CHAPTER THE THIRD

THE REVOLVER

Section 1

"THAT comet is going to hit the earth!"

So said one of the two men who got into the train and settled down.

"Ah!" said the other man.

"They do say that it is made of gas, that comet. We sha'n't blow up, shall us?". . .

What did it matter to me?

I was thinking of revenge--revenge against the primary conditions of my being. I was thinking of Nettie and her lover. I was firmly resolved he should not have her--though I had to kill them both to prevent it. I did not care what else might happen, if only that end was ensured. All my thwarted passions had turned to rage. I would have accepted eternal torment that night without a second thought, to be certain of revenge. A hundred possibilities of action, a

hundred stormy situations, a whirl of violent schemes, chased one another through my shamed, exasperated mind. The sole prospect I could endure was of some gigantic, inexorably cruel vindication of my humiliated self.

And Nettie? I loved Nettie still, but now with the intensest jealousy, with the keen, unmeasuring hatred of wounded pride, and baffled, passionate desire.

Section 2

As I came down the hill from Clayton Crest--for my shilling and a penny only permitted my traveling by train as far as Two-Mile Stone, and thence I had to walk over the hill--I remember very vividly a little man with a shrill voice who was preaching under a gas-lamp against a hoarding to a thin crowd of Sunday evening loafers. He was a short man, bald, with a little fair curly beard and hair and watery blue eyes, and he was preaching that the end of the world drew near.

I think that is the first time I heard any one link the comet with the end of the world. He had got that jumbled up with international politics and prophecies from the Book of Daniel.

I stopped to hear him only for a moment or so. I do not think I should have halted at all but his crowd blocked my path, and the sight of his queer wild expression, the gesture of his upward-pointing finger, held me.

"There is the end of all your Sins and Follies," he bawled. "There! There is the Star of Judgments, the Judgments of the most High God! It is appointed unto all men to die--unto all men to die"--his voice changed to a curious flat chant--"and after death, the Judgment! The Judgment!"

I pushed and threaded my way through the bystanders and went on, and his curious harsh flat voice pursued me. I went on with the thoughts that had occupied me before--where I could buy a revolver, and how I might master its use--and probably I should have forgotten all about him had he not taken a part in the hideous dream that ended the little sleep I had that night. For the most part I lay awake thinking of Nettie and her lover.

Then came three strange days--three days that seem now to have been wholly concentrated upon one business.

This dominant business was the purchase of my revolver. I held myself resolutely to the idea that I must either restore myself by some extraordinary act of vigor and violence in Nettie's eyes or I must kill her. I would not let myself fall away from that. I felt

that if I let this matter pass, my last shred of pride and honor would pass with it, that for the rest of my life I should never deserve the slightest respect or any woman's love. Pride kept me to my purpose between my gusts of passion.

Yet it was not easy to buy that revolver.

I had a kind of shyness of the moment when I should have to face the shopman, and I was particularly anxious to have a story ready if he should see fit to ask questions why I bought such a thing. I determined to say I was going to Texas, and I thought it might prove useful there. Texas in those days had the reputation of a wild lawless land. As I knew nothing of caliber or impact, I wanted also to be able to ask with a steady face at what distance a man or woman could be killed by the weapon that might be offered me. I was pretty cool-headed in relation to such practical aspects of my affair. I had some little difficulty in finding a gunsmith. In Clayton there were some rook-rifles and so forth in a cycle shop, but the only revolvers these people had impressed me as being too small and toylike for my purpose. It was in a pawnshop window in the narrow High Street of Swathinglea that I found my choice, a reasonably clumsy and serious-looking implement ticketed "As used in the American army."

I had drawn out my balance from the savings bank, matter of two pounds and more, to make this purchase, and I found it at last

a very easy transaction. The pawnbroker told me where I could get ammunition, and I went home that night with bulging pockets, an armed man.

The purchase of my revolver was, I say, the chief business of those days, but you must not think I was so intent upon it as to be insensible to the stirring things that were happening in the streets through which I went seeking the means to effect my purpose. They were full of murmurings: the whole region of the Four Towns scowled lowering from its narrow doors. The ordinary healthy flow of people going to work, people going about their business, was chilled and checked. Numbers of men stood about the streets in knots and groups, as corpuscles gather and catch in the blood-vessels in the opening stages of inflammation. The woman looked haggard and worried. The ironworkers had refused the proposed reduction of their wages, and the lockout had begun. They were already at "play." The Conciliation Board was doing its best to keep the coal-miners and masters from a breach, but young Lord Redcar, the greatest of our coal owners and landlord of all Swathinglea and half Clayton, was taking a fine upstanding attitude that made the breach inevitable. He was a handsome young man, a gallant young man; his pride revolted at the idea of being dictated to by a "lot of bally miners," and he meant, he said, to make a fight for it. The world had treated him sumptuously from his earliest years; the shares in the common stock of five thousand people had gone to pay for his handsome upbringing, and large, romantic, expensive ambitions filled

his generously nurtured mind. He had early distinguished himself at Oxford by his scornful attitude towards democracy. There was something that appealed to the imagination in his fine antagonism to the crowd--on the one hand, was the brilliant young nobleman, picturesquely alone; on the other, the ugly, inexpressive multitude, dressed inelegantly in shop-clothes, under-educated, under-fed, envious, base, and with a wicked disinclination for work and a wicked appetite for the good things it could so rarely get. For common imaginative purposes one left out the policeman from the design, the stalwart policeman protecting his lordship, and ignored the fact that while Lord Redcar had his hands immediately and legally on the workman's shelter and bread, they could touch him to the skin only by some violent breach of the law.

He lived at Lowchester House, five miles or so beyond Checkshill; but partly to show how little he cared for his antagonists, and partly no doubt to keep himself in touch with the negotiations that were still going on, he was visible almost every day in and about the Four Towns, driving that big motor car of his that could take him sixty miles an hour. The English passion for fair play one might have thought sufficient to rob this bold procedure of any dangerous possibilities, but he did not go altogether free from insult, and on one occasion at least an intoxicated Irish woman shook her fist at him. . . .

A dark, quiet crowd, that was greater each day, a crowd more than

half women, brooded as a cloud will sometimes brood permanently upon a mountain crest, in the market-place outside the Clayton Town Hall, where the conference was held. . . .

I consider myself justified in regarding Lord Redcar's passing automobile with a special animosity because of the leaks in our roof.

We held our little house on lease; the owner was a mean, saving old man named Pettigrew, who lived in a villa adorned with plaster images of dogs and goats, at Overcastle, and in spite of our specific agreement, he would do no repairs for us at all. He rested secure in my mother's timidity. Once, long ago, she had been behind-hand with her rent, with half of her quarter's rent, and he had extended the days of grace a month; her sense that some day she might need the same mercy again made her his abject slave. She was afraid even to ask that he should cause the roof to be mended for fear he might take offence. But one night the rain poured in on her bed and gave her a cold, and stained and soaked her poor old patchwork counterpane. Then she got me to compose an excessively polite letter to old Pettigrew, begging him as a favor to perform his legal obligations. It is part of the general imbecility of those days that such one-sided law as existed was a profound mystery to the common people, its provisions impossible to ascertain, its machinery impossible to set in motion. Instead of the clearly written code, the lucid statements of rules and principles that are now at the service of every one,

the law was the muddle secret of the legal profession. Poor people, overworked people, had constantly to submit to petty wrongs because of the intolerable uncertainty not only of law but of cost, and of the demands upon time and energy, proceedings might make. There was indeed no justice for any one too poor to command a good solicitor's deference and loyalty; there was nothing but rough police protection and the magistrate's grudging or eccentric advice for the mass of the population. The civil law, in particular, was a mysterious upper-class weapon, and I can imagine no injustice that would have been sufficient to induce my poor old mother to appeal to it.

All this begins to sound incredible. I can only assure you that it was so.

