

THE NEW WORD

Any room nowadays must be the scene, for any father and any son are the dramatis personae . We could pick them up in Mayfair, in Tooting, on the Veldt, in rectories or in grocers' back parlours, dump them down on our toy stage and tell them to begin. It is a great gathering to choose from, but our needs are small. Let the company shake hands, and all go away but two.

The two who have remained (it is discovered on inquiry) are Mr. Torrance and his boy; so let us make use of them. Torrance did not linger in order to be chosen, he was anxious, like all of them, to be off; but we recognised him, and sternly signed to him to stay. Not that we knew him personally, but the fact is, we remembered him (we never forget a face) as the legal person who reads out the names of the jury before the court opens, and who brushes aside your reasons for wanting to be let off. It pleases our humour to tell Mr. Torrance that we cannot let him off.

He does not look so formidable as when last we saw him, and this is perhaps owing to our no longer being hunched with others on those unfeeling benches. It is not because he is without a wig, for we saw him, on the occasion to which we are so guardedly referring, both in a wig and out of it; he passed behind a screen without it, and immediately (as quickly as we write) popped out in it, giving it a finishing touch rather like the butler's wriggle to his coat as he goes to the door. There are the two kinds of learned brothers, those who use the screen, and those who (so far as the jury knows) sleep in their wigs. The latter are the swells, and include the judges; whom, however, we have seen in the public thoroughfares without their wigs, a horrible sight that has doubtless led many an onlooker to crime.

Mr. Torrance, then, is no great luminary; indeed, when we accompany him to his house, as we must, in order to set our scene properly, we find that it is quite a suburban affair, only one servant kept, and her niece engaged twice a week to crawl about the floors. There is no fire in the drawing-room, so the family remain on after dinner in the dining-room, which rather gives them away. There is really no one in the room but Roger. That is the truth of it, though to the unseeing eye all the family are there except Roger. They consist of Mr., Mrs., and Miss Torrance. Mr.

Torrance is enjoying his evening paper and a cigar, and every line of him is insisting stubbornly that nothing unusual is happening in the house. In the home circle (and now that we think of it, even in court) he has the reputation of being a somewhat sarcastic gentleman; he must be dogged, too, otherwise he would have ceased long ago to be sarcastic to his wife, on whom wit falls like pellets on sandbags; all the dents they make are dimples.

Mrs. Torrance is at present exquisitely employed; she is listening to Roger's step overhead. You, know what a delightful step the boy has. And what is more remarkable is that Emma is listening to it too, Emma who is seventeen, and who has been trying to keep Roger in his place ever since he first compelled her to bow to him. Things have come to a pass when a sister so openly admits that she is only number two in the house.

Remarks well worthy of being recorded fall from these two ladies as they gaze upward. 'I think--didn't I, Emma?' is the mother's contribution, while it is Emma who replies in a whisper, 'No, not yet!'

Mr. Torrance calmly reads, or seems to read, for it is not possible that there can be anything in the paper as good as this. Indeed, he occasionally casts a humorous glance at his women-folk. Perhaps he is trying to steady them. Let us hope he has some such good reason for breaking in from time to time on their entrancing occupation.

'Listen to this, dear. It is very important. The paper says, upon apparently good authority, that love laughs at locksmiths.'

His wife answers without lowering her eyes. 'Did you speak, John? I am listening.'

'Yes, I was telling you that the Hidden Hand has at last been discovered in a tub in Russell Square.'

'I hear, John. How thoughtful.'

'And so they must have been made of margarine, my love.'

'I shouldn't wonder, John.'

'Hence the name Petrograd.'

'Oh, was that the reason?'

'You will be pleased to hear, Ellen, that the honourable gentleman then resumed his seat.'

'That was nice of him.'

'As I,' good-naturedly, 'now resume mine, having made my usual impression.'

'Yes, John.'

Emma slips upstairs to peep through a keyhole, and it strikes her mother that John has been saying something. They are on too good terms to make an apology necessary. She observes blandly, 'John, I haven't heard a word you said.'

'I'm sure you haven't, woman.'

'I can't help being like this, John.'

'Go on being like yourself, dear.'

'Am I foolish?'

'Um.'

'Oh, but, John, how can you be so calm--with him up there?'

'He has been up there a good deal, you know, since we presented him to an astounded world nineteen years ago.'

