

CHAPTER THE FIRST

MRS. TEDDY GOES FOR A WALK

Section 1

All over England now, where the livery of mourning had been a rare thing to see, women and children went about in the October sunshine in new black clothes. Everywhere one met these fresh griefs, mothers who had lost their sons, women who had lost their men, lives shattered and hopes destroyed. The dyers had a great time turning coloured garments to black. And there was also a growing multitude of crippled and disabled men. It was so in England, much more was it so in France and Russia, in all the countries of the Allies, and in Germany and Austria; away into Asia Minor and Egypt, in India and Japan and Italy there was mourning, the world was filled with loss and mourning and impoverishment and distress.

And still the mysterious powers that required these things of mankind were unappeased, and each day added its quota of heart-stabbing messages and called for new mourning, and sent home fresh consignments of broken and tormented men.

Some clung to hopes that became at last almost more terrible than black certainties....

Mrs. Teddy went about the village in a coloured dress bearing herself confidently. Teddy had been listed now as "missing, since reported killed," and she had had two letters from his comrades. They said Teddy had been left behind in the ruins of a farm with one or two other wounded, and that when the Canadians retook the place these wounded had all been found butchered. None had been found alive. Afterwards the Canadians had had to fall back. Mr. Direck had been at great pains to hunt up wounded men from Teddy's company, and also any likely Canadians both at the base hospital in France and in London, and to get what he could from them. He had made it a service to Cissie. Only one of his witnesses was quite clear about Teddy, but he, alas! was dreadfully clear. There had been only one lieutenant among the men left behind, he said, and obviously that must have been Teddy. "He had been prodded in half-a-dozen places. His head was nearly severed from his body."

Direck came down and told the story to Cissie. "Shall I tell it to her?" he asked.

Cissie thought. "Not yet," she said....

Letty's face changed in those pitiful weeks when she was denying death. She lost her pretty colour, she became white; her mouth grew hard and her eyes had a hard brightness. She never wept, she never gave a sign of sorrow, and she insisted upon talking about Teddy, in a dry offhand voice. Constantly she referred to his final return. "Teddy," she said,

"will be surprised at this," or "Teddy will feel sold when he sees how I have altered that."

"Presently we shall see his name in a list of prisoners," she said. "He is a wounded prisoner in Germany."

She adopted that story. She had no justification for it, but she would hear no doubts upon it. She presently began to prepare parcels to send him. "They want almost everything," she told people. "They are treated abominably. He has not been able to write to me yet, but I do not think I ought to wait until he asks me."

Cissie was afraid to interfere with this.

After a time Letty grew impatient at the delay in getting any address and took her first parcel to the post office.

"Unless you know what prison he is at," said the postmistress.

"Pity!" said Letty. "I don't know that. Must it wait for that? I thought the Germans were so systematic that it didn't matter."

The postmistress made tedious explanations that Letty did not seem to hear. She stared straight in front of her at nothing. Then in a pause in the conversation she picked up her parcel.

"It's tiresome for him to have to wait," she said. "But it can't be long before I know."

She took the parcel back to the cottage.

"After all," she said, "it gives us time to get the better sort of throat lozenges for him--the sort the syndicate shop doesn't keep."

She put the parcel conspicuously upon the dresser in the kitchen where it was most in the way, and set herself to make a jersey for Teddy against the coming of the cold weather.

But one night the white mask fell for a moment from her face.

Cissie and she had been sitting in silence before the fire. She had been knitting--she knitted very badly--and Cissie had been pretending to read, and had been watching her furtively. Cissie eyed the slow, toilsome growth of the slack woolwork for a time, and the touch of angry effort in every stroke of the knitting needles. Then she was stirred to remonstrance.

"Poor Letty!" she said very softly. "Suppose after all, he is dead?"

Letty met her with a pitiless stare.

"He is a prisoner," she said. "Isn't that enough? Why do you jab at me

by saying that? A wounded prisoner. Isn't that enough despicable trickery for God even to play on Teddy--our Teddy? To the very last moment he shall not be dead. Until the war is over. Until six months after the war....

"I will tell you why, Cissie...."

She leant across the table and pointed her remarks with her knitting needles, speaking in a tone of reasonable remonstrance. "You see," she said, "if people like Teddy are to be killed, then all our ideas that life is meant for, honesty and sweetness and happiness, are wrong, and this world is just a place of devils; just a dirty cruel hell. Getting born would be getting damned. And so one must not give way to that idea, however much it may seem likely that he is dead...."