But I, when I learned that old Pettigrew had been down to tell my mother all about his rheumatism, to inspect the roof, and to allege that nothing was needed, gave way to my most frequent emotion in those days, a burning indignation, and took the matter into my own hands. I wrote and asked him, with a withering air of technicality, to have the roof repaired "as per agreement," and added, "if not done in one week from now we shall be obliged to take proceedings." I had not mentioned this high line of conduct to my mother at first, and so when old Pettigrew came down in a state of great agitation with my letter in his hand, she was almost equally agitated.

"How could you write to old Mr. Pettigrew like that?" she asked me.

I said that old Pettigrew was a shameful old rascal, or words to that effect, and I am afraid I behaved in a very undutiful way to her when she said that she had settled everything with him--she wouldn't say how, but I could guess well enough--and that I was to promise her, promise her faithfully, to do nothing more in the matter. I wouldn't promise her.

And--having nothing better to employ me then--I presently went raging to old Pettigrew in order to put the whole thing before him in what I considered the proper light. Old Pettigrew evaded my illumination; he saw me coming up his front steps--I can still see his queer old nose and the crinkled brow over his eye and the little wisp of gray hair that showed over the corner of his window-blind--and he instructed his servant to put up the chain when she answered the door, and to tell me that he would not see me. So I had to fall back upon my pen.

Then it was, as I had no idea what were the proper "proceedings" to take, the brilliant idea occurred to me of appealing to Lord Redcar as the ground landlord, and, as it were, our feudal chief, and pointing out to him that his security for his rent was depreciating in old Pettigrew's hands. I added some general observations on leaseholds, the taxation of ground rents, and the private ownership

of the soil. And Lord Redcar, whose spirit revolted at democracy, and who cultivated a pert humiliating manner with his inferiors to show as much, earned my distinguished hatred for ever by causing his secretary to present his compliments to me, and his request that I would mind my own business and leave him to manage his. At which I was so greatly enraged that I first tore this note into minute innumerable pieces, and then dashed it dramatically all over the floor of my room--from which, to keep my mother from the job, I afterward had to pick it up laboriously on all-fours.

I was still meditating a tremendous retort, an indictment of all Lord Redcar's class, their manners, morals, economic and political crimes, when my trouble with Nettie arose to swamp all minor troubles. Yet, not so completely but that I snarled aloud when his lordship's motor-car whizzed by me, as I went about upon my long meandering quest for a weapon. And I discovered after a time that my mother had bruised her knee and was lame. Fearing to irritate me by bringing the thing before me again, she had set herself to move her bed out of the way of the drip without my help, and she had knocked her knee. All her poor furnishings, I discovered, were cowering now close to the peeling bedroom walls; there had come a vast discoloration of the ceiling, and a washing-tub was in occupation of the middle of her chamber. . . .

It is necessary that I should set these things before you, should give the key of inconvenience and uneasiness in which all things

were arranged, should suggest the breath of trouble that stirred along the hot summer streets, the anxiety about the strike, the rumors and indignations, the gatherings and meetings, the increasing gravity of the policemen's faces, the combative headlines of the local papers, the knots of picketers who scrutinized any one who passed near the silent, smokeless forges, but in my mind, you must understand, such impressions came and went irregularly; they made a moving background, changing undertones, to my preoccupation by that darkly shaping purpose to which a revolver was so imperative an essential.

Along the darkling streets, amidst the sullen crowds, the thought of Nettie, my Nettie, and her gentleman lover made ever a vivid inflammatory spot of purpose in my brain.

Section 3

It was three days after this--on Wednesday, that is to say--that the first of those sinister outbreaks occurred that ended in the bloody affair of Peacock Grove and the flooding out of the entire line of the Swathinglea collieries. It was the only one of these disturbances I was destined to see, and at most a mere trivial preliminary of that struggle.

The accounts that have been written of this affair vary very widely. To read them is to realize the extraordinary carelessness of truth that dishonored the press of those latter days. In my bureau I have several files of the daily papers of the old time--I collected them, as a matter of fact--and three or four of about that date I have just this moment taken out and looked through to refresh my impression of what I saw. They lie before me--queer, shriveled, incredible things; the cheap paper has already become brittle and brown and split along the creases, the ink faded or smeared, and I have to handle them with the utmost care when I glance among their raging headlines. As I sit here in this serene place, their quality throughout, their arrangement, their tone, their arguments and exhortations, read as though they came from drugged and drunken men. They give one the effect of faded bawling, of screams and shouts heard faintly in a little gramophone. . . . It is only on Monday I find, and buried deep below the war news, that these publications contain any intimation that unusual happenings were forward in Clayton and Swathinglea.

What I saw was towards evening. I had been learning to shoot with my new possession. I had walked out with it four or five miles across a patch of moorland and down to a secluded little coppice full of blue-bells, halfway along the high-road between Leet and Stafford. Here I had spent the afternoon, experimenting and practising with careful deliberation and grim persistence. I had brought an old kite-frame of cane with me, that folded and unfolded, and each

shot-hole I made I marked and numbered to compare with my other endeavors. At last I was satisfied that I could hit a playing-card at thirty paces nine times out of ten; the light was getting too bad for me to see my penciled bull's-eye, and in that state of quiet moodiness that sometimes comes with hunger to passionate men, I returned by the way of Swathinglea towards my home.

The road I followed came down between banks of wretched-looking working-men's houses, in close-packed rows on either side, and took upon itself the role of Swathinglea High Street, where, at a lamp and a pillar-box, the steam-trams began. So far that dirty hot way had been unusually quiet and empty, but beyond the corner, where the first group of beershops clustered, it became populous. It was very quiet still, even the children were a little inactive, but there were a lot of people standing dispersedly in little groups, and with a general direction towards the gates of the Bantock Burden coalpit.

The place was being picketed, although at that time the miners were still nominally at work, and the conferences between masters and men still in session at Clayton Town Hall. But one of the men employed at the Bantock Burden pit, Jack Briscoe, was a socialist, and he had distinguished himself by a violent letter upon the crisis to the leading socialistic paper in England, The Clarion, in which he had adventured among the motives of Lord Redcar. The publication of this had been followed by instant dismissal. As Lord Redcar wrote

a day or so later to the Times--I have that Times, I have all the London papers of the last month before the Change--

"The man was paid off and kicked out. Any self-respecting employer would do the same." The thing had happened overnight, and the men did not at once take a clear line upon what was, after all, a very intricate and debatable occasion. But they came out in a sort of semiofficial strike from all Lord Redcar's collieries beyond the canal that besets Swathinglea. They did so without formal notice, committing a breach of contract by this sudden cessation. But in the long labor struggles of the old days the workers were constantly putting themselves in the wrong and committing illegalities through that overpowering craving for dramatic promptness natural to uneducated minds.

All the men had not come out of the Bantock Burden pit. Something was wrong there, an indecision if nothing else; the mine was still working, and there was a rumor that men from Durham had been held in readiness by Lord Redcar, and were already in the mine. Now, it is absolutely impossible to ascertain certainly how things stood at that time. The newspapers say this and that, but nothing trustworthy remains.

I believe I should have gone striding athwart the dark stage of that stagnant industrial drama without asking a question, if Lord Redcar had not chanced to come upon the scene about the same time

as myself and incontinently end its stagnation.

He had promised that if the men wanted a struggle he would put up the best fight they had ever had, and he had been active all that afternoon in meeting the quarrel half way, and preparing as conspicuously as possible for the scratch force of "blacklegs"--as we called them--who were, he said and we believed, to replace the strikers in his pits.

I was an eye-witness of the whole of the affair outside the Bantock Burden pit, and--I do not know what happened.

Picture to yourself how the thing came to me.