'But he--he is not going to be up there much longer, John.' She sits on the arm of his chair, so openly to wheedle him that it is not worth his while to smile. Her voice is tremulous; she is a woman who can conceal nothing. 'You will be nice to him--to-night--won't you, John?'

Mr. Torrance is a little pained. 'Do I just begin to-night, Ellen?'

'Oh no, no; but I think he is rather--shy of you at times.'

'That,' he says a little wryly, 'is because he is my son, Ellen.'

'Yes--it's strange; but--yes.'

With a twinkle that is not all humorous, 'Did it ever strike you, Ellen, that I am a bit--shy of him?'

She is indeed surprised. 'Of Rogie!'

'I suppose it is because I am his father.'

She presumes that this is his sarcasm again, and lets it pass at that. It reminds her of what she wants to say.

'You are so sarcastic,' she has never quite got the meaning of this word, 'to Rogie at times. Boys don't like that, John.'

'Is that so, Ellen?'

'Of course I don't mind your being sarcastic to me --'

'Much good,' groaning, 'my being sarcastic to you! You are so seldom aware of it.'

'I am not asking you to be a mother to him, John.'

'Thank you, my dear.'

She does not know that he is sarcastic again. 'I quite understand that a man can't think all the time about his son as a mother does.'

'Can't he, Ellen? What makes you so sure of that?'

'I mean that a boy naturally goes to his mother with his troubles rather than to his father. Rogie tells me everything.'

Mr. Torrance is stung. 'I daresay he might tell me things he wouldn't tell you.'

She smiles at this. It is very probably sarcasm.

'I want you to be serious just now. Why not show more warmth to him, John?'

With an unspoken sigh, 'It would terrify him, Ellen. Two men show warmth to each other! Shame, woman!'

'Two men!' indignantly. 'John, he is only nineteen.'

'That's all,' patting her hand. 'Ellen, it is the great age to be to-day, nineteen.'

Emma darts in.

'Mother, he has unlocked the door! He is taking a last look at himself in the mirror before coming down!'

Having made the great announcement, she is off again.

'You won't be sarcastic, John?'

'I give you my word--if you promise not to break down.'

Rashly, 'I promise.' She hurries to the door and back again. 'John, I'll contrive to leave you and him alone together for a little.'

Mr. Torrance is as alarmed as if the judge had looked over the bench and asked where he was. 'For God's sake, woman, don't do that! Father and son! He'll bolt; or if he doesn't, I will.'

Emma Torrance flings open the door grandly, and we learn what all the to-do is about.

EMMA. 'Allow me to introduce 2nd Lieutenant Torrance of the Royal Sussex. Father--your son; 2nd Lieutenant Torrance--your father. Mother--your little Rogie.'

Roger, in uniform, walks in, strung up for the occasion. Or the uniform comes forward with Roger inside it. He has been a very ordinary nice boy up to now, dull at his 'books'; by an effort Mr. Torrance had sent him to an obscure boarding-school, but at sixteen it was evident that an office was the proper place for Roger. Before the war broke out he was treasurer of the local lawn tennis club, and his golf handicap was seven; he carried his little bag daily to and from the city, and his highest relaxation was giggling with girls or about them. Socially he had fallen from the standards of the home; even now that he is in his uniform the hasty might say something clever about 'temporary gentlemen.'

But there are great ideas buzzing in Roger's head, which would never have been there save for the war. At present he is chiefly conscious of his clothes. His mother embraces him with cries of rapture, while Mr. Torrance surveys him quizzically over the paper; and Emma, rushing to the piano, which is of such an old-fashioned kind that it can also be used as a sideboard, plays 'See the Conquering Hero Comes.'

ROGER, in an agony, 'Mater, do stop that chit making an ass of me.'

He must be excused for his 'mater.' That was the sort of school; and his mother is rather proud of the phrase, though it sometimes makes his father wince.

MRS. TORRANCE. 'Emma, please, don't. But I'm sure you deserve it, my darling. Doesn't he, John?'

MR. TORRANCE, missing his chance, 'Hardly yet, you know. Can't be exactly a conquering hero the first night you put them on, can you, Roger?'

ROGER, hotly, 'Did I say I was?'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'Oh, John! Do turn round, Rogie. I never did--I never did!'

EMMA. 'Isn't he a pet!'

ROGER. 'Shut up, Emma.'