"You see, if he is dead, then Cruelty is the Law, and some one must pay me for his death.... Some one must pay me.... I shall wait for six months after the war, dear, and then I shall go off to Germany and learn my way about there. And I will murder some German. Not just a common German, but a German who belongs to the guilty kind. A sacrifice. It ought, for instance, to be comparatively easy to kill some of the children of the Crown Prince or some of the Bavarian princes. I shall prefer German children. I shall sacrifice them to Teddy. It ought not to be difficult to find people who can be made directly responsible, the people who invented the poison gas, for instance, and kill them, or to kill people who are dear to them. Or necessary to them.... Women can do

that so much more easily than men....

"That perhaps is the only way in which wars of this kind will ever be brought to an end. By women insisting on killing the kind of people who make them. Rooting them out. By a campaign of pursuit and assassination that will go on for years and years after the war itself is over....

Murder is such a little gentle punishment for the crime of war.... It would be hardly more than a reproach for what has happened. Falling like snow. Death after death. Flake by flake. This prince. That statesman. The count who writes so fiercely for war.... That is what I am going to do. If Teddy is really dead.... We women were ready enough a year or so ago to starve and die for the Vote, and that was quite a little thing in comparison with this business.... Don't you see what I mean? It's so plain and sensible, Cissie. Whenever a man sits and thinks whether he will make a war or not, then he will think too of women, women with daggers, bombs; of a vengeance that will never tire nor rest; of consecrated patient women ready to start out upon a pilgrimage that will only end with his death.... I wouldn't hurt these war makers. No. In spite of the poison gas. In spite of trench feet and the men who have been made blind and the wounded who have lain for days, dying slowly in the wet. Women ought not to hurt. But I would kill. Like killing dangerous vermin. It would go on year by year. Balkan kings, German princes, chancellors, they would have schemed for so much--and come to just a rattle in the throat.... And if presently other kings and emperors began to prance about and review armies, they too would go....

"Until all the world understood that women would not stand war any more forever....

"Of course I shall do something of the sort. What else is there to do now for me?"

Letty's eyes were bright and intense, but her voice was soft and subdued. She went on after a pause in the same casual voice. "You see now, Cissie, why I cling to the idea that Teddy is alive. If Teddy is alive, then even if he is wounded, he will get some happiness out of it--and all this won't be--just rot. If he is dead then everything is so desperately silly and cruel from top to bottom--"

She smiled wanly to finish her sentence.

"But, Letty!" said Cissie, "there is the boy!"

"I shall leave the boy to you. Compared with Teddy I don't care that for the boy. I never did. What is the good of pretending? Some women are made like that."

She surveyed her knitting. "Poor stitches," she said....

"I'm hard stuff, Cissie. I take after mother more than father. Teddy is my darling. All the tenderness of my life is Teddy. If it goes, it goes.... I won't crawl about the world like all these other snivelling

widows. If they've killed my man I shall kill. Blood for blood and loss for loss. I shall get just as close to the particular Germans who made this war as I can, and I shall kill them and theirs....

"The Women's Association for the Extirpation of the whole breed of War Lords," she threw out. "If I do happen to hurt--does it matter?"

She looked at her sister's shocked face and smiled again.

"You think I go about staring at nothing," she remarked.... "Not a bit of it! I have been planning all sorts of things.... I have been thinking how I could get to Germany.... Or one might catch them in Switzerland.... I've had all sorts of plans. They can't go guarded for ever....

"Oh, it makes me despise humanity to see how many soldiers and how few assassins there are in the world.... After the things we have seen. If people did their duty by the dagger there wouldn't be such a thing as a War Lord in the world. Not one.... The Kaiser and his sons and his sons' sons would know nothing but fear now for all their lives. Fear would only cease to pursue as the coffin went down into the grave. Fear by sea, fear by land, for the vessel he sailed in, the train he travelled in, fear when he slept for the death in his dreams, fear when he waked for the death in every shadow; fear in every crowd, fear whenever he was alone. Fear would stalk him through the trees, hide in the corner of the staircase; make all his food taste perplexingly, so that he would want

to spit it out...."

She sat very still brooding on that idea for a time, and then stood up.

"What nonsense one talks!" she cried, and yawned. "I wonder why poor Teddy doesn't send me a post card or something to tell me his address. I tell you what I am afraid of sometimes about him, Cissie."

"Yes?" said Cissie.

