he put it down, filled it again, rinsed it out, handed it to me.

“No, thank you,” I said.

I turned and went back to the harvest-field.

Afterwards I was glad to think that I would not drink after that German, not even from the crystal Welsh spring. I was glad that I had not had a glance for that man who, treated with every kindness by a too-confiding Briton, was at that moment planning to do his worst by his benefactor.

That evening, when Elizabeth and I got into camp, walking rather slowly after an arduous day, we found the news there before us.

It had been brought in by little Peggy, the timber girl. On the road down from the woods, where they were working, the timber gang had been passed by Mr. Price's wagoner's boy, who was scorching into "the town" by the shortest way, and as fast as an out-of-date old bicycle could take him.

"Heard the news?" he had shrieked out to the gang. "Fire at Mr. Price's farm!"

Immediately the songs of the timber girls (who always, on their return from work, made the welkin ring with selections from Revue) had stopped upon a staccato note.

"Fire?" they'd all shrilled together. "Is it a bad one?"

"Yes, I think!" the wagoner's son had retorted with that enthusiastic glee over ill-tidings which marks the small boy. "All the barns is in a blaäaze! Burn up the harvest it will!"

He had whooped and sped on.

This was the story Peggy brought back. Horrified beyond words, Elizabeth and I stared at one another.

It must have happened only just after we had left off work! But what had happened?

“Let’s go and see. We must go back and see!” I exclaimed to my chum. “Perhaps we shall be able to help. Anyhow, let’s get back to the farm at once! Come along, quick!”

Together Elizabeth and I bolted like rabbits out of the porch of the hut, leaving a chattering group of girls to look after us. Two or three of them broke away to join us. Peggy, with a large hunk of bread and rhubarb jam in her hand, overtook us first.

“Now I bet you it’s those Boches!” she cried as she came up. “Setting fire to the corn they’ve just got in! Well, I s’pose nobody *can* be astonished at *them*? Come on, girls, let’s see what it is they have done — come on! *At the double* ——”

With a clatter of Land boots on the hard road we took to our heels together and ran!

CHAPTER XXXV

“FIRE, FIRE!”

“An enemy hath done this.”

— PARABLE OF THE TARES.

WE ran, taking a short cut to the farm over the stubble of the cornfield which had been reaped that afternoon.

As we ran I kept saying to myself: “The big barn! Can it be the big barn that’s on fire?”

For that would have meant nearly all the wheat of this whole big field destroyed and done for.

We ran, passing the gate beside which lay the dumpy little gleaners’ sheaves of every ear that the children had found after our heel-rakes had combed out the field. Oh! would that represent all that was left of this afternoon’s harvesting?

The wind in our faces brought us a drift of smoke, a smell of wood burning, the sound of shouting.

“Beat that down!” called Dick Holiday’s voice. “Never mind about that other. Leave that shed! It’s done.”

We came up, panting, to find the dear, familiar farmyard in a pandemonium such as it had never known before. It was full of people, and the sound of their feet and voices mingling with that deep, ominous roar of the fire.

Something was fiercely ablaze. Was — oh! was it? No, thank heaven, it was not the big barn after all!

A harvest so good had overflowed the great tithe-barn for which I had feared. Part of today's wheat had been stacked into a smaller shed, but a few feet off from the great barn. It was this shed that blazed and blazed, sending up clouds of blue-grey smoke, fountains of sparks, and that smell which was something between that of an autumn bonfire and of malt and bread.

Yes, it was England's bread that was being destroyed there before our eyes. But only a part of that afternoon's harvesting of it. For the other part a fight was being put up; the big barn, perilously near, must not be allowed to catch.

People had formed themselves into a chain to hand down buckets full of water from the canal that meandered by at the top-end of the farmyard to where the fire went flashing up, licking up even to the branches of the elms. Dick Holiday in his shirt-sleeves, close to the taller figure of Mr. Price, was dashing water, bucket after bucket of it, not on to the flames at all, but on to the walls and woodwork of the great barn.

“Sand,” I heard him call. “Sand in that pit over there. Mix it with the water!”