MRS. TORRANCE, challenging the world, 'Though I say it who shouldn't--and yet, why shouldn't I?'

MR. TORRANCE. 'In any case you will--so go ahead, "mater."'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'I knew he would look splendid; but I--of course I couldn't know that he would look quite so splendid as this.'

ROGER. 'I know I look a bally ass. That is why I was such a time in coming down.'

MR. TORRANCE. 'We thought we heard you upstairs strutting about.'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'John! Don't mind him, Rogie.'

ROGER, haughtily, 'I don't.'

MR. TORRANCE. 'Oh!'

ROGER. 'But I wasn't strutting.'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'That dreadful sword! No, I would prefer you not to draw it, dear--not till necessity makes you.'

MR. TORRANCE. 'Come, come, Ellen; that's rather hard lines on the boy. If he isn't to draw it here, where is he to draw it?'

EMMA, with pride, 'At the Front, father.'

MR. TORRANCE. 'I thought they left them at home nowadays, Roger?'

ROGER. 'Yes, mater; you see, they are a bit in the way.'

MRS. TORRANCE, foolishly, 'Not when you have got used to them.'

MR. TORRANCE. 'That isn't what Roger means.' (His son glares.)

EMMA, who, though she has not formerly thought much of Roger, is now proud to trot by his side and will henceforth count the salutes, 'I know what he means. If you carry a sword the snipers know you are an officer, and they try to pick you off.'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'It's no wonder they are called Huns. Fancy a British sniper doing that! Roger, you will be very careful, won't you, in the trenches?'

ROGER. 'Honour bright, mater.'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'Above all, don't look up.'

MR. TORRANCE. 'The trenches ought to be so deep that they can't look up.'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'What a good idea, John.'

ROGER. 'He's making game of you, mater.'

MRS. TORRANCE, unruffled, 'Is he, my own?--very likely. Now about the question of provisions--'

ROGER. 'Oh, lummy, you talk as if I was going off to-night! I mayn't go for months and months.'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'I know--and, of course, there is a chance that you may not be needed at all.'

ROGER, poor boy, 'None of that, mater.'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'There is something I want to ask you, John--How long do you think the war is likely to last?' Her John resumes his paper. 'Rogie, I know you will laugh at me, but there are some things that I could not help getting for you.'

ROGER. 'You know, you have knitted enough things already to fit up my whole platoon.'

MRS. TORRANCE, proud almost to tears, 'His platoon.'

EMMA. 'Have you noticed how fine all the words in -oon are? Platoon!
Dragoon!'

MR. TORRANCE. 'Spitoon!'

EMMA. 'Colonel is good, but rather papaish; Major is nosey; Admiral of
the Fleet is scrumptious, but Marechal de France--that is the best of all.'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'I think there is nothing so nice as 2nd Lieutenant.'
Gulping, 'Lot of little boys.'

ROGER. 'Mater!'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'I mean, just think of their cold feet.' She produces
many parcels and displays their strange contents. 'Those are for putting
inside your socks. Those are for outside your socks. I am told that it is
also advisable to have straw in your boots.'

MR. TORRANCE. 'Have you got him some straw?'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'I thought, John, he could get it there. But if you
think--'

ROGER. 'He's making fun of you again, mater.'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'I shouldn't wonder. Here are some overalls. One is
leather and one fur, and this one is waterproof. The worst of it is that
they are from different shops, and each says that the others keep the
damp in, or draw the feet. They have such odd names, too. There are new
names for everything nowadays. Vests are called cuirasses. Are you
laughing at me, Rogie?'

MR. TORRANCE, sharply, 'If he is laughing, he ought to be ashamed of
himself.'

ROGER, barking, 'Who was laughing?'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'John!'

Emma cuffs her father playfully.

MR. TORRANCE. 'All very well, Emma, but it's past your bedtime.'

EMMA, indignantly, 'You can't expect me to sleep on a night like this.'

MR. TORRANCE. 'You can try.'

MRS. TORRANCE. '2nd Lieutenant! 2nd Lieutenant!'

MR. TORRANCE, alarmed, 'Ellen, don't break down. You promised.'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'I am not going to break down; but--but there is a photograph of Rogie when he was very small--'

MR. TORRANCE. 'Go to bed!'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'I happen--to have it in my pocket--'

ROGER. 'Don't bring it out, mater.'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'If I break down, John, it won't be owing to the picture itself so much as because of what is written on the back.'