"Loss of memory. Suppose a beastly lump of shell or something whacked him on the head.... I had a dream of him looking strange about the eyes and not knowing me. That, you know, really may have happened.... It would be beastly, of course...."

Cissie's eyes were critical, but she had nothing ready to say.

There were some moments of silence.

"Oh! bed," said Letty. "Though I shall just lie scheming."

Section 2

Cissie lay awake that night thinking about her sister as if she had never thought about her before.

She began to weigh the concentrated impressions of a thousand memories. She and her sister were near in age; they knew each other with an extreme intimacy, and yet it seemed to Cissie that night as though she did not know Letty at all. A year ago she would have been certain she knew everything about her. But the old familiar Letty, with the bright complexion, and the wicked eye, with her rebellious schoolgirl insistence upon the beautifulness of "Boofl young men," and her frank and glowing passion for Teddy, with her delight in humorous mystifications and open-air exercise and all the sunshine and laughter of life, this sister Letty, who had been so satisfactory and complete and final, had been thrust aside like a mask. Cissie no longer knew her sister's eyes. Letty's hand had become thin and unfamiliar and a little wrinkled; she was sharp-featured and thin-lipped; her acts, which had once been predictable, were incomprehensible, and Cissie was thrown back upon speculations. In their schooldays Letty had had a streak of intense sensibility; she had been easily moved to tears. But never once had she wept or given any sign of weeping since Teddy's name had appeared in the casualty list.... What was the strength of this tragic tension? How far would it carry her? Was Letty really capable of becoming a Charlotte Corday? Of carrying out a scheme of far-seeing vengeance, of making her way through long months and years nearer and nearer to revenge?

Were such revenges possible?

Would people presently begin to murder the makers of the Great War? What

a strange thing it would be in history if so there came a punishment and end to the folly of kings!

Only a little while ago Cissie's imagination might have been captured by so romantic a dream. She was still but a year or so out of the stage of melodrama. But she was out of it. She was growing up now to a subtler wisdom. People, she was beginning to realise, do not do these simple things. They make vows of devotion and they are not real vows of devotion; they love--quite honestly--and qualify. There are no great revenges but only little mean ones; no life-long vindications except the unrelenting vengeance of the law. There is no real concentration of people's lives anywhere such as romance demands. There is change, there is forgetfulness. Everywhere there is dispersal. Even to the tragic story of Teddy would come the modifications of time. Even to the wickedness of the German princes would presently be added some conflicting aspects. Could Letty keep things for years in her mind, hard and terrible, as they were now? Surely they would soften; other things would overlay them....

There came a rush of memories of Letty in a dozen schoolgirl adventures, times when she had ventured, and times when she had failed; Letty frightened, Letty vexed, Letty launching out to great enterprises, going high and hard and well for a time, and then failing. She had seen Letty snivelling and dirty; Letty shamed and humiliated. She knew her Letty to the soul. Poor Letty! Poor dear Letty! With a sudden clearness of vision Cissie realised what was happening in her sister's mind. All this tense

scheming of revenges was the imaginative play with which Letty warded off the black alternative to her hope; it was not strength, it was weakness. It was a form of giving way. She could not face starkly the simple fact of Teddy's death. That was too much for her. So she was building up this dream of a mission of judgment against the day when she could resist the facts no longer. She was already persuaded, only she would not be persuaded until her dream was ready. If this state of suspense went on she might establish her dream so firmly that it would at last take complete possession of her mind. And by that time also she would have squared her existence at Matching's Easy with the elaboration of her reverie.

She would go about the place then, fancying herself preparing for this tremendous task she would never really do; she would study German maps; she would read the papers about German statesmen and rulers; perhaps she would even make weak attempts to obtain a situation in Switzerland or in Germany. Perhaps she would buy a knife or a revolver. Perhaps presently she would begin to hover about Windsor or Sandringham when peace was made, and the German cousins came visiting again....

Into Cissie's mind came the image of the thing that might be; Letty, shabby, draggled, with her sharp bright prettiness become haggard, an assassin dreamer, still dependent on Mr. Britling, doing his work rather badly, in a distraught unpunctual fashion.

She must be told, she must be convinced soon, or assuredly she would

become an eccentric, a strange character, a Matching's Easy Miss Flite....

Section 3

Cissie could think more clearly of Letty's mind than of her own.