I scarcely know how it was that I found myself with one of my best milking-pails full of wet sand, racing down the yard beside Colonel Fielding. All to-

gether we were working presently, as we had worked before in the field. Even as I toiled strenuously with my pails I noticed such odd little details in the midst of the turmoil; I noticed the way Ivor and Colonel Fielding turned their faces, as they threw the water, away from the burning walls of the shed, now hot as a furnace; I noticed Mrs. Price's little flying feet under her grey overall; I noticed the frightened twitter of the birds who had been scared out of their usual roosting places in the hedge near by, and the angry calling of the rooks whose nests were in those elms. And on Dick Holiday's forehead, under a hank of his short, brown hair, I even noticed a great smudge of black from the charred wood.

I was standing near enough to him to see this when he, who had been looking up at the roof of the shed, grasped my arm and pulled me back a step suddenly. I thought he had not noticed who it was. But he exclaimed, "Joan, look out! It's going to fall in now."

And at the word the roof of that shed collapsed. It fell in like a house of cards, or like (alas!) one of the many French homes of which black ruin marks the trace. Up went a great spurt of flames, crackling and roaring to the skies again.

Captain Holiday loosed my arm. "The wind's shifted," he said, in relief, watching the direction of those flames. Then, raising his voice, he added: "I say, Mr. Price, the wind's turned again. That'll be all right now, I think."

“All right, Captain Holiday; thank goodness,” came from the farmer, turning his heated, school-boy’s face with a look of relief also. “The fire will blow right away from the barn now. Quite safe now. Ah! I didn’t think we should stop it. I thought it was done for, indeed! Leave it now, we can ——”

For the flames, full fed, seemed to be sinking as suddenly as they had leapt.

The labourers, land girls, a detachment of wounded boys from the Hospital, and villagers drew back; faces were mopped, sleeves rolled down again, hands placed on hips, and deep ejaculations breathed out in Welsh and English.

“Well, oh!” . . . “I never saw such a thing.” “Saved more than three-quarters of the corn, whatever! . . . In where did that fire start, Mr. Price?”

Then, quickly, a brusque voice rapped out curtly, “What the deuce is this? Mr. Price! Come here, will you? Look at this ——”

“This” was something that Captain Holiday seemed to have found just within the opening to the big barn to which he had turned. A group of us pressed nearer to look.

“A very neatly arranged packet of shavings, by Jove!” came from Dick Holiday, on his knees. He sniffed. “Smelling of paraffin. . . . And here’s another of ’em, and another! . . . Mr. Price, where is the paraffin kept on this place?”

“I’ll show you, Captain Holiday,” said the farmer, perturbed.

He turned towards the house, followed by the two young officers from the Lodge, with the rest of us bringing up a straggling procession in the rear.

At the back-door of the farm Mrs. Price had already joined the one onlooker of this scene who had not ventured down into the yard — an elegant onlooker, in a semi-evening toilette of mauve georgette, half-hidden beneath a creamy wrap.

Muriel, excited and amused, hardly seemed to realize the gravity of what she had been watching.

“Oh, Dick, have you got the fire out, nearly?” she chattered. “I should have come down to see you all near to, only I didn't want to ruin these shoes. I'd just dashed out as I was! Thrilling, isn't it? What is this about paraffin?” she added, quickly. “Did they say you found paraffin thrown about? Oh! I wonder” — more excitedly — “I wonder if it was that man I saw with the can?”

Sharply her cousin rapped out, “What man?”

“That nice-looking sailor with the blue eyes who said I spoke German so well ——”

Dick Holiday gave a very quick movement. “The German? You saw him with a can of paraffin? What's this, Muriel? When?”

“Today — at lunch-time, I think it was,” returned Muriel, while we all listened eagerly. “I was coming back from taking a letter to the post-box, and I met that German I was talking to the other day, close to the little well in the field ——”

“Yes?”

“ Well, that’s all; he just had a tin of paraffin showing out of his jacket pocket, and I asked him, in German, what he was going to do with it.”

“ What did he say? ” asked Dick Holiday, more than curtly.

“ He said he was going to put a little paraffin in the ditches to destroy the mosquitoes’ nests there are hereabouts,” explained Muriel. “ He said the farmer had ordered him to do it.”