I was descending a steep, cobbled, excavated road between banked-up footways, perhaps six feet high, upon which, in a monotonous series, opened the living room doors of rows of dark, low cottages. The perspective of squat blue slate roofs and clustering chimneys drifted downward towards the irregular open space before the colliery--a space covered with coaly, wheel-scarred mud, with a patch of weedy dump to the left and the colliery gates to the right. Beyond, the High Street with shops resumed again in good earnest and went on, and the lines of the steam-tramway that started out from before my feet, and were here shining and acutely visible with reflected skylight and here lost in a shadow, took up for one acute moment the greasy yellow irradiation of a newly lit gaslamp

as they vanished round the bend. Beyond, spread a darkling marsh of homes, an infinitude of little smoking hovels, and emergent, meager churches, public-houses, board schools, and other buildings amidst the prevailing chimneys of Swathinglea. To the right, very clear and relatively high, the Bantock Burden pit-mouth was marked by a gaunt lattice bearing a great black wheel, very sharp and distinct in the twilight, and beyond, in an irregular perspective, were others following the lie of the seams. The general effect, as one came down the hill, was of a dark compressed life beneath a very high and wide and luminous evening sky, against which these pit-wheels rose. And ruling the calm spaciousness of that heaven was the great comet, now green-white, and wonderful for all who had eyes to see.

The fading afterglow of the sunset threw up all the contours and skyline to the west, and the comet rose eastward out of the pouring tumult of smoke from Bladden's forges. The moon had still to rise.

By this time the comet had begun to assume the cloudlike form still familiar through the medium of a thousand photographs and sketches. At first it had been an almost telescopic speck; it had brightened to the dimensions of the greatest star in the heavens; it had still grown, hour by hour, in its incredibly swift, its noiseless and inevitable rush upon our earth, until it had equaled and surpassed the moon. Now it was the most splendid thing this sky of earth has ever held. I have never seen a photograph that gave a proper idea

of it. Never at any time did it assume the conventional tailed outline, comets are supposed to have. Astronomers talked of its double tail, one preceding it and one trailing behind it, but these were foreshortened to nothing, so that it had rather the form of a bellying puff of luminous smoke with an intenser, brighter heart. It rose a hot yellow color, and only began to show its distinctive greenness when it was clear of the mists of the evening.

It compelled attention for a space. For all my earthly concentration of mind, I could but stare at it for a moment with a vague anticipation that, after all, in some way so strange and glorious an object must have significance, could not possibly be a matter of absolute indifference to the scheme and values of my life.

But how?

I thought of Parload. I thought of the panic and uneasiness that was spreading in this very matter, and the assurances of scientific men that the thing weighed so little--at the utmost a few hundred tons of thinly diffused gas and dust--that even were it to smite this earth fully, nothing could possibly ensue. And, after all, said I, what earthly significance has any one found in the stars?

Then, as one still descended, the houses and buildings rose up, the presence of those watching groups of people, the tension of the situation; and one forgot the sky.

Preoccupied with myself and with my dark dream about Nettie and my honor, I threaded my course through the stagnating threat of this gathering, and was caught unawares, when suddenly the whole scene flashed into drama. . . .

The attention of every one swung round with an irresistible magnetism towards the High Street, and caught me as a rush of waters might catch a wisp of hay. Abruptly the whole crowd was sounding one note. It was not a word, it was a sound that mingled threat and protest, something between a prolonged "Ah!" and "Ugh!" Then with a hoarse intensity of anger came a low heavy booing, "Boo! boo--oo!" a note stupidly expressive of animal savagery. "Toot, toot!" said Lord Redcar's automobile in ridiculous repartee. "Toot, toot!" One heard it whizzing and throbbing as the crowd obliged it to slow down.

Everybody seemed in motion towards the colliery gates, I, too, with the others.

I heard a shout. Through the dark figures about me I saw the motor-car stop and move forward again, and had a glimpse of something writhing on the ground.

It was alleged afterwards that Lord Redcar was driving, and that he quite deliberately knocked down a little boy who would not get out of his way. It is asserted with equal confidence that the boy

was a man who tried to pass across the front of the motor-car as it came slowly through the crowd, who escaped by a hair's breadth, and then slipped on the tram-rail and fell down. I have both accounts set forth, under screaming headlines, in two of these sere newspapers upon my desk. No one could ever ascertain the truth. Indeed, in such a blind tumult of passion, could there be any truth?

There was a rush forward, the horn of the car sounded, everything swayed violently to the right for perhaps ten yards or so, and there was a report like a pistol-shot.

For a moment every one seemed running away. A woman, carrying a shawl-wrapped child, blundered into me, and sent me reeling back. Every one thought of firearms, but, as a matter of fact, something had gone wrong with the motor, what in those old-fashioned contrivances was called a backfire. A thin puff of bluish smoke hung in the air behind the thing. The majority of the people scattered back in a disorderly fashion, and left a clear space about the struggle that centered upon the motor-car.

The man or boy who had fallen was lying on the ground with no one near him, a black lump, an extended arm and two sprawling feet. The motor-car had stopped, and its three occupants were standing up. Six or seven black figures surrounded the car, and appeared to be holding on to it as if to prevent it from starting again; one--it was Mitchell, a well-known labor leader--argued in fierce

low tones with Lord Redcar. I could not hear anything they said, I was not near enough. Behind me the colliery gates were open, and there was a sense of help coming to the motor-car from that direction. There was an unoccupied muddy space for fifty yards, perhaps, between car and gate, and then the wheels and head of the pit rose black against the sky. I was one of a rude semicircle of people that hung as yet indeterminate in action about this dispute.

It was natural, I suppose, that my fingers should close upon the revolver in my pocket.

I advanced with the vaguest intentions in the world, and not so quickly but that several men hurried past me to join the little knot holding up the car.

Lord Redcar, in his big furry overcoat, towered up over the group about him; his gestures were free and threatening, and his voice loud. He made a fine figure there, I must admit; he was a big, fair, handsome young man with a fine tenor voice and an instinct for gallant effect. My eyes were drawn to him at first wholly. He seemed a symbol, a triumphant symbol, of all that the theory of aristocracy claims, of all that filled my soul with resentment. His chauffeur sat crouched together, peering at the crowd under his lordship's arm. But Mitchell showed as a sturdy figure also, and his voice was firm and loud.

"You've hurt that lad," said Mitchell, over and over again. "You'll wait here till you see if he's hurt."

"I'll wait here or not as I please," said Redcar; and to the chauffeur, "Here! get down and look at it!"

"You'd better not get down," said Mitchell; and the chauffeur stood bent and hesitating on the step.

The man on the back seat stood up, leant forward, and spoke to Lord Redcar, and for the first time my attention was drawn to him. It was young Verrall! His handsome face shone clear and fine in the green pallor of the comet.

I ceased to hear the quarrel that was raising the voice of Mitchell and Lord Redcar. This new fact sent them spinning into the background. Young Verrall!

It was my own purpose coming to meet me half way.

There was to be a fight here, it seemed certain to come to a scuffle, and here we were--

What was I to do? I thought very swiftly. Unless my memory cheats me, I acted with swift decision. My hand tightened on my revolver, and then I remembered it was unloaded. I had thought my course out

in an instant. I turned round and pushed my way out of the angry crowd that was now surging back towards the motor-car.

It would be quiet and out of sight, I thought, among the dump heaps across the road, and there I might load unobserved. . .

A big young man striding forward with his fists clenched, halted for one second at the sight of me.

"What!" said he. "Ain't afraid of them, are you?"

I glanced over my shoulder and back at him, was near showing him my pistol, and the expression changed in his eyes. He hung perplexed at me. Then with a grunt he went on.

I heard the voices growing loud and sharp behind me.

I hesitated, half turned towards the dispute, then set off running towards the heaps. Some instinct told me not to be detected loading. I was cool enough therefore to think of the aftermath of the thing I meant to do.

I looked back once again towards the swaying discussion--or was it a fight now? and then I dropped into the hollow, knelt among the weeds, and loaded with eager trembling fingers. I loaded one chamber, got up and went back a dozen paces, thought of possibilities,

vacillated, returned and loaded all the others. I did it slowly because I felt a little clumsy, and at the end came a moment of inspection--had I forgotten any thing? And then for a few seconds I crouched before I rose, resisting the first gust of reaction against my impulse. I took thought, and for a moment that great green-white meteor overhead swam back into my conscious mind. For the first time then I linked it clearly with all the fierce violence that had crept into human life. I joined up that with what I meant to do. I was going to shoot young Verrall as it were under the benediction of that green glare.