She herself was in a tangle. She had grown to be very fond of Mr. Direck, and to have a profound trust and confidence in him, and her fondness seemed able to find no expression at all except a constant girding at his and America's avoidance of war. She had fallen in love with him when he was wearing fancy dress; she was a young woman with a stronger taste for body and colour than she supposed; what indeed she resented about him, though she did not know it, was that he seemed never disposed to carry the spirit of fancy dress into everyday life. To begin with he had touched both her imagination and senses, and she wanted him to go on doing that. Instead of which he seemed lapsing more and more into reiterated assurances of devotion and the flat competent discharge of humanitarian duties. Always nowadays he was trying to persuade her that what he was doing was the right and honourable thing for him to do; what he did not realise, what indeed she did not realise, was the exasperation his rightness and reasonableness produced in her. When he saw he exasperated her he sought very earnestly to be righter and reasonabler and more plainly and demonstrably right and reasonable than ever.

Withal, as she felt and perceived, he was such a good thing, such a very good thing; so kind, so trustworthy, with a sort of slow strength, with a careful honesty, a big good childishness, a passion for fairness. And so helpless in her hands. She could lash him and distress him. Yet she could not shake his slowly formed convictions.

When Cissie had dreamt of the lover that fate had in store for her in her old romantic days, he was to be perfect always, he and she were always to be absolutely in the right (and, if the story needed it, the world in the wrong). She had never expected to find herself tied by her affections to a man with whom she disagreed, and who went contrary to her standards, very much as if she was lashed on the back of a very nice elephant that would wince to but not obey the goad....

So she nagged him and taunted him, and would hear no word of his case. And he wanted dreadfully to discuss his case. He felt that the point of conscience about the munitions was particularly fine and difficult. He wished she would listen and enter into it more. But she thought with that more rapid English flash which is not so much thinking as feeling. He loved that flash in her in spite of his persuasion of its injustice.

Her thought that he ought to go to the war made him feel like a renegade; but her claim that he was somehow still English held him in spite of his reason. In the midst of such perplexities he was glad to find one neutral task wherein he could find himself whole-heartedly with

and for Cissie.

He hunted up the evidence of Teddy's fate with a devoted pertinacity.

And in the meanwhile the other riddle resolved itself. He had had a certain idea in his mind for some time. He discovered one day that it was an inspiration. He could keep his conscientious objection about America, and still take a line that would satisfy Cissie. He took it.

When he came down to Matching's Easy at her summons to bear his convincing witness of Teddy's fate, he came in an unwonted costume. It was a costume so wonderful in his imagination that it seemed to cry aloud, to sound like a trumpet as he went through London to Liverpool Street station; it was a costume like an international event; it was a costume that he felt would blare right away to Berlin. And yet it was a costume so commonplace, so much the usual wear now, that Cissie, meeting him at the station and full of the thought of Letty's trouble, did not remark it, felt indeed rather than observed that he was looking more strong and handsome than he had ever done since he struck upon her imagination in the fantastic wrap that Teddy had found for him in the merry days when there was no death in the world. And Letty too, resistant, incalculable, found no wonder in the wonderful suit.

He bore his testimony. It was the queer halting telling of a patched-together tale....

"I suppose," said Letty, "if I tell you now that I don't believe that that officer was Teddy you will think I am cracked.... But I don't."

She sat staring straight before her for a time after saying this. Then suddenly she got up and began taking down her hat and coat from the peg behind the kitchen door. The hanging strap of the coat was twisted and she struggled with it petulantly until she tore it.

"Where are you going?" cried Cissie.

Letty's voice over her shoulder was the harsh voice of a scolding woman.

"I'm going out--anywhere." She turned, coat in hand. "Can't I go out if I like?" she asked. "It's a beautiful day.... Mustn't I go out?... I suppose you think I ought to take in what you have told me in a moment. Just smile and say 'Indeed!' ... Abandoned!--while his men retreated! How jolly! And then not think of it any more.... Besides, I must go out. You two want to be left together. You want to canoodle. Do it while you can!"

Then she put on coat and hat, jamming her hat down on her head, and said something that Cissie did not immediately understand.

"He'll have his turn in the trenches soon enough. Now that he's made up his mind.... He might have done it sooner...."

She turned her back as though she had forgotten them. She stood for a moment as though her feet were wooden, not putting her feet as she usually put her feet. She took slow, wide, unsure steps. She went out--like something that is mortally injured and still walks--into the autumnal sunshine. She left the door wide open behind her.

Section 4

And Cissie, with eyes full of distress for her sister, had still to grasp the fact that Direck was wearing a Canadian uniform....