“ Did you give him that order, Mr. Price? ”

“ Never in my life! ” returned the farmer.

“ Do they know where your paraffin barrel is in that shed? Would they be able to get to it; should you notice them if they were round about it, Mrs. Price? Have you noticed any of them there? ”

“ Really, Captain Holiday, I couldn’t say,” returned the farmer’s wife, with concern. “ I’ve got so used to them, I haven’t thought very much about them —— ”

“ Ah! the fault of all of us! ” declared Dick Holiday, with a sternness I had not before heard in his voice. “ There’s very little doubt in my mind what to think about them now! ” He turned to the farmer again. “ Don’t let any of your men touch those heaps of shavings, Mr. Price, please. Leave everything just as it is, will you? The evidence will have to be looked to. No telephone on the farm, have you? I shall have to send over to the camp, then. I say, Fielding —— ”

Elizabeth’s “ Falconer,” his golden hair ruffled and

his delicate face very flushed turned, from where he was having a murmured talk with the Man-hater.

"Sorry to trouble you, but I'd like you to drive over in the dog-cart to the prison camp," said Dick Holiday. "I'll stay here till the commandant comes. My compliments to him (he's a Major Russell), and I'd be obliged if he'd let you bring him back here at once."

"Right," said Colonel Fielding, and was off.

In a worried murmur Mr. Price was saying: "Well, indeed, I wouldn't have believed it of our Germans! That sailor, you can't deny that he seemed a pleasant young fellow!"

"Can't deny the paraffin-smell on his jacket, if it was he," retorted Dick Holiday, with a resigned shrug of his flannelled shoulders. Then he turned to Muriel. I suppose it wasn't in masculine human nature to resist saying what he did to her.

"Perhaps you'll believe me now when I say a German is — always a German? You see why I told you you weren't to speak to 'em?"

A sudden change came over Muriel's face. I suppose there isn't a girl alive who likes being shown, before a little crowd of people, that she is in the wrong. Muriel, I remembered from our Berlin days, hated it more than most people. By chance I caught her eye as her cousin spoke.

That tiny thing seemed like a lighted match in corn stalks as dry as those which had just been blazing.

For now Muriel blazed up. Temper flashed from the big eyes she turned upon her cousin.

“I don’t think I’m letting you ‘tell’ me what I am or am not to do, Dick, thank you,” she informed him with a high-pitched little laugh. “I don’t take that, even from ——”

Here she looked straight at me for a change.

“I don’t take orders, even from the man I am going to marry. And, by the way, I don’t think you have heard the news yet. I am engaged to be married, you know.”

She paused for a moment, lifted her neat little head, still looking hard at me. In her pretty eyes I saw, with surprise, the expression of the woman who wants to scratch somebody; wants to *hurt*.

She announced, “I am writing today to promise to marry Captain Markham!”

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE HARVEST-MOON

“Oh, moon of my delight!”

—OMAR KHAYYÁM.

ABOUT Muriel's piece of news a good deal was said, later on, by Colonel Fielding.

He declared that Miss Muriel, who had played all she knew to marry the Holiday property, now saw that the game was absolutely up, and that she had better fall back at once upon the other . . . er . . . source of comfort and luxury. He, Colonel Fielding, vowed that her intention to write to “that unfortunate blighter, Markham,” was born then and there on the steps of the farmhouse as her cousin strafed her. He also told Elizabeth that Miss Muriel's last hope was to irritate Miss Matthews, whom she had always suspected of a *tendresse* for young Markham.

To all this the Man-hater replied that if the “Falconer” made any more of his catty remarks about the future Mrs. Markham, it would merely show him up as a disappointed admirer of hers. I believe they “chipped” each other happily for hours about this.

But to return to the actual moment of Muriel's staggering announcement.

She looked round for its effect. Certainly she got it.

All eyes gazed upon the pretty creature standing

there. Engaged! Another engagement in the place! This excitement eclipsed all thought of the fire, the incendiary Germans, the commandant (who couldn't come, by the way, until next day). For an instant we stared; and Muriel's cousin seemed the most dumfounded.

But he pulled himself together the first. Holding out his hand, he exclaimed heartily: "Good! The best of luck, my child!" He wrung her small fingers, beaming all over his face.