But about Nettie?

I found it impossible to think out that obvious complication.

I came up over the heap again, and walked slowly back towards the wrangle.

Of course I had to kill him. . . .

Now I would have you believe I did not want to murder young Verrall at all at that particular time. I had not pictured such circumstances as these, I had never thought of him in connection with Lord Redcar and our black industrial world. He was in that distant other world of Checkshill, the world of parks and gardens, the world of sunlit emotions and Nettie. His appearance here was disconcerting. I was

taken by surprise. I was too tired and hungry to think clearly, and the hard implication of our antagonism prevailed with me. In the tumult of my passed emotions I had thought constantly of conflicts, confrontations, deeds of violence, and now the memory of these things took possession of me as though they were irrevocable resolutions.

There was a sharp exclamation, the shriek of a woman, and the crowd came surging back. The fight had begun.

Lord Redcar, I believe, had jumped down from his car and felled Mitchell, and men were already running out to his assistance from the colliery gates.

I had some difficulty in shoving through the crowd; I can still remember very vividly being jammed at one time between two big men so that my arms were pinned to my sides, but all the other details are gone out of my mind until I found myself almost violently projected forward into the "scrap."

I blundered against the corner of the motor-car, and came round it face to face with young Verrall, who was descending from the back compartment. His face was touched with orange from the automobile's big lamps, which conflicted with the shadows of the comet light, and distorted him oddly. That effect lasted but an instant, but it put me out. Then he came a step forward, and the ruddy lights and queerness vanished.

I don't think he recognized me, but he perceived immediately I meant attacking. He struck out at once at me a haphazard blow, and touched me on the cheek.

Instinctively I let go of the pistol, snatched my right hand out of my pocket and brought it up in a belated parry, and then let out with my left full in his chest.

It sent him staggering, and as he went back I saw recognition mingle with astonishment in his face.

"You know me, you swine," I cried and hit again.

Then I was spinning sideways, half-stunned, with a huge lump of a fist under my jaw. I had an impression of Lord Redcar as a great furry bulk, towering like some Homeric hero above the fray. I went down before him--it made him seem to rush up--and he ignored me further. His big flat voice counseled young Verrall--

"Cut, Teddy! It won't do. The picketa's got i'on bahs. . . ."

Feet swayed about me, and some hobnailed miner kicked my ankle and went stumbling. There were shouts and curses, and then everything had swept past me. I rolled over on my face and beheld the chauffeur, young Verrall, and Lord Redcar--the latter holding up his long

skirts of fur, and making a grotesque figure--one behind the other, in full bolt across a coldly comet-lit interval, towards the open gates of the colliery.

I raised myself up on my hands.

Young Verrall!

I had not even drawn my revolver--I had forgotten it. I was covered with coaly mud--knees, elbows, shoulders, back. I had not even drawn my revolver! . . .

A feeling of ridiculous impotence overwhelmed me. I struggled painfully to my feet.

I hesitated for a moment towards the gates of the colliery, and then went limping homeward, thwarted, painful, confused, and ashamed. I had not the heart nor desire to help in the wrecking and burning of Lord Redcar's motor.

Section 4

In the night, fever, pain, fatigue--it may be the indigestion of my supper of bread and cheese--roused me at last out of a hag-rid

sleep to face despair. I was a soul lost amidst desolations and shame, dishonored, evilly treated, hopeless. I raged against the God I denied, and cursed him as I lay.

And it was in the nature of my fever, which was indeed only half fatigue and illness, and the rest the disorder of passionate youth, that Nettie, a strangely distorted Nettie, should come through the brief dreams that marked the exhaustions of that vigil, to dominate my misery. I was sensible, with an exaggerated distinctness, of the intensity of her physical charm for me, of her every grace and beauty; she took to herself the whole gamut of desire in me and the whole gamut of pride. She, bodily, was my lost honor. It was not only loss but disgrace to lose her. She stood for life and all that was denied; she mocked me as a creature of failure and defeat. My spirit raised itself towards her, and then the bruise upon my jaw glowed with a dull heat, and I rolled in the mud again before my rivals.

There were times when something near madness took me, and I gnashed my teeth and dug my nails into my hands and ceased to curse and cry out only by reason of the insufficiency of words. And once towards dawn I got out of bed, and sat by my looking-glass with my revolver loaded in my hand. I stood up at last and put it carefully in my drawer and locked it--out of reach of any gusty impulse. After that I slept for a little while.

Such nights were nothing rare and strange in that old order of the world. Never a city, never a night the whole year round, but amidst those who slept were those who waked, plumbing the deeps of wrath and misery. Countless thousands there were so ill, so troubled, they agonize near to the very border-line of madness, each one the center of a universe darkened and lost. . .

The next day I spent in gloomy lethargy.

I had intended to go to Checkshill that day, but my bruised ankle was too swollen for that to be possible. I sat indoors in the ill-lit downstairs kitchen, with my foot bandaged, and mused darkly and read. My dear old mother waited on me, and her brown eyes watched me and wondered at my black silences, my frowning preoccupations. I had not told her how it was my ankle came to be bruised and my clothes muddy. She had brushed my clothes in the morning before I got up.

Ah well! Mothers are not treated in that way now. That I suppose must console me. I wonder how far you will be able to picture that dark, grimy, untidy room, with its bare deal table, its tattered wall paper, the saucepans and kettle on the narrow, cheap, but by no means economical range, the ashes under the fireplace, the rust-spotted steel fender on which my bandaged feet rested; I wonder how near you can come to seeing the scowling pale-faced hobbledehoy I was, unshaven and collarless, in the Windsor chair, and the little

timid, dirty, devoted old woman who hovered about me with love peering out from her puckered eyelids. . .

When she went out to buy some vegetables in the middle of the morning she got me a half-penny journal. It was just such a one as these upon my desk, only that the copy I read was damp from the press, and these are so dry and brittle, they crack if I touch them. I have a copy of the actual issue I read that morning; it was a paper called emphatically the New Paper, but everybody bought it and everybody called it the "yell." It was full that morning of stupendous news and still more stupendous headlines, so stupendous that for a little while I was roused from my egotistical broodings to wider interests. For it seemed that Germany and England were on the brink of war.

Of all the monstrous irrational phenomena of the former time, war was certainly the most strikingly insane. In reality it was probably far less mischievous than such quieter evil as, for example, the general acquiescence in the private ownership of land, but its evil consequences showed so plainly that even in those days of stifling confusion one marveled at it. On no conceivable grounds was there any sense in modern war. Save for the slaughter and mangling of a multitude of people, the destruction of vast quantities of material, and the waste of innumerable units of energy, it effected nothing. The old war of savage and barbaric nations did at least change humanity, you assumed yourselves to be a superior tribe in physique

and discipline, you demonstrated this upon your neighbors, and if successful you took their land and their women and perpetuated and enlarged your superiority. The new war changed nothing but the color of maps, the design of postage stamps, and the relationship of a few accidentally conspicuous individuals. In one of the last of these international epileptic fits, for example, the English, with much dysentery and bad poetry, and a few hundred deaths in battle, conquered the South African Boers at a gross cost of about three thousand pounds per head--they could have bought the whole of that preposterous imitation of a nation for a tenth of that sum--and except for a few substitutions of personalities, this group of partially corrupt officials in the place of that, and so forth, the permanent change was altogether insignificant. (But an excitable young man in Austria committed suicide when at length the Transvaal ceased to be a "nation.") Men went through the seat of that war after it was all over, and found humanity unchanged, except for a general impoverishment, and the convenience of an unlimited supply of empty ration tins and barbed wire and cartridge cases--unchanged and resuming with a slight perplexity all its old habits and misunderstandings, the nigger still in his slum-like kraal, the white in his ugly ill-managed shanty. . .