He stood behind her, ashamed that in such a moment this fact and its neglect by every one could be so vivid in his mind.

Section 5

Cissie's estimate of her sister's psychology had been just. The reverie of revenge had not yet taken a grip upon Letty's mind sufficiently strong to meet the challenge of this conclusive evidence of Teddy's death. She walked out into a world of sunshine now almost completely convinced that Teddy was dead, and she knew quite well that her dream of some dramatic and terrible vindication had gone from her. She knew that in truth she could do nothing of that sort....

She walked out with a set face and eyes that seemed unseeing, and yet it was as if some heavy weight had been lifted from her shoulders. It was over; there was no more to hope for and there was nothing more to fear. She would have been shocked to realise that her mind was relieved.

She wanted to be alone. She wanted to be away from every eye. She was like some creature that after a long nightmare incubation is at last born into a clear, bleak day. She had to feel herself; she had to stretch her mind in this cheerless sunshine, this new world, where there was to be no more Teddy and no real revenge nor compensation for Teddy. Teddy was past....

Hitherto she had had an angry sense of being deprived of Teddy--almost as though he were keeping away from her. Now, there was no more Teddy to be deprived of....

She went through the straggling village, and across the fields to the hillside that looks away towards Mertonstone and its steeple. And where the hill begins to fall away she threw herself down under the hedge by the path, near by the stile into the lane, and lay still. She did not so much think as remain blank, waiting for the beginning of impressions....

It was as it were a blank stare at the world....

She did not know if it was five minutes or half an hour later that she became aware that some one was looking at her. She turned with a start,

and discovered the Reverend Dimple with one foot on the stile, and an expression of perplexity and consternation upon his chubby visage.

Instantly she understood. Already on four different occasions since Teddy's disappearance she had seen the good man coming towards her, always with a manifest decision, always with the same faltering doubt as now. Often in their happy days had she and Teddy discussed him and derided him and rejoiced over him. They had agreed he was as good as Jane Austen's Mr. Collins. He really was very like Mr. Collins, except that he was plumper. And now, it was as if he was transparent to her hard defensive scrutiny. She knew he was impelled by his tradition, by his sense of fitness, by his respect for his calling, to offer her his ministrations and consolations, to say his large flat amiabilities over her and pat her kindly with his hands. And she knew too that he dreaded her. She knew that the dear old humbug knew at the bottom of his heart quite certainly that he was a poor old humbug, and that she was in his secret. And at the bottom of his heart he found himself too honest to force his poor platitudes upon any who would not be glad of them. If she could have been glad of them he would have had no compunction. He was a man divided against himself; failing to carry through his rich pretences, dismayed.

He had been taking his afternoon "constitutional." He had discovered her beyond the stile just in time to pull up. Then had come a fatal, a preposterous hesitation. She stared at him now, with hard, expressionless eyes.

He stared back at her, until his plump pink face was all consternation. He was extraordinarily distressed. It was as if a thousand unspoken things had been said between them.

"No wish," he said, "intrude."

If he had had the certain balm, how gladly would he have given it!

He broke the spell by stepping back into the lane. He made a gesture with his hands, as if he would have wrung them. And then he had fled down the lane--almost at a run.

"Po' girl," he shouted. "Po' girl," and left her staring.

Staring--and then she laughed.

This was good. This was the sort of thing one could tell Teddy, when at last he came back and she could tell him anything. And then she realised again; there was no more Teddy, there would be no telling. And suddenly she fell weeping.

"Oh, Teddy, Teddy," she cried through her streaming tears. "How could you leave me? How can I bear it?"

Never a tear had she shed since the news first came, and now she could

weep, she could weep her grief out. She abandoned herself unreservedly to this blessed relief....

Section 6

There comes an end to weeping at last, and Letty lay still, in the red light of the sinking sun.

She lay so still that presently a little foraging robin came dirting down to the grass not ten yards away and stopped and looked at her. And then it came a hop or so nearer.

She had been lying in a state of passive abandonment, her swollen wet eyes open, regardless of everything. But those quick movements caught her back to attention. She began to watch the robin, and to note how it glanced sidelong at her and appeared to meditate further approaches. She made an almost imperceptible movement, and straightway the little creature was in a projecting spray of berried hawthorn overhead.

Her tear-washed mind became vaguely friendly. With an unconscious comfort it focussed down to the robin. She rolled over, sat up, and imitated his friendly "cheep."