She produces it dolefully.

MR. TORRANCE. 'Then don't look at the back.'

He takes it from her.

MRS. TORRANCE, not very hopeful of herself, 'But I know what is written on the back, "Roger John Torrance, aged two years four months, and thirty-three pounds."'

MR. TORRANCE. 'Correct.' She weeps softly. 'There, there, woman.' He signs imploringly to Emma.

EMMA, kissing him, 'I'm going to by-by. 'Night, mammy. 'Night, Rog.' She is about to offer him her cheek, then salutes instead, and rushes off, with Roger in pursuit.

MRS. TORRANCE. 'I shall leave you together, John.'

MR. TORRANCE, half liking it, but nervous, 'Do you think it's wise?' With a groan, 'You know what I am.'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'Do be nice to him, dear.' Roger's return finds her very artful indeed, 'I wonder where I put my glasses?'

ROGER. 'I'll look for them.'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'No, I remember now. They are upstairs in such a funny place that I must go myself. Do you remember, Rogie, that I hoped they would reject you on account of your eyes?'

ROGER. 'I suppose you couldn't help it.'

MRS. TORRANCE, beaming on her husband, 'Did you believe I really meant it, John?'

MR. TORRANCE, curious, 'Did you , Roger?'

ROGER. 'Of course. Didn't you, father?'

MR. TORRANCE. 'No! I knew the old lady better.'

He takes her hand.

MRS. TORRANCE, sweetly, 'I shouldn't have liked it, Rogie dear. I'll tell you something. You know your brother Harry died when he was seven. To you, I suppose, it is as if he had never been. You were barely five.'

ROGER. 'I don't remember him, mater.'

MRS. TORRANCE. 'No--no. But I do, Rogie. He would be twenty-one now; but though you and Emma grew up I have always gone on seeing him as just seven. Always till the war broke out. And now I see him a man of twenty-one, dressed in khaki, fighting for his country, same as you. I wouldn't have had one of you stay at home, though I had had a dozen. That is, if it is the noble war they all say it is. I'm not clever, Rogie, I have to take it on trust. Surely they wouldn't deceive mothers. I'll get my glasses.'

She goes away, leaving the father and son somewhat moved. It is Mr. Torrance who speaks first, gruffly.

'Like to change your mother, Roger?'

The answer is also gruff. 'What do you think?'

Then silence falls. These two are very conscious of being together, without so much as the tick of a clock to help them. The father clings to his cigar, sticks his knife into it, studies the leaf, tries crossing his legs another way. The son examines the pictures on the walls as if he had never seen them before, and is all the time edging toward the door.

Mr. Torrance wets his lips; it must be now or never, 'Not going, Roger?'

Roger counts the chairs. 'Yes, I thought--'

'Won't you--sit down and--have a chat?'

Roger is bowled over. 'A what? You and me!'

'Why not?' rather truculently.

'Oh--oh, all right,' sitting uncomfortably.

The cigar gets several more stabs.

'I suppose you catch an early train to-morrow?'

'The 5.20. I have flag-signalling at half-past six.'

'Phew! Hours before I shall be up.'

'I suppose so.'

'Well, you needn't dwell on it, Roger.'

Indignantly. 'I didn't.' He starts up. 'Good-night, father.'

'Good-night. Damn. Come back. My fault. Didn't I say I wanted to have a chat with you?'

'I thought we had had it.'

Gloomingly, 'No such luck.'

There is another pause. A frightened ember in the fire makes an appeal to some one to say something. Mr. Torrance rises. It is now he who is casting eyes at the door. He sits again, ashamed of himself.

'I like your uniform, Roger,' he says pleasantly.

Roger wriggles. 'Haven't you made fun of me enough?'

Sharply, 'I'm not making fun of you. Don't you see I'm trying to tell you that I'm proud of you?'

Roger is at last aware of it, with a sinking. He appeals, 'Good lord, father, you are not going to begin now.'

The father restrains himself.

'Do you remember, Roger, my saying that I didn't want you to smoke till you were twenty?'

'Oh, it's that, is it?' Shutting his mouth tight, 'I never promised.'

Almost with a shout, 'It's not that.' Then kindly, 'Have a cigar, my boy?'

'Me?'

A rather shaky hand, passes him a cigar case. Roger selects from it and lights up nervously. He is now prepared for the worst.