But we in England saw all these things, or did not see them, through the mirage of the New Paper, in a light of mania. All my adolescence from fourteen to seventeen went to the music of that monstrous resonating futility, the cheering, the anxieties, the

songs and the waving of flags, the wrongs of generous Buller and the glorious heroism of De Wet--who ALWAYS got away; that was the great point about the heroic De Wet--and it never occurred to us that the total population we fought against was less than half the number of those who lived cramped ignoble lives within the compass of the Four Towns.

But before and after that stupid conflict of stupidities, a greater antagonism was coming into being, was slowly and quietly defining itself as a thing inevitable, sinking now a little out of attention only to resume more emphatically, now flashing into some acute definitive expression and now percolating and pervading some new region of thought, and that was the antagonism of Germany and Great Britain.

When I think of that growing proportion of readers who belong entirely to the new order, who are growing up with only the vaguest early memories of the old world, I find the greatest difficulty in writing down the unintelligible confusions that were matter of fact to their fathers.

Here were we British, forty-one millions of people, in a state of almost indescribably aimless, economic, and moral muddle that we had neither the courage, the energy, nor the intelligence to improve, that most of us had hardly the courage to think about, and with our affairs hopelessly entangled with the entirely different confusions

of three hundred and fifty million other persons scattered about the globe, and here were the Germans over against us, fifty-six millions, in a state of confusion no whit better than our own, and the noisy little creatures who directed papers and wrote books and gave lectures, and generally in that time of world-dementia pretended to be the national mind, were busy in both countries, with a sort of infernal unanimity, exhorting--and not only exhorting but successfully persuading--the two peoples to divert such small common store of material, moral and intellectual energy as either possessed, into the purely destructive and wasteful business of war. And--I have to tell you these things even if you do not believe them, because they are vital to my story--there was not a man alive who could have told you of any real permanent benefit, of anything whatever to counterbalance the obvious waste and evil, that would result from a war between England and Germany, whether England shattered Germany or was smashed and overwhelmed, or whatever the end might be.

The thing was, in fact, an enormous irrational obsession, it was, in the microcosm of our nation, curiously parallel to the egotistical wrath and jealousy that swayed my individual microcosm. It measured the excess of common emotion over the common intelligence, the legacy of inordinate passion we have received from the brute from which we came. Just as I had become the slave of my own surprise and anger and went hither and thither with a loaded revolver, seeking and intending vague fluctuating crimes, so these two nations went

about the earth, hot eared and muddle headed, with loaded navies and armies terribly ready at hand. Only there was not even a Nettie to justify their stupidity. There was nothing but quiet imaginary thwarting on either side.

And the press was the chief instrument that kept these two huge multitudes of people directed against one another.

The press--those newspapers that are now so strange to us--like the "Empires," the "Nations," the Trusts, and all the other great monstrous shapes of that extraordinary time--was in the nature of an unanticipated accident. It had happened, as weeds happen in abandoned gardens, just as all our world has happened,--because there was no clear Will in the world to bring about anything better. Towards the end this "press" was almost entirely under the direction of youngish men of that eager, rather unintelligent type, that is never able to detect itself aimless, that pursues nothing with incredible pride and zeal, and if you would really understand this mad era the comet brought to an end, you must keep in mind that every phase in the production of these queer old things was pervaded by a strong aimless energy and happened in a concentrated rush.

Let me describe to you, very briefly, a newspaper day.

Figure first, then, a hastily erected and still more hastily designed building in a dirty, paper-littered back street of old

London, and a number of shabbily dressed men coming and going in this with projectile swiftness, and within this factory companies of printers, tensely active with nimble fingers--they were always speeding up the printers--ply their type-setting machines, and cast and arrange masses of metal in a sort of kitchen inferno, above which, in a beehive of little brightly lit rooms, disheveled men sit and scribble. There is a throbbing of telephones and a clicking of telegraph needles, a rushing of messengers, a running to and fro of heated men, clutching proofs and copy. Then begins a clatter roar of machinery catching the infection, going faster and faster, and whizzing and banging,--engineers, who have never had time to wash since their birth, flying about with oil-cans, while paper runs off its rolls with a shudder of haste. The proprietor you must suppose arriving explosively on a swift motor-car, leaping out before the thing is at a standstill, with letters and documents clutched in his hand, rushing in, resolute to "hustle," getting wonderfully in everybody's way. At the sight of him even the messenger boys who are waiting, get up and scamper to and fro. Sprinkle your vision with collisions, curses, incoherencies. You imagine all the parts of this complex lunatic machine working hysterically toward a crescendo of haste and excitement as the night wears on. At last the only things that seem to travel slowly in all those tearing vibrating premises are the hands of the clock.

Slowly things draw on toward publication, the consummation of all those stresses. Then in the small hours, into the now dark and

deserted streets comes a wild whirl of carts and men, the place
spurts paper at every door, bales, heaps, torrents of papers,
that are snatched and flung about in what looks like a free fight,
and off with a rush and clatter east, west, north, and south. The
interest passes outwardly; the men from the little rooms are going
homeward, the printers disperse yawning, the roaring presses slacken.
The paper exists. Distribution follows manufacture, and we follow
the bundles.

Our vision becomes a vision of dispersal. You see those bundles
hurling into stations, catching trains by a hair's breadth, speeding
on their way, breaking up, smaller bundles of them hurled with
a fierce accuracy out upon the platforms that rush by, and then
everywhere a division of these smaller bundles into still smaller
bundles, into dispersing parcels, into separate papers, and the
dawn happens unnoticed amidst a great running and shouting of boys,
a shoving through letter slots, openings of windows, spreading out
upon book-stalls. For the space of a few hours you must figure the
whole country dotted white with rustling papers--placards everywhere
vociferating the hurried lie for the day; men and women in trains,
men and women eating and reading, men by study-fenders, people
sitting up in bed, mothers and sons and daughters waiting for father
to finish--a million scattered people reading--reading headlong--or
feverishly ready to read. It is just as if some vehement jet
had sprayed that white foam of papers over the surface of the land. . .

And then you know, wonderfully gone--gone utterly, vanished as foam might vanish upon the sand.

Nonsense! The whole affair a noisy paroxysm of nonsense, unreasonable excitement, witless mischief, and waste of strength--signifying nothing. . . .

And one of those white parcels was the paper I held in my hands, as I sat with a bandaged foot on the steel fender in that dark underground kitchen of my mother's, clean roused from my personal troubles by the yelp of the headlines. She sat, sleeves tucked up from her ropy arms, peeling potatoes as I read.

It was like one of a flood of disease germs that have invaded a body, that paper. There I was, one corpuscle in the big amorphous body of the English community, one of forty-one million such corpuscles and, for all my preoccupations, these potent headlines, this paper ferment, caught me and swung me about. And all over the country that day, millions read as I read, and came round into line with me, under the same magnetic spell, came round--how did we say it?--Ah!--"to face the foe."

The comet had been driven into obscurity overleaf. The column headed "Distinguished Scientist says Comet will Strike our Earth. Does it Matter?" went unread. "Germany"--I usually figured this mythical malignant creature as a corseted stiff-mustached Emperor

enhanced by heraldic black wings and a large sword--had insulted our flag. That was the message of the New Paper, and the monster towered over me, threatening fresh outrages, visibly spitting upon my faultless country's colors. Somebody had hoisted a British flag on the right bank of some tropical river I had never heard of before, and a drunken German officer under ambiguous instructions had torn it down. Then one of the convenient abundant natives of the country, a British subject indisputably, had been shot in the leg. But the facts were by no means clear. Nothing was clear except that we were not going to stand any nonsense from Germany. Whatever had or had not happened we meant to have an apology for, and apparently they did not mean apologizing.

"HAS WAR COME AT LAST?"

That was the headline. One's heart leapt to assent. . . .

There were hours that day when I clean forgot Nettie, in dreaming of battles and victories by land and sea, of shell fire, and entrenchments, and the heaped slaughter of many thousands of men.

But the next morning I started for Checkshill, started, I remember, in a curiously hopeful state of mind, oblivious of comets, strikes, and wars.