Section 7

Presently she became aware of footsteps rustling through the grass towards her.

She looked over her shoulder and discovered Mr. Britling approaching by the field path. He looked white and tired and listless, even his bristling hair and moustache conveyed his depression; he was dressed in an old tweed knickerbocker suit and carrying a big atlas and some papers. He had an effect of hesitation in his approach. It was as if he wanted to talk to her and doubted her reception for him.

He spoke without any preface. "Direck has told you?" he said, standing over her.

She answered with a sob.

"I was afraid it was so, and yet I did not believe it," said Mr. Britling. "Until now."

He hesitated as if he would go on, and then he knelt down on the grass a little way from her and seated himself. There was an interval of silence.

"At first it hurts like the devil," he said at last, looking away at Mertonsome spire and speaking as if he spoke to no one in particular. "And then it hurts. It goes on hurting.... And one can't say much to any

one...."

He said no more for a time. But the two of them comforted one another, and knew that they comforted each other. They had a common feeling of fellowship and ease. They had been stricken by the same thing; they understood how it was with each other. It was not like the attempted comfort they got from those who had not loved and dreaded....

She took up a little broken twig and dug small holes in the ground with it.

"It's strange," she said, "but I'm glad I know for sure."

"I can understand that," said Mr. Britling.

"It stops the nightmares.... It isn't hopes I've had so much as fears.... I wouldn't admit he was dead or hurt. Because--I couldn't think it without thinking it--horrible. Now--"

"It's final," said Mr. Britling.

"It's definite," she said after a pause. "It's like thinking he's asleep--for good."

But that did not satisfy her. There was more than this in her mind. "It does away with the half and half," she said. "He's dead or he is

alive...."

She looked up at Mr. Britling as if she measured his understanding.

"You don't still doubt?" he said.

"I'm content now in my mind--in a way. He wasn't anyhow there--unless he was dead. But if I saw Teddy coming over the hedge there to me--It would be just natural.... No, don't stare at me. I know really he is dead. And it is a comfort. It is peace.... All the thoughts of him being crushed dreadfully or being mutilated or lying and screaming--or things like that--they've gone. He's out of his spoilt body. He's my unbroken Teddy again.... Out of sight somewhere.... Unbroken.... Sleeping."

She resumed her excavation with the little stick, with the tears running down her face.

Mr. Britling presently went on with the talk. "For me it came all at once, without a doubt or a hope. I hoped until the last that nothing would touch Hugh. And then it was like a black shutter falling--in an instant...."

He considered. "Hugh, too, seems just round the corner at times. But at times, it's a blank place...."

"At times," said Mr. Britling, "I feel nothing but astonishment. The

whole thing becomes incredible. Just as for weeks after the war began I couldn't believe that a big modern nation could really go to war--seriously--with its whole heart.... And they have killed Teddy and Hugh....

"They have killed millions. Millions--who had fathers and mothers and wives and sweethearts...."

Section 8

"Somehow I can't talk about this to Edith. It is ridiculous, I know. But in some way I can't.... It isn't fair to her. If I could, I would.... Quite soon after we were married I ceased to talk to her. I mean talking really and simply--as I do to you. And it's never come back. I don't know why.... And particularly I can't talk to her of Hugh.... Little things, little shadows of criticism, but enough to make it impossible.... And I go about thinking about Hugh, and what has happened to him sometimes... as though I was stifling."

Letty compared her case.

"I don't want to talk about Teddy--not a word."

"That's queer.... But perhaps--a son is different. Now I come to think of it--I've never talked of Mary.... Not to any one ever. I've never

thought of that before. But I haven't. I couldn't. No. Losing a lover, that's a thing for oneself. I've been through that, you see. But a son's more outside you. Altogether. And more your own making. It's not losing a thing in you; it's losing a hope and a pride.... Once when I was a little boy I did a drawing very carefully. It took me a long time.... And a big boy tore it up. For no particular reason. Just out of cruelty.... That--that was exactly like losing Hugh...."

Letty reflected.

"No," she confessed, "I'm more selfish than that."

"It isn't selfish," said Mr. Britling. "But it's a different thing. It's less intimate, and more personally important."

"I have just thought, 'He's gone. He's gone.' Sometimes, do you know, I have felt quite angry with him. Why need he have gone--so soon?"

Mr. Britling nodded understandingly.