'Have you ever wondered, Roger, what sort of a fellow I am?'

Guardedly, 'Often.'

Mr. Torrance casts all sense of decency to the winds; such is one of the effects of war.

'I have often wondered what sort of fellow you are, Roger. We have both been at it on the sly. I suppose that is what makes a father and son so uncomfortable in each other's presence.'

Roger is not yet prepared to meet him half-way, but he casts a line.

'Do you feel the creeps when you are left alone with me?'

'Mortally, Roger. My first instinct is to slip away.'

'So is mine,' with deep feeling.

'You don't say so!' with such surprise that the father undoubtedly goes up a step in the son's estimation. 'I always seem to know what you are thinking, Roger.'

'Do you? Same here.'

'As a consequence it is better, it is right, it is only decent that you and I should be very chary of confidences with each other.'

Roger is relieved. 'I'm dashed glad you see it in that way.'

'Oh, quite. And yet, Roger, if you had to answer this question on oath, "Whom do you think you are most like in this world?" I don't mean superficially, but deep down in your vitals, what would you say? Your mother, your uncle, one of your friends on the golf links?'

'No.'

'Who?'

Darkly, 'You.'

'Just how I feel.'

There is such true sympathy in the manly avowal that Roger cannot but be brought closer to his father.

'It's pretty ghastly, father.'

'It is. I don't know which it is worse for.'

They consider each other without bitterness.

'You are a bit of a wag at times, Roger.'

'You soon shut me up.'

'I have heard that you sparkle more freely in my absence.'

'They say the same about you.'

'And now that you mention it, I believe it is true; and yet, isn't it a bigger satisfaction to you to catch me relishing your jokes than any other person?'

Roger's eyes open wide. 'How did you know that?'

'Because I am so bucked if I see you relishing mine.'

'Are you?' Roger's hold on the certain things in life are slipping. 'You don't show it.'

'That is because of our awkward relationship.'

Roger lapses into gloom. 'We have got to go through with it.'

His father kicks the coals. 'There's no way out.'

'No.'

'We have, as it were, signed a compact, Roger, never to let on that we care for each other. As gentlemen we must stick to it.'

'Yes. What are you getting at, father?'

'There is a war on, Roger.'

'That needn't make any difference.'

'Yes, it does. Roger, be ready; I hate to hit you without warning. I'm going to cast a grenade into the middle of you. It's this, I'm fond of you, my boy.'

Roger squirms. 'Father, if any one were to hear you!'

'They won't. The door is shut, Amy is gone to bed, and all is quiet in our street. Won't you--won't you say something civil to me in return, Roger?'

Roger looks at him and away from him. 'I sometimes--bragged about you at school.'

Mr. Torrance is absurdly pleased. 'Did you? What sort of things, Roger?'

'I--I forget.'

'Come on, Roger.'

'Is this fair, father?'

'No, I suppose it isn't.' Mr. Torrance attacks the coals again. 'You and your mother have lots of confidences, haven't you?'

'I tell her a good deal. Somehow--'

'Yes, somehow one can.' With the artfulness that comes of years, 'I'm glad you tell her everything.'

Roger looks down his cigar. 'Not everything, father. There are things--about oneself--'

'Aren't there, Roger!'

'Best not to tell her.'

'Yes--yes. If there are any of them you would care to tell me instead--just if you want to, mind--just if you are in a hole or anything?'

'No thanks,' very stiffly.

'Any little debts, for instance?'

'That's all right now. Mother--'

'She did?'

Roger is ready to jump at him. 'I was willing to speak to you about them, but--'

'She said, "Not worth while bothering father."'

'How did you know?'

'Oh, I have met your mother before, you see. Nothing else?'

'No.'

'Haven't been an ass about a girl or anything of that sort?'

'Good lord, father!'

'I shouldn't have said it. In my young days we sometimes--It's all different now.'

'I don't know, I could tell you things that would surprise you.'

'No! Not about yourself?'

'No. At least--'

'Just as you like, Roger.'

'It blew over long ago.'

'Then there's no need?'

'No--oh no. It was just--you know--the old, old story.'

He eyes his father suspiciously, but not a muscle in Mr. Torrance's countenance is out of place.

'I see. It hasn't--left you bitter about the sex, Roger, I hope?'

'Not now. She--you know what women are.'