Section 5

You must understand that I had no set plan of murder when I walked over to Checkshill. I had no set plan of any sort. There was a great confusion of dramatically conceived intentions in my head, scenes of threatening and denunciation and terror, but I did not mean to kill. The revolver was to turn upon my rival my disadvantage in age and physique. . . .

But that was not it really! The revolver!--I took the revolver because I had the revolver and was a foolish young lout. It was a dramatic sort of thing to take. I had, I say, no plan at all.

Ever and again during that second trudge to Checkshill I was irradiated with a novel unreasonable hope. I had awakened in the morning with the hope, it may have been the last unfaded trail of some obliterated dream, that after all Nettie might relent toward me, that her heart was kind toward me in spite of all that I imagined had happened. I even thought it possible that I might have misinterpreted what I had seen. Perhaps she would explain everything. My revolver was in my pocket for all that.

I limped at the outset, but after the second mile my ankle warmed to forgetfulness, and the rest of the way I walked well. Suppose, after all, I was wrong?

I was still debating that, as I came through the park. By the corner of the paddock near the keeper's cottage, I was reminded by some belated blue hyacinths of a time when I and Nettie had gathered them together. It seemed impossible that we could really have parted ourselves for good and all. A wave of tenderness flowed over me, and still flooded me as I came through the little dell and drew towards the hollies. But there the sweet Nettie of my boy's love faded, and I thought of the new Nettie of desire and the man I had come upon in the moonlight, I thought of the narrow, hot purpose that had grown so strongly out of my springtime freshness, and my mood darkened to night.

I crossed the beech wood and came towards the gardens with a resolute and sorrowful heart. When I reached the green door in the garden wall I was seized for a space with so violent a trembling that I could not grip the latch to lift it, for I no longer had any doubt how this would end. That trembling was succeeded by a feeling of cold, and whiteness, and self-pity. I was astonished to find myself grimacing, to feel my cheeks wet, and thereupon I gave way completely to a wild passion of weeping. I must take just a little time before the thing was done. . . . I turned away from the door and stumbled for a little distance, sobbing loudly, and lay down out of sight among the bracken, and so presently became calm again. I lay there some time. I had half a mind to desist, and then my emotion passed like the shadow of a cloud, and I walked very coolly

into the gardens.

Through the open door of one of the glass houses I saw old Stuart. He was leaning against the staging, his hands in his pockets, and so deep in thought he gave no heed to me.

I hesitated and went on towards the cottage, slowly.

Something struck me as unusual about the place, but I could not tell at first what it was. One of the bedroom windows was open, and the customary short blind, with its brass upper rail partly unfastened, drooped obliquely across the vacant space. It looked negligent and odd, for usually everything about the cottage was conspicuously trim.

The door was standing wide open, and everything was still. But giving that usually orderly hall an odd look--it was about half-past two in the afternoon--was a pile of three dirty plates, with used knives and forks upon them, on one of the hall chairs.

I went into the hall, looked into either room, and hesitated.

Then I fell to upon the door-knocker and gave a loud rat-tat-too, and followed this up with an amiable "Hel-lo!"

For a time no one answered me, and I stood listening and expectant,

with my fingers about my weapon. Some one moved about upstairs presently, and was still again. The tension of waiting seemed to brace my nerves.

I had my hand on the knocker for the second time, when Puss appeared in the doorway.

For a moment we remained staring at one another without speaking. Her hair was disheveled, her face dirty, tear-stained, and irregularly red. Her expression at the sight of me was pure astonishment.
I thought she was about to say something, and then she had darted away out of the house again.

"I say, Puss!" I said. "Puss!"

I followed her out of the door. "Puss! What's the matter? Where's Nettie?"

She vanished round the corner of the house.

I hesitated, perplexed whether I should pursue her. What did it all mean? Then I heard some one upstairs.

"Willie!" cried the voice of Mrs. Stuart. "Is that you?"

"Yes," I answered. "Where's every one? Where's Nettie? I want to

have a talk with her."

She did not answer, but I heard her dress rustle as she moved. I Judged she was upon the landing overhead.

I paused at the foot of the stairs, expecting her to appear and come down.

Suddenly came a strange sound, a rush of sounds, words jumbled and hurrying, confused and shapeless, borne along upon a note of throaty distress that at last submerged the words altogether and ended in a wail. Except that it came from a woman's throat it was exactly the babbling sound of a weeping child with a grievance. "I can't," she said, "I can't," and that was all I could distinguish.
It was to my young ears the strangest sound conceivable from a kindly motherly little woman, whom I had always thought of chiefly as an unparalleled maker of cakes. It frightened me. I went upstairs at once in a state of infinite alarm, and there she was upon the landing, leaning forward over the top of the chest of drawers beside her open bedroom door, and weeping. I never saw such weeping. One thick strand of black hair had escaped, and hung with a spiral twist down her back; never before had I noticed that she had gray hairs.

As I came up upon the landing her voice rose again. "Oh that I should have to tell you, Willie! Oh that I should have to tell you!" She

dropped her head again, and a fresh gust of tears swept all further words away.

I said nothing, I was too astonished; but I drew nearer to her, and waited. . . .

I never saw such weeping; the extraordinary wetness of her dripping handkerchief abides with me to this day.

"That I should have lived to see this day!" she wailed. "I had rather a thousand times she was struck dead at my feet."

I began to understand.

"Mrs. Stuart," I said, clearing my throat; "what has become of Nettie?"

"That I should have lived to see this day!" she said by way of reply.

I waited till her passion abated.

There came a lull. I forgot the weapon in my pocket. I said nothing, and suddenly she stood erect before me, wiping her swollen eyes. "Willie," she gulped, "she's gone!"

"Nettie?"

"Gone! . . . Run away. . . . Run away from her home. Oh, Willie, Willie! The shame of it! The sin and shame of it!"

She flung herself upon my shoulder, and clung to me, and began again to wish her daughter lying dead at our feet.

"There, there," said I, and all my being was a-tremble. "Where has she gone?" I said as softly as I could.

But for the time she was preoccupied with her own sorrow, and I had to hold her there, and comfort her with the blackness of finality spreading over my soul.

"Where has she gone?" I asked for the fourth time.

"I don't know--we don't know. And oh, Willie, she went out yesterday morning! I said to her, 'Nettie,' I said to her, 'you're mighty fine for a morning call.' 'Fine clo's for a fine day,' she said, and that was her last words to me!--Willie!--the child I suckled at my breast!"

"Yes, yes. But where has she gone?" I said.

She went on with sobs, and now telling her story with a sort of

fragmentary hurry: "She went out bright and shining, out of this house for ever. She was smiling, Willie--as if she was glad to be going. ("Glad to be going," I echoed with soundless lips.) 'You're mighty fine for the morning,' I says; 'mighty fine.' 'Let the girl be pretty,' says her father, 'while she's young!' And somewhere she'd got a parcel of her things hidden to pick up, and she was going off--out of this house for ever!"

She became quiet.

"Let the girl be pretty," she repeated; "let the girl be pretty while she's young. . . . Oh! how can we go on LIVING, Willie? He doesn't show it, but he's like a stricken beast. He's wounded to the heart. She was always his favorite. He never seemed to care for Puss like he did for her. And she's wounded him--"

"Where has she gone?" I reverted at last to that.

"We don't know. She leaves her own blood, she trusts herself-- Oh, Willie, it'll kill me! I wish she and me together were lying in our graves."

"But"--I moistened my lips and spoke slowly--"she may have gone to marry."

"If that was so! I've prayed to God it might be so, Willie. I've

prayed that he'd take pity on her--him, I mean, she's with."

I jerked out: "Who's that?"

"In her letter, she said he was a gentleman. She did say he was a gentleman."

"In her letter. Has she written? Can I see her letter?"

"Her father took it."

"But if she writes-- When did she write?"

"It came this morning."

"But where did it come from? You can tell--"

"She didn't say. She said she was happy. She said love took one like a storm--"

"Curse that! Where is her letter? Let me see it. And as for this gentleman--"

She stared at me.