"I'm not angry. I'm not depressed. I'm just bitterly hurt by the ending of something I had hoped to watch--always--all my life," he said. "I don't know how it is between most fathers and sons, but I admired Hugh. I found exquisite things in him. I doubt if other people saw them. He was quiet. He seemed clumsy. But he had an extraordinary fineness. He was a creature of the most delicate and rapid responses.... These aren't

my fond delusions. It was so.... You know, when he was only a few days old, he would start suddenly at any strange sound. He was alive like an Æolian harp from the very beginning.... And his hair when he was born--he had a lot of hair--was like the down on the breast of a bird. I remember that now very vividly--and how I used to like to pass my hand over it. It was silk, spun silk. Before he was two he could talk--whole sentences. He had the subtlest ear. He loved long words.... And then," he said with tears in his voice, "all this beautiful fine structure, this brain, this fresh life as nimble as water--as elastic as a steel spring, it is destroyed...."

"I don't make out he wasn't human. Often and often I have been angry with him, and disappointed in him. There were all sorts of weaknesses in him. We all knew them. And we didn't mind them. We loved him the better. And his odd queer cleverness!.... And his profound wisdom. And then all this beautiful and delicate fabric, all those clear memories in his dear brain, all his whims, his sudden inventions...."

"You know, I have had a letter from his chum Park. He was shot through a loophole. The bullet went through his eye and brow.... Think of it!

"An amazement ... a blow ... a splattering of blood. Rags of tormented skin and brain stuff.... In a moment. What had taken eighteen years--love and care...."

He sat thinking for an interval, and then went on, "The reading and

writing alone! I taught him to read myself--because his first governess, you see, wasn't very clever. She was a very good methodical sort, but she had no inspiration. So I got up all sorts of methods for teaching him to read. But it wasn't necessary. He seemed to leap all sorts of difficulties. He leapt to what one was trying to teach him. It was as quick as the movement of some wild animal....

"He came into life as bright and quick as this robin looking for food....

"And he's broken up and thrown away.... Like a cartridge case by the side of a covert...."

He choked and stopped speaking. His elbows were on his knees, and he put his face between his hands and shuddered and became still. His hair was troubled. The end of his stumpy moustache and a little roll of flesh stood out at the side of his hand, and made him somehow twice as pitiful. His big atlas, from which papers projected, seemed forgotten by his side. So he sat for a long time, and neither he nor Letty moved or spoke. But they were in the same shadow. They found great comfort in one another. They had not been so comforted before since their losses came upon them.

Section 9

It was Mr. Britling who broke silence. And when he drew his hands down from his face and spoke, he said one of the most amazing and unexpected things she had ever heard in her life.

"The only possible government in Albania," he said, looking steadfastly before him down the hill-side, "is a group of republican cantons after the Swiss pattern. I can see no other solution that is not offensive to God. It does not matter in the least what we owe to Serbia or what we owe to Italy. We have got to set this world on a different footing. We have got to set up the world at last--on justice and reason."

Then, after a pause, "The Treaty of Bucharest was an evil treaty. It must be undone. Whatever this German King of Bulgaria does, that treaty must be undone and the Bulgarians united again into one people. They must have themselves, whatever punishment they deserve, they must have nothing more, whatever reward they win."

She could not believe her ears.

"After this precious blood, after this precious blood, if we leave one plot of wickedness or cruelty in the world--"

And therewith he began to lecture Letty on the importance of international politics--to every one. How he and she and every one must understand, however hard it was to understand.

"No life is safe, no happiness is safe, there is no chance of bettering life until we have made an end to all that causes war....

"We have to put an end to the folly and vanity of kings, and to any people ruling any people but themselves. There is no convenience, there is no justice in any people ruling any people but themselves; the ruling of men by others, who have not their creeds and their languages and their ignorances and prejudices, that is the fundamental folly that has killed Teddy and Hugh--and these millions. To end that folly is as much our duty and business as telling the truth or earning a living...."

"But how can you alter it?"

He held out a finger at her. "Men may alter anything if they have motive enough and faith enough."

He indicated the atlas beside him.

"Here I am planning the real map of the world," he said. "Every sort of district that has a character of its own must have its own rule; and the great republic of the united states of the world must keep the federal peace between them all. That's the plain sense of life; the federal world-republic. Why do we bother ourselves with loyalties to any other government but that? It needs only that sufficient men should say it, and that republic would be here now. Why have we loitered so long--until these tragic punishments come? We have to map the world out into its

states, and plan its government and the way of its tolerations."

"And you think it will come?"

"It will come."

"And you believe that men will listen to such schemes?" said Letty.