'Yes, yes.'

'You needn't mention it to mother.'

'I won't.' Mr. Torrance is elated to share a secret with Roger about which mother is not to know. 'Think your mother and I are an aged pair, Roger?'

'I never--of course you are not young.'

'How long have you known that? I mean, it's true--but I didn't know it till quite lately.'

'That you're old?'

'Hang it, Roger, not so bad as that--elderly. This will stagger you; but I assure you that until the other day I jogged along thinking of myself as on the whole still one of the juveniles.' He makes a wry face. 'I crossed the bridge, Roger, without knowing it.'

'What made you know?'

'What makes us know all the new things, Roger?--the war. I'll tell you a secret. When we realised in August of 1914 that myriads of us were to be needed, my first thought wasn't that I had a son, but that I must get fit myself.'

'You!'

'Funny, isn't it?' says Mr. Torrance quite nastily. 'But, as I tell you, I didn't know I had ceased to be young, I went into Regent's Park and tried to run a mile.'

'Lummy, you might have killed yourself.'

'I nearly did--especially as I had put a weight on my shoulders to represent my kit. I kept at it for a week, but I knew the game was up. The discovery was pretty grim, Roger.'

'Don't you bother about that part of it. You are doing your share, taking care of mother and Emma.'

Mr. Torrance emits a laugh of self-contempt. 'I am not taking care of them. It is you who are taking care of them. My friend, you are the head of the house now.'

'Father!'

'Yes, we have come back to hard facts, and the defender of the house is the head of it.'

'Me? Fudge.'

'It's true. The thing that makes me wince most is that some of my contemporaries have managed to squeeze back: back into youth, Roger,

though I guess they were a pretty tight fit in the turnstile. There is Coxon; he is in khaki now, with his hair dyed, and when he and I meet at the club we know that we belong to different generations. I'm a decent old fellow, but I don't really count any more, while Coxon, lucky dog, is being damned daily on parade.'

'I hate your feeling it in that way, father.'

'I don't say it is a palatable draught, but when the war is over we shall all shake down to the new conditions. No fear of my being sarcastic to you then, Roger. I'll have to be jolly respectful.'

'Shut up, father!'

'You've begun, you see. Don't worry, Roger. Any rawness I might feel in having missed the chance of seeing whether I was a man--like Coxon, confound him!--is swallowed up in the pride of giving the chance to you. I'm in a shiver about you, but--It's all true, Roger, what your mother said about 2nd Lieutenants. Till the other day we were so little of a military nation that most of us didn't know there were 2nd Lieutenants. And now, in thousands of homes we feel that there is nothing else. 2nd Lieutenant! It is like a new word to us--one, I daresay, of many that the war will add to our language. We have taken to it, Roger. If a son of mine were to tarnish it--'

'I'll try not to,' Roger growls.

'If you did, I should just know that there had been something wrong about me.'

Gruffly, 'You're all right.'

'If I am, you are.' It is a winning face that Mr. Torrance turns on his son. 'I suppose you have been asking yourself of late, what if you were to turn out to be a funk!'

'Father, how did you know?'

'I know because you are me. Because ever since there was talk of this commission I have been thinking and thinking what were you thinking--so as to help you.'

This itself is a help. Roger's hand--but he withdraws it hurriedly.

'They all seem to be so frightfully brave, father,' he says wistfully.

'I expect, Roger, that the best of them had the same qualms as you before their first engagement.'

'I--I kind of think, father, that I won't be a funk.'

'I kind of think so too, Roger.' Mr. Torrance forgets himself. 'Mind you don't be rash, my boy; and for God's sake, keep your head down in the trenches.'

Roger has caught him out. He points a gay finger at his anxious father.

'You know you laughed at mother for saying that!'

'Did I? Roger, your mother thinks that I have an unfortunate manner with you.'

The magnanimous Roger says, 'Oh, I don't know. It's just the father-and-son complication.'

'That is really all it is. But she thinks I should show my affection for you more openly.'

Roger wriggles again. Earnestly, 'I wouldn't do that.' Nicely, 'Of course for this once--but in a general way I wouldn't do that. We know, you and I.'

'As long as we know, it's no one else's affair, is it?'

'That's the ticket, father.'

'Still--' It is to be feared that Mr. Torrance is now taking advantage of his superior slyness. 'Still, before your mother--to please her--eh?'