"You know who it is."

"Willie!" she protested.

"You know who it is, whether she said or not?" Her eyes made a mute unconfident denial.

"Young Verrall?"

She made no answer. "All I could do for you, Willie," she began presently.

"Was it young Verrall?" I insisted.

For a second, perhaps, we faced one another in stark understanding. . . . Then she plumped back to the chest of drawers, and her wet pocket-handkerchief, and I knew she sought refuge from my relentless eyes.

My pity for her vanished. She knew it was her mistress's son as well as I! And for some time she had known, she had felt.

I hovered over her for a moment, sick with amazed disgust. I suddenly bethought me of old Stuart, out in the greenhouse, and turned and went downstairs. As I did so, I looked up to see Mrs. Stuart moving droopingly and lamely back into her own room.

Section 6

Old Stuart was pitiful.

I found him still inert in the greenhouse where I had first seen him. He did not move as I drew near him; he glanced at me, and then stared hard again at the flowerpots before him.

"Eh, Willie," he said, "this is a black day for all of us."

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"The missus takes on so," he said. "I came out here."

"What do you mean to do?"

"What IS a man to do in such a case?"

"Do!" I cried, "why-- Do!"

"He ought to marry her," he said.

"By God, yes!" I cried. "He must do that anyhow."

"He ought to. It's--it's cruel. But what am I to do? Suppose he won't? Likely he won't. What then?"

He drooped with an intensified despair.

"Here's this cottage," he said, pursuing some contracted argument. "We've lived here all our lives, you might say. . . . Clear out. At my age. . . . One can't die in a slum."

I stood before him for a space, speculating what thoughts might fill the gaps between these broken words. I found his lethargy, and the dimly shaped mental attitudes his words indicated, abominable. I said abruptly, "You have her letter?"

He dived into his breast-pocket, became motionless for ten seconds, then woke up again and produced her letter. He drew it clumsily from its envelope, and handed it to me silently.

"Why!" he cried, looking at me for the first time, "What's come to your chin, Willie?"

"It's nothing," I said. "It's a bruise;" and I opened the letter.

It was written on greenish tinted fancy note-paper, and with all and more than Nettie's usual triteness and inadequacy of expression. Her handwriting bore no traces of emotion; it was round and upright

and clear as though it had been done in a writing lesson. Always her letters were like masks upon her image; they fell like curtains before the changing charm of her face; one altogether forgot the sound of her light clear voice, confronted by a perplexing stereotyped thing that had mysteriously got a hold upon one's heart and pride. How did that letter run?--

"MY DEAR MOTHER,

"Do not be distressed at my going away. I have gone somewhere safe, and with some one who cares for me very much. I am sorry for your sakes, but it seems that it had to be. Love is a very difficult thing, and takes hold of one in ways one does not expect. Do not think I am ashamed about this, I glory in my love, and you must not trouble too much about me. I am very, very happy (deeply underlined).

"Fondest love to Father and Puss.

"Your loving

"Nettie."

That queer little document! I can see it now for the childish simple thing it was, but at the time I read it in a suppressed anguish of rage. It plunged me into a pit of hopeless shame; there seemed to

remain no pride for me in life until I had revenge. I stood staring at those rounded upstanding letters, not trusting myself to speak or move. At last I stole a glance at Stuart.

He held the envelope in his hand, and stared down at the postmark between his horny thumbnails.

"You can't even tell where she is," he said, turning the thing round in a hopeless manner, and then desisting. "It's hard on us, Willie. Here she is; she hadn't anything to complain of; a sort of pet for all of us. Not even made to do her share of the 'ousework. And she goes off and leaves us like a bird that's learnt to fly. Can't TRUST us, that's what takes me. Puts 'erself-- But there! What's to happen to her?"

"What's to happen to him?"

He shook his head to show that problem was beyond him.

"You'll go after her," I said in an even voice; "you'll make him marry her?"

"Where am I to go?" he asked helplessly, and held out the envelope with a gesture; "and what could I do? Even if I knew-- How could I leave the gardens?"

"Great God!" I cried, "not leave these gardens! It's your Honor, man! If she was my daughter--if she was my daughter--I'd tear the world to pieces!" . . I choked. "You mean to stand it?"

"What can I do?"

"Make him marry her! Horsewhip him! Horsewhip him, I say!--I'd strangle him!"

He scratched slowly at his hairy cheek, opened his mouth, and shook his head. Then, with an intolerable note of sluggish gentle wisdom, he said, "People of our sort, Willie, can't do things like that."

I came near to raving. I had a wild impulse to strike him in the face. Once in my boyhood I happened upon a bird terribly mangled by some cat, and killed it in a frenzy of horror and pity. I had a gust of that same emotion now, as this shameful mutilated soul fluttered in the dust, before me. Then, you know, I dismissed him from the case.

"May I look?" I asked.

He held out the envelope reluctantly.

"There it is," he said, and pointing with his garden-rough forefinger.

"I.A.P.A.M.P. What can you make of that?"

I took the thing in my hands. The adhesive stamp customary in those days was defaced by a circular postmark, which bore the name of the office of departure and the date. The impact in this particular case had been light or made without sufficient ink, and half the letters of the name had left no impression. I could distinguish--

I A P A M P

and very faintly below D.S.O.

I guessed the name in an instant flash of intuition. It was Shaphambury. The very gaps shaped that to my mind. Perhaps in a sort of semi-visibility other letters were there, at least hinting themselves. It was a place somewhere on the east coast, I knew, either in Norfolk or Suffolk.

"Why!" cried I--and stopped.

What was the good of telling him?

Old Stuart had glanced up sharply, I am inclined to think almost fearfully, into my face. "You--you haven't got it?" he said.

Shaphambury--I should remember that.

"You don't think you got it?" he said.

I handed the envelope back to him.

"For a moment I thought it might be Hampton," I said.

"Hampton," he repeated. "Hampton. How could you make Hampton?" He turned the envelope about. "H.A.M.--why, Willie, you're a worse hand at the job than me!"

He replaced the letter in the envelope and stood erect to put this back in his breast pocket.

I did not mean to take any risks in this affair. I drew a stump of pencil from my waistcoat pocket, turned a little away from him and wrote "Shaphambury" very quickly on my frayed and rather grimy shirt cuff.

"Well," said I, with an air of having done nothing remarkable.

I turned to him with some unimportant observation--I have forgotten what.

I never finished whatever vague remark I commenced.

I looked up to see a third person waiting at the greenhouse door.

Section 7

It was old Mrs. Verrall.

I wonder if I can convey the effect of her to you. She was a little old lady with extraordinarily flaxen hair, her weak aquiline features were pursed up into an assumption of dignity, and she was richly dressed. I would like to underline that "richly dressed," or have the words printed in florid old English or Gothic lettering. No one on earth is now quite so richly dressed as she was, no one old or young indulges in so quiet and yet so profound a sumptuosity. But you must not imagine any extravagance of outline or any beauty or richness of color. The predominant colors were black and fur browns, and the effect of richness was due entirely to the extreme costliness of the materials employed. She affected silk brocades with rich and elaborate patterns, priceless black lace over creamy or purple satin, intricate trimmings through which threads and bands of velvet wriggled, and in the winter rare furs. Her gloves fitted exquisitely, and ostentatiously simple chains of fine gold and pearls, and a great number of bracelets, laced about her little person. One was forced to feel that the slightest article she wore cost more than all the wardrobe of a dozen girls like Nettie; her

bonnet affected the simplicity that is beyond rubies. Richness, that is the first quality about this old lady that I would like to convey to you, and the second was cleanliness. You felt that old Mrs. Verrall was exquisitely clean. If you had boiled my poor dear old mother in soda for a month you couldn't have got her so clean as Mrs. Verrall constantly and manifestly was. And pervading all her presence shone her third great quality, her manifest confidence in the respectful subordination of the world.