Then I heard myself exclaim: "Oh, Muriel! You really are going to marry Harry? I am so glad; so glad!"

(Which I certainly was!)

Elizabeth and the others added congratulations. Vic declared there never was such a spot for "getting off" as here! Mr. Price beamed as benignantly as if Muriel were a favourite sister, and little Mrs. Price, all smiles, insisted on our drinking Miss Elvey's health in her own elderberry wine, in the dining-room.

"Come in, all of you!" she urged hospitably. "Come, Captain Holiday ——"

But Captain Holiday stood still, smiling.

"Mrs. Price, I'll join you in one second, but Mr. Price has got his coat, and I really can't come in like this in shirt-sleeves. I must get a coat; I've lost mine."

"Lost it?" exclaimed the farmer. "Dear me, where did you do that, Captain Holiday?"

Captain Holiday answered promptly and serenely.

“Miss Matthews thinks she passed a coat in the harvest field as she was coming along” (and there was a “Dare-to-contradict-me” gleam in the eyes he turned to me). “You might just come along with me, Joan, and show me where you saw it?”

Gasping over this bit of obvious improvisation, I found it had succeeded.

Muriel and the others had disappeared into the house, and the shirt-sleeved Captain Holiday was piloting me gently but firmly across the now-deserted farmyard.

“Captain Holiday,” I protested, “I never said I saw a coat ——”

He interrupted serenely. “Of course I rapped out just any excuse to get you to myself at once. I’ve things to say to you. But you know that, Joan.”

Yes Already I guessed (and with what sudden rapture!) what was coming. Not always do misunderstandings “keep up” until the uttermost word is said. For long enough I had misunderstood. But now —— I knew, from the tone in which he wished Muriel joy, that she never could have been “the” girl. That had not been cordiality “put on.” He had been as genuinely glad as I was to hear of the girl’s engagement!

And I knew what was coming next; with quiet but growing delight I expected it, yet did not wish one word of explanation to be hurried.

He began, in his direct way: “What do you think of this news about my cousin and Captain Markham? Are you surprised?”

“I didn’t know whether she meant to accept him. But I knew he was desperate about her! He told me so himself, that Sunday we all went to tea with those people.”

Here Dick Holiday gave me a quick, searching glance. We were going through the gate of the harvest-field as he took up “That Sunday! Yes! D’you mind my asking you? Markham was telling you about all that, in the garden?”

“Yes.”

Dick Holiday said simply, “I thought he was making love to you.”

“Ah!” A light had broken upon me. Just as keenly and as mistakenly as I had been jealous of Muriel, this man at my side had been jealous of Harry. So he had gone away, avoided me these last weeks!

He said: “Markham is a great pal of yours, is he?”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Nothing more?”

I said: “I think you guessed that he was the man I cared about once.”

“Once?” he repeated eagerly. “Why not now?” He knew as well as I did! Sure of it, I laughed softly as I glanced about the cleared field. I said, “I don’t see that coat of yours anywhere about.”

“Must be in the next field,” he returned, coolly. We walked on, over the stubble and through a gap in the hedge to where the sheaves still stood in their pyramids of five.

Then pausing again, he added. "What about my question, though?"

My heart was beating very quickly under that well-worn smock of mine, but I managed to say, "Which question was that? You always ask so many, Captain Holiday."

"I've told you so often not to call me that," he retorted. He paused, standing tall and dark and graceful between the mauve evening sky and the russet stooks. "My name," he began — and I expected to hear the familiar protest — "my name is Dick, you know." But he ended with an announcement which I suppose was meant to take away my breath.

"My name was Richard Wynn."

I could trump that, I thought!

Looking up at him, I said, "I knew." But this he trumped instead by saying calmly: "I wondered how soon you would! Extraordinary that you didn't tumble to it before, Joan, when everybody here knew I'd only taken my uncle's name. The Prices, Muriel, any of the farm people could have told you. Or Fielding — I suppose, by the way, he did tell you? Yes? So now you know I did write to you in the spring — letter you threw away, eh? What have you to say about it?"

He took a step nearer to me. I stood my ground, and retorted, "Richard Wynn, why did you write that letter, to begin with?"

