

CHAPTER XV--THE SEA WIFE

You might not expect to find the Sea Wife in the heart of Kent, but that is where I found her, in a mean street, in the poor quarter of Maidstone. In her window she had no sign of lodgings to let, and persuasion was necessary before she could bring herself to let me sleep in her front room. In the evening I descended to the semi-subterranean kitchen, and talked with her and her old man, Thomas Mugridge by name.

And as I talked to them, all the subtleties and complexities of this tremendous machine civilisation vanished away. It seemed that I went down through the skin and the flesh to the naked soul of it, and in Thomas Mugridge and his old woman gripped hold of the essence of this remarkable English breed. I found there the spirit of the wanderlust which has lured Albion's sons across the zones; and I found there the colossal unreckoning which has tricked the English into foolish squabbings and preposterous fights, and the doggedness and stubbornness which have brought them blindly through to empire and greatness; and likewise I found that vast, incomprehensible patience which has enabled the home population to endure under the burden of it all, to toil without complaint through the weary years, and docilely to yield the best of its sons to fight and colonise to the ends of the earth.

Thomas Mugridge was seventy-one years old and a little man. It was because he was little that he had not gone for a soldier. He had

remained at home and worked. His first recollections were connected with work. He knew nothing else but work. He had worked all his days, and at seventy-one he still worked. Each morning saw him up with the lark and afield, a day labourer, for as such he had been born. Mrs. Mugridge was seventy-three. From seven years of age she had worked in the fields, doing a boy's work at first, and later a man's. She still worked, keeping the house shining, washing, boiling, and baking, and, with my advent, cooking for me and shaming me by making my bed. At the end of threescore years and more of work they possessed nothing, had nothing to look forward to save more work. And they were contented. They expected nothing else, desired nothing else.

They lived simply. Their wants were few--a pint of beer at the end of the day, sipped in the semi-subterranean kitchen, a weekly paper to pore over for seven nights hand-running, and conversation as meditative and vacant as the chewing of a heifer's cud. From a wood engraving on the wall a slender, angelic girl looked down upon them, and underneath was the legend: "Our Future Queen." And from a highly coloured lithograph alongside looked down a stout and elderly lady, with underneath: "Our Queen--Diamond Jubilee."

"What you earn is sweetest," quoth Mrs. Mugridge, when I suggested that it was about time they took a rest.

"No, an' we don't want help," said Thomas Mugridge, in reply to my question as to whether the children lent them a hand.

"We'll work till we dry up and blow away, mother an' me," he added; and Mrs. Mugridge nodded her head in vigorous indorsement.

Fifteen children she had borne, and all were away and gone, or dead. The "baby," however, lived in Maidstone, and she was twenty-seven. When the children married they had their hands full with their own families and troubles, like their fathers and mothers before them.

Where were the children? Ah, where were they not? Lizzie was in Australia; Mary was in Buenos Ayres; Poll was in New York; Joe had died in India--and so they called them up, the living and the dead, soldier and sailor, and colonist's wife, for the traveller's sake who sat in their kitchen.

They passed me a photograph. A trim young fellow, in soldier's garb looked out at me.

"And which son is this?" I asked.

They laughed a hearty chorus. Son! Nay, grandson, just back from Indian service and a soldier-trumpeter to the King. His brother was in the same regiment with him. And so it ran, sons and daughters, and grand sons and daughters, world-wanderers and empire-builders, all of them, while the old folks stayed at home and worked at building empire too.

"There dwells a wife by the Northern Gate,
And a wealthy wife is she;
She breeds a breed o' rovin' men
And casts them over sea.

"And some are drowned in deep water,
And some in sight of shore;
And word goes back to the weary wife,
And ever she sends more."

But the Sea Wife's child-bearing is about done. The stock is running out, and the planet is filling up. The wives of her sons may carry on the breed, but her work is past. The erstwhile men of England are now the men of Australia, of Africa, of America. England has sent forth "the best she breeds" for so long, and has destroyed those that remained so fiercely, that little remains for her to do but to sit down through the long nights and gaze at royalty on the wall.

The true British merchant seaman has passed away. The merchant service is no longer a recruiting ground for such sea dogs as fought with Nelson at Trafalgar and the Nile. Foreigners largely man the merchant ships, though Englishmen still continue to officer them and to prefer foreigners for'ard. In South Africa the colonial teaches the islander how to shoot, and the officers muddle and blunder; while at home the street people play hysterically at mafficking, and the War Office lowers the stature for enlistment.

It could not be otherwise. The most complacent Britisher cannot hope to draw off the life-blood, and underfeed, and keep it up forever. The average Mrs. Thomas Mugridge has been driven into the city, and she is not breeding very much of anything save an anaemic and sickly progeny which cannot find enough to eat. The strength of the English-speaking race to-day is not in the tight little island, but in the New World overseas, where are the sons and daughters of Mrs. Thomas Mugridge. The Sea Wife by the Northern Gate has just about done her work in the world, though she does not realize it. She must sit down and rest her tired loins for a space; and if the casual ward and the workhouse do not await her, it is because of the sons and daughters she has reared up against the day of her feebleness and decay.