Faltering, 'I suppose it would.'

'Well, what do you say?'

'I know she would like it.'

'Of course you and I know that display of that sort is all bunkum--repellent even to our natures.'

'Lord, yes!'

'But to gratify her.'

'I should be so conscious.'

Mr. Torrance is here quite as sincere as his son. 'So should I.'

Roger considers it. 'How far would you go?'

'Oh, not far. Suppose I called you "Old Rogie"? There's not much in that.'

'It all depends on the way one says these things.'

'I should be quite casual.'

'Hum. What would you like me to call you?'

Severely, 'It isn't what would I like. But I daresay your mother would beam if you called me "dear father"'

'I don't think so?'

'You know quite well that you think so, Roger.'

'It's so effeminate.'

'Not if you say it casually.'

With something very like a snort Roger asks, 'How does one say a thing like that casually?'

'Well, for instance, you could whistle while you said it--or anything of that sort.'

'Hum. Of course you--if we were to--be like that, you wouldn't do anything.'

'How do you mean?'

'You wouldn't paw me?'

'Roger,' with some natural indignation, 'you forget yourself.' But apparently it is for him to continue. 'That reminds me of a story I heard the other day of a French general. He had asked for volunteers from his airmen for some specially dangerous job--and they all stepped forward. Pretty good that. Then three were chosen and got their orders and saluted, and were starting off when he stopped them. "Since when," he said, "have brave boys departing to the post of danger omitted to embrace their father?" They did it then. Good story?'

Roger lowers. 'They were French.'

'Yes, I said so. Don't you think it's good?'

'Why do you tell it to me?'

'Because it's a good story.'

'You are sure, father,' sternly, 'that there is no other reason?' Mr. Torrance tries to brazen it out, but he looks guilty. 'You know, father, that is barred.'

Just because he knows that he has been playing it low, Mr. Torrance snaps angrily, 'What is barred?'

'You know,' says his monitor.

Mr. Torrance shouts.

'I know that you are a young ass.'

'Really, father--'

'Hold your tongue.'

Roger can shout also.

'I must say, father--'

'Be quiet, I tell you.'

It is in the middle of this competition that the lady who dotes on them both chooses to come back, still without her spectacles.

'Oh dear! And I had hoped---Oh, John!'

Mr. Torrance would like to kick himself.

'My fault,' he says with a groan.

'But whatever is the matter?'

'Nothing, mater.' The war is already making Roger quite smart. 'Only father wouldn't do as I told him.'

Mr. Torrance cannot keep pace with his son's growth. He raps out, 'Why the dickens should I?'

Roger is imperturbable; this will be useful in France. 'You see, mater, he said I was the head of the house.'

'You, Rogie!' She goes to her husband's side. 'What nonsense!'

Roger grins. 'Do you like my joke, father?'

The father smiles upon him and is at once uproariously happy. He digs his boy boldly in the ribs.

'Roger, you scoundrel!'

'That's better,' says Mrs. Torrance at a venture.

Roger feels that things have perhaps gone far enough. 'I think I'll go to my room now. You will come up, mater?'

'Yes, dear. I shan't be five minutes, John.'

'More like half an hour.'

She hesitates. 'There is nothing wrong, is there? I thought I noticed a--a-- --'

'A certain liveliness, my dear. No, we were only having a good talk.'

'What about, John?' wistfully.

'About the war,' Roger breaks in hurriedly.

'About tactics and strategy, wasn't it, Roger?'

'Yes.'

'The fact is, Ellen, I have been helping Roger to take his first trench.' With a big breath, 'And we took it too, together, didn't we, Roger?'

'You bet,' says Roger valiantly.

'Though I suppose,' sighing, 'it is one of those trenches that the enemy retake during the night.'

'Oh, I--I don't know, father.'

The lady asks, 'Whatever are you two talking about?'

'Aha,' says Mr. Torrance in high feather, patting her, but unable to resist a slight boast, 'it is very private. We don't tell you everything, you know, Ellen.'

She beams, though she does not understand.

'Come on, mater, it's only his beastly sarcasm again. 'Night, father; I won't see you in the morning.'

'Night,' says Mr. Torrance.

But Roger has not gone yet. He seems to be looking for something--a book, perhaps. Then he begins to whistle--casually.

'Good-night, dear father.'

Mr. John Torrance is left alone, rubbing his hands.