"Difficult to explain," he said simply, pulling an ear of corn from the stook nearest to him and nibbling

at it as if absently with his strong teeth. "Difficult . . . Well! It was when I was feeling pretty rocky and 'down'——"

"Ah! Elizabeth always said it was the effect of shell-shock!"

"Did she?" He laughed, nibbling that ear. "It wasn't altogether, either. I was in hospital, badlyhipped. Some of the fellows there were engaged; nice girls coming to visit them, bringing them roses. They'd something to look forward to every afternoon. Bucked to the nines. 'My girl'—'my girl says this'—'my girl and I are doing a show today'—'my girl's brought me so-and-so'—'my *fiancée* and her governor took me so-and-so'—— That sort of thing the whole time. Here was I"—he threw away the stripped stalk—"back in Blighty and scarcely a soul interested whether I lived or died. Not a woman in my life at all, Joan. . . . All this sounds awful piffle, perhaps, but that's not a funny thought for any fellow when he's down; not a woman to care——"

His brusque voice sounded boyishly shy. It tore at my heartstrings; but I only said the first thing that came into my head.

"What about the Elveys? What about your aunt and Muriel? They must have known you were in England, wounded."

"Er——" He paused. "Yes, Yes, I suppose they did. But they only wrote much later on, just before I came down here . . . Well, then I got to barracks, Millshott. It was still there . . . I mean that

feeling of being fed because I'd no one to care. One night ——”

He stopped. “Ah! Have I got to report all these details?”

“Please. Yes. You must.”

“One night I saw a fellow in the card-room, writing. You could tell by his face it wasn't any business-letter. I felt ‘Gad,’ if I'd a girl to write to of my own!”

“I should have thought ——” I hesitated. “I shouldn't have thought it was possible . . . for *you* . . . *not* to have had one . . .”

“Ah! Now what d'you mean by that?”

“Go on. After you thought ‘Gad, if I'd a girl to write to' ——?”

“Well, then, sort of desperately, I fished out an old letter-case of mine that I hadn't touched,” he told me, “for years. I found — what d'you think? — a bow of blue ribbon. Blest if I hadn't forgotten what it was, at first ——”

“Flattering of you ——”

——“but I soon remembered, Joan! I'd sneaked it off your plait. D'you remember?”

“Go on, please.”

“Well, *I* began remembering the old days at Mr. Matthews's farm. . . . The veranda with all our sticks and fishing-boots! The wood-fires. The icicles round the back-kitchen door; you remember? That fox-terrier pup I gave you — he's dead, I expect? And how I used to go out after the beagles with your brothers — what a regiment of chaps we were! And you just the

one little girl . . . I remembered how I'd looked at you ——”

“Oh, you couldn't have looked at me ——”

“Couldn't I? I'd often thought 'There's a sweetheart, now, some day, for some man.' I remembered, in barracks. Then I thought 'She's grown-up now, that kid. Supposing there were a chance of that very girl, grown-up, looking at *me?*' So ——”

He stopped, with a smile, as though I must understand everything now.

To me an odd thing had happened; just as on that day among the chickens on the hillside I was swept back for a moment to the Past. I felt memories flocking and twittering about me. I remembered him, the leggy dark Welsh lad . . . Mr. Wynn, the pupil . . . yes . . . yes, this was his familiar voice; this was the look and the movement of him, it was all coming back to me . . . and the time that he'd said “Good-bye” to me under the dripping veranda. One hand clutching his suit-case, the other grasping me suddenly by the hair, his boy's mouth had snatched a half-brotherly kiss; the first I'd known from one who was not a brother. And now, more than seven years later, he came close, put his hand on the nape of my neck, just under my twisted-up hair. It thrilled me to the heels with happiness.

“Wait. Wait,” I whispered, pulling back. “I haven't heard everything yet.”

“You have.”

“You always did — did contradict me,” I said,

standing there under his hand. "And you only wrote to me because there was nobody else — not much of a compliment ——"

"What? Well, no answer came, and I knew I'd been an ass. Then came the business about my uncle's property." He began talking very quickly. "That shoved things right to the back of my mind, Dear . . . why d'you shiver? Are you cold?"

"No."