She was pale and a little out of breath that day, but without any loss of her ultimate confidence, and it was clear to me that she had come to interview Stuart upon the outbreak of passion that had bridged the gulf between their families.

And here again I find myself writing in an unknown language, so far as my younger readers are concerned. You who know only the world that followed the Great Change will find much that I am telling inconceivable. Upon these points I cannot appeal, as I have appealed for other confirmations, to the old newspapers; these were the things that no one wrote about because every one understood and every one had taken up an attitude. There were in England and America, and indeed throughout the world, two great informal divisions of human beings--the Secure and the Insecure. There was not and never had been in either country a nobility--it was and remains a common error that the British peers were noble--neither in law nor custom were there noble families, and we altogether lacked the edification

one found in Russia, for example, of a poor nobility. A peerage was an hereditary possession that, like the family land, concerned only the eldest sons of the house; it radiated no luster of noblesse oblige. The rest of the world were in law and practice common--and all America was common. But through the private ownership of land that had resulted from the neglect of feudal obligations in Britain and the utter want of political foresight in the Americas, large masses of property had become artificially stable in the hands of a small minority, to whom it was necessary to mortgage all new public and private enterprises, and who were held together not by any tradition of service and nobility but by the natural sympathy of common interests and a common large scale of living. It was a class without any very definite boundaries; vigorous individualities, by methods for the most part violent and questionable, were constantly thrusting themselves from insecurity to security, and the sons and daughters of secure people, by marrying insecurity or by wild extravagance or flagrant vice, would sink into the life of anxiety and insufficiency which was the ordinary life of man. The rest of the population was landless and, except by working directly or indirectly for the Secure, had no legal right to exist. And such was the shallowness and insufficiency of our thought, such the stifled egotism of all our feelings before the Last Days, that very few indeed of the Secure could be found to doubt that this was the natural and only conceivable order of the world.

It is the life of the Insecure under the old order that I am

displaying, and I hope that I am conveying something of its hopeless bitterness to you, but you must not imagine that the Secure lived lives of paradisiacal happiness. The pit of insecurity below them made itself felt, even though it was not comprehended. Life about them was ugly; the sight of ugly and mean houses, of ill-dressed people, the vulgar appeals of the dealers in popular commodities, were not to be escaped. There was below the threshold of their minds an uneasiness; they not only did not think clearly about social economy but they displayed an instinctive disinclination to think. Their security was not so perfect that they had not a dread of falling towards the pit, they were always lashing themselves by new ropes, their cultivation of "connexions," of interests, their desire to confirm and improve their positions, was a constant ignoble preoccupation. You must read Thackeray to get the full flavor of their lives. Then the bacterium was apt to disregard class distinctions, and they were never really happy in their servants. Read their surviving books. Each generation bewails the decay of that "fidelity" of servants, no generation ever saw. A world that is squalid in one corner is squalid altogether, but that they never understood. They believed there was not enough of anything to go round, they believed that this was the intention of God and an incurable condition of life, and they held passionately and with a sense of right to their disproportionate share. They maintained a common intercourse as "Society" of all who were practically secure, and their choice of that word is exhaustively eloquent of the quality of their philosophy. But, if you can master these

alien ideas upon which the old system rested, just in the same measure will you understand the horror these people had for marriages with the Insecure. In the case of their girls and women it was extraordinarily rare, and in the case of either sex it was regarded as a disastrous social crime. Anything was better than that.

You are probably aware of the hideous fate that was only too probably the lot, during those last dark days, of every girl of the insecure classes who loved and gave way to the impulse of self-abandonment without marriage, and so you will understand the peculiar situation of Nettie with young Verrall. One or other had to suffer. And as they were both in a state of great emotional exaltation and capable of strange generosities toward each other, it was an open question and naturally a source of great anxiety to a mother in Mrs. Verrall's position, whether the sufferer might not be her son--whether as the outcome of that glowing irresponsible commerce Nettie might not return prospective mistress of Checkshill Towers. The chances were greatly against that conclusion, but such things did occur.

These laws and customs sound, I know, like a record of some nasty-minded lunatic's inventions. They were invincible facts in that vanished world into which, by some accident, I had been born, and it was the dream of any better state of things that was scouted as lunacy. Just think of it! This girl I loved with all my soul, for whom I was ready to sacrifice my life, was not good enough to marry young Verrall. And I had only to look at his even, handsome,

characterless face to perceive a creature weaker and no better than myself. She was to be his pleasure until he chose to cast her aside, and the poison of our social system had so saturated her nature--his evening dress, his freedom and his money had seemed so fine to her and I so clothed in squalor--that to that prospect she had consented. And to resent the social conventions that created their situation, was called "class envy," and gently born preachers reproached us for the mildest resentment against an injustice no living man would now either endure or consent to profit by.

What was the sense of saying "peace" when there was no peace? If there was one hope in the disorders of that old world it lay in revolt and conflict to the death.

But if you can really grasp the shameful grotesqueness of the old life, you will begin to appreciate the interpretation of old Mrs. Verrall's appearance that leapt up at once in my mind.

She had come to compromise the disaster!

And the Stuarts WOULD compromise! I saw that only too well.

An enormous disgust at the prospect of the imminent encounter between Stuart and his mistress made me behave in a violent and irrational way. I wanted to escape seeing that, seeing even Stuart's first gesture in that, at any cost.

"I'm off," said I, and turned my back on him without any further farewell.

My line of retreat lay by the old lady, and so I advanced toward her.

I saw her expression change, her mouth fell a little way open, her forehead wrinkled, and her eyes grew round. She found me a queer customer even at the first sight, and there was something in the manner of my advance that took away her breath.

She stood at the top of the three or four steps that descended to the level of the hothouse floor. She receded a pace or two, with a certain offended dignity at the determination of my rush.

I gave her no sort of salutation.

Well, as a matter of fact, I did give her a sort of salutation. There is no occasion for me to begin apologizing now for the thing I said to her--I strip these things before you--if only I can get them stark enough you will understand and forgive. I was filled with a brutal and overpowering desire to insult her.

And so I addressed this poor little expensive old woman in the following terms, converting her by a violent metonymy into a

comprehensive plural. "You infernal land thieves!" I said point-blank into her face. "HAVE YOU COME TO OFFER THEM MONEY?"

And without waiting to test her powers of repartee I passed rudely beyond her and vanished, striding with my fists clenched, out of her world again. . .

I have tried since to imagine how the thing must have looked to her. So far as her particular universe went I had not existed at all, or I had existed only as a dim black thing, an insignificant speck, far away across her park in irrelevant, unimportant transit, until this moment when she came, sedately troubled, into her own secure gardens and sought for Stuart among the greenhouses. Then abruptly I flashed into being down that green-walled, brick-floored vista as a black-avised, ill-clad young man, who first stared and then advanced scowling toward her. Once in existence I developed rapidly. I grew larger in perspective and became more and more important and sinister every moment. I came up the steps with inconceivable hostility and disrespect in my bearing, towered over her, becoming for an instant at least a sort of second French Revolution, and delivered myself with the intensest concentration of those wicked and incomprehensible words. Just for a second I threatened annihilation. Happily that was my climax.

And then I had gone by, and the Universe was very much as it had always been except for the wild swirl in it, and the faint sense

of insecurity my episode left in its wake.

The thing that never entered my head in those days was that a large proportion of the rich were rich in absolute good faith. I thought they saw things exactly as I saw them, and wickedly denied. But indeed old Mrs. Verrall was no more capable of doubting the perfection of her family's right to dominate a wide country side, than she was of examining the Thirty-nine Articles or dealing with any other of the adamantine pillars upon which her universe rested in security.

No doubt I startled and frightened her tremendously. But she could not understand.

None of her sort of people ever did seem to understand such livid flashes of hate, as ever and again lit the crowded darkness below their feet. The thing leapt out of the black for a moment and vanished, like a threatening figure by a desolate roadside lit for a moment by one's belated carriage-lamp and then swallowed up by the night. They counted it with nightmares, and did their best to forget what was evidently as insignificant as it was disturbing.