"No?" He put his other brown hand about my neck. "Shoved things out of my mind until I came right up against you, Joan. You!"

"At the Camp ——"

"No fear! Hadn't I spotted you all in your brand-new uniform, bless you, on Euston platform that morning? That was why I got little Rhys to bring me up to the Camp at once, to make sure it was you. You see, I'd remembered what you looked like, even if you had forgotten me."

I thought "Forget him! How, how could I have *thought* of anything but him ——"

"So that's all," he said. "Only — that wasn't really much of a kiss just before I went to Canada ——"

"But you haven't told me about all these weeks here, since then!"

"That'll keep to make conversation (if we're short of it) after we're married!" he declared abruptly. "You see as we shall get married practically at once ——"

“‘As we shall!’ Are you not going to ask me what I have to say in the mat——”

“No, because you always complain so of my asking questions,” he whispered. He was near enough to whisper now, having drawn me close, close to him. “Put your arms round my neck,” he coaxed. “Kiss me.” He put down his brown face.

“There’s — Oh, there’s such a smudge of black from the wood-smoke on you, Dick!”

“D’you mind, sweetheart?”

Over his shoulder I saw a strip of evening sky deepening slowly from mauve to violet. The long-drawn, quavering cry of an owl came across to us on the freshening air. And from behind a black fringe of elms there peeped out (fit witness to a Land-Girl’s betrothal!) the big round primrose-colored Harvest-Moon.

Oh, night of Harvest in that rich Welsh valley! To some you meant the end of toil, relief from anxiety, triumph; to some the overthrow of darkling schemes. To me you were Love’s dream come true; oh, night of stars and murmurs and caress, oh not-to-be-forgotten night . . .

I found no words to voice what was in my heart, beating so near to his own.

“Dick, Dick!” I sighed.

He nestled his face (smudge and all) against mine, in a string of kisses that were just a give-and-take of the delight that is beyond all words.

POSTSCRIPT

THE VICTORY-DANCE

“Now joy, Old England, raise!
For the tidings of thy might,
By the festal cities' blaze
Whilst the wine-cup shines in light!
And yet, amidst that joy and uproar,
Let us think of them that sleep
Full many a fathom deep
By thy wild and rocky steep,
Elsinore!”—

CAMPBELL.

LIGHTS, lights over London again!
After four years of darkness and gloom the dear old lights shone down on the streets where one could see people's faces plainly once again—and what a crowd of faces, too! The pinky speckle of them was like nothing as much as a huge flower-bed of that sturdy plant London Pride. And above them there had burst into bloom the sudden crop of fluttering flags . . . the flags of Victory. Yes, at last after these four tense years Victory had set those flags waving and those lights blazing and those people cheering and shouting and dancing in the streets of London town.

Were you there?

Were you one atom in that whirling stream of laughing and rejoicing people that surged and circled and broke and re-formed again about the steps of the Pavilion and the fountain in Piccadilly Circus? Did

you fly before those organized rushes of the Australians through the *mêlée*? did you ride on motor-drays driven by R.A.F. cadets who had adorned themselves with nurses' bonnets and cloaks? did you laugh helplessly over the antics of those young and uplifted Naval officers who, correctly uniformed but for their smashed-in bowler hats, were pressing coin and tobacco and vows of eternal friendship upon their taxi-driver while the surrounding group applauded wildly? School-boyish — yes, the Forces were a crowd of school-boys let loose that night, and hadn't they deserved it, the right to make holiday and to rejoice in England's way, which is behind a laughing mask and a tin trumpet?

* * * * * * *

And behind that again; ah, what?

Not all the cheers and merry nonsense talked could drown the undersong of Victory-week.

Boys who fell to buy that Victory, day after day of that four years' struggle! Boys who sold their budding lives, this one working his gun, that one on his ship, that other darling in his downward crashing 'plane! Sons, brothers, lovers, sweet young cousins and boy-friends of ours! All day the thought of these had burned with a proud and steady flame at every British woman's heart. All day there had been on our lips the names, the familiar home-names, of those who would not come home . . . "If He — if They were only here . . ."

Hard to believe that they were not! Far, far beyond that hubbub one seemed to catch echoes of dear ex-

ultant voices we shall hear no more with these our earthly cars, calling "*cheerio! . . . I say! . . . Can't you hear? it's us! So long!*" And, beyond the thronging faces under the blaze of the street-lamps, Memory and Love could raise a cloud of other faces: laughing, care-free faces of youths for whom there would be no Tomorrow of difficulties and sordid struggles and the anti-climax of growing old.

* * * * *

"Yes! Thank Heaven that Jack and the rest of them will never have lived to *that* ——!"

"That" was a sight of which I got a glimpse as a taxi steered its way inch by inch from the dense throng about the entrance to the Berkeley. I spoke aloud in the crowd where I found myself, arms linked with my Dick on one side of me and with Elizabeth's young husband on the other. The happy four of us (two men in war-worn khaki, two girls in breeches and new smocks) had come up to town together on the Wednesday after that glorious Monday.

And the sight which had struck me was that of the face over the heavy fur collar of the man who was sitting in that taxi; bloated and coarse, he carried his sixty years as though he had not in all that time known one hour of strenuous exercise or of clean joy in the open. Over-eating (more disgustful in its effects than heavy drinking) was stamped on his face from the bags beneath his eyes to his lowest chin. A dead thing he seemed to me; dead more truly than any of the lads who had flung their happy lives away for the cause

of the world while he and his like "lived." Through the square of the window I caught above his shoulder a glimpse of a girl's pretty and pettish profile . . .

The crowd surged in between us and the taxi before I could exclaim "*Muriel!* . . . I say, it was Muriel; did you see her?"

My tall young husband turned his head as it towered above us. "No! Muriel with him? I thought I saw old What's-his-name; I s'pose he's taken her out to celebrate on his steel-profits ——"

For since Harvest-time Muriel Elvey had been twice engaged; for a month to Harry, an engagement quickly broken after she and her mother had been to stay at the house of this distant connection, the elderly profiteer of whom I had caught that glimpse. She was to marry him. Elizabeth and I thought it the most horrible thing we had ever heard of. But Dick had only shrugged his shoulders and Colonel Fielding had declared it was an excellent arrangement and that the . . . er . . . Mystery-Girl would consider she was in for a very good time.

"A good time!" Oh, misused phrase! To me it has come to represent one image; the memory of a fleshy and stubby-fingered male hand resting on a taxi-door, holding a fat black cigar and wearing a diamond that spat out coloured lights, less sparkling than the dewdrops that stud the Welsh bracken at home.

We were all going home again in a couple of days; the Land was home to us for ever now; a very little of Town would do for all of us these days, and we, fit and

joyous from air and work and elemental interests, had a "good time" which we never even called such.

"Isn't it odd," I remarked as we struggled back towards the Circus again, "that Harry Markham *didn't* seem to mind about Muriel so much, after all?"

"No," said Elizabeth's Colonel, succinctly. "He had a month of her. I bet he's . . . er . . . jolly glad of the change to that topping little Driver-girl he's all over the place with now ——"

"*'Go it, Mother Browne!'*" whooped the youngest of the dancing warriors, a Captain with three wound-stripes and a cheeky peach face which no German bullet would ever now spoil. "Come on!"

"Here, what's this, what's this ——" broke in my Dick. "What are you doing, you people ——"

"This" was a new swirl of the whirlpool which had sucked us in just at the top of the Haymarket. A score of young men in khaki and leather kit, British, Overseas men and a huge American, were dancing round a policeman, good-humored monument of Tolerance.

They opened the ring, crying "Land-girls! Land Army! Put the girls in too; come on, dance round the girls ——"

Elizabeth and I, laughing, were borne into the middle of that circle; our men joined hands and whirled around us with the others.

"Dance, man, dance! Dance, Bobby; haven't you heard the news? There's a Peace on . . . No! You can't have my stick — some girl's snatched my perfectly good stick! *My* perfectly good stick that I've had

ever since the War! The War's over! Come on, dance round the pretty Land-girls! they helped to win it, too!"

We laughed, my chum and I, but in our eyes tears danced with smiles, and in our hearts a thrill of pride was all astir as we murmured to each other, "Did you hear that? It is true, isn't it? We did do our little bit to help!"

THE END



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