Mr. Britling, with his eyes far away over the hills, seemed to think.

"Yes," he said. "Not perhaps to-day--not steadily. But kings and empires die; great ideas, once they are born, can never die again. In the end this world-republic, this sane government of the world, is as certain as the sunset. Only...."

He sighed, and turned over a page of his atlas blindly.

"Only we want it soon. The world is weary of this bloodshed, weary of all this weeping, of this wasting of substance and this killing of sons and lovers. We want it soon, and to have it soon we must work to bring it about. We must give our lives. What is left of our lives...."

"That is what you and I must do, Letty. What else is there left for us to do?... I will write of nothing else, I will think of nothing else now but of safety and order. So that all these dear dead--not one of them but will have brought the great days of peace and man's real beginning nearer, and these cruel things that make men whimper like children, that

break down bright lives into despair and kill youth at the very moment when it puts out its clean hands to take hold of life--these cruelties, these abominations of confusion, shall cease from the earth forever."

Section 10

Letty regarded him, frowning, and with her chin between her fists....

"But do you really believe," said Letty, "that things can be better than they are?"

"But--Yes!" said Mr. Britling.

"I don't," said Letty. "The world is cruel. It is just cruel. So it will always be."

"It need not be cruel," said Mr. Britling.

"It is just a place of cruel things. It is all set with knives. It is full of diseases and accidents. As for God--either there is no God or he is an idiot. He is a slobbering idiot. He is like some idiot who pulls off the wings of flies."

"No," said Mr. Britling.

"There is no progress. Nothing gets better. How can you believe in God after Hugh? Do you believe in God?"

"Yes," said Mr. Britling after a long pause; "I do believe in God."

"Who lets these things happen!" She raised herself on her arm and thrust her argument at him with her hand. "Who kills my Teddy and your Hugh--and millions."

"No," said Mr. Britling.

"But he must let these things happen. Or why do they happen?"

"No," said Mr. Britling. "It is the theologians who must answer that. They have been extravagant about God. They have had silly absolute ideas--that He is all powerful. That He's omni-everything. But the common sense of men knows better. Every real religious thought denies it. After all, the real God of the Christians is Christ, not God Almighty; a poor mocked and wounded God nailed on a cross of matter.... Some day He will triumph.... But it is not fair to say that He causes all things now. It is not fair to make out a case against him. You have been misled. It is a theologian's folly. God is not absolute; God is finite.... A finite God who struggles in his great and comprehensive way as we struggle in our weak and silly way--who is with us--that is the essence of all real religion.... I agree with you so--Why! if I thought there was an omnipotent God who looked down on battles and deaths and

all the waste and horror of this war--able to prevent these things--doing them to amuse Himself--I would spit in his empty face...."

"Any one would...."

"But it's your teachers and catechisms have set you against God.... They want to make out He owns all Nature. And all sorts of silly claims. Like the heralds in the Middle Ages who insisted that Christ was certainly a great gentleman entitled to bear arms. But God is within Nature and necessity. Necessity is a thing beyond God--beyond good and ill, beyond space and time, a mystery everlastingly impenetrable. God is nearer than that. Necessity is the uttermost thing, but God is the innermost thing. Closer He is than breathing and nearer than hands and feet. He is the Other Thing than this world. Greater than Nature or Necessity, for he is a spirit and they are blind, but not controlling them.... Not yet...."

"They always told me He was the maker of Heaven and Earth."

"That's the Jew God the Christians took over. It's a Quack God, a Panacea. It's not my God."

Letty considered these strange ideas.

"I never thought of Him like that," she said at last. "It makes it all seem different."

"Nor did I. But I do now.... I have suddenly found it and seen it plain. I see it so plain that I am amazed that I have not always seen it.... It is, you see, so easy to understand that there is a God, and how complex and wonderful and brotherly He is, when one thinks of those dear boys who by the thousand, by the hundred thousand, have laid down their lives.... Ay, and there were German boys too who did the same.... The cruelties, the injustice, the brute aggression--they saw it differently. They laid down their lives--they laid down their lives.... Those dear lives, those lives of hope and sunshine....

"Don't you see that it must be like that, Letty? Don't you see that it must be like that?"

"No," she said, "I've seen things differently from that."

"But it's so plain to me," said Mr. Britling. "If there was nothing else in all the world but our kindness for each other, or the love that made you weep in this kind October sunshine, or the love I bear Hugh--if there was nothing else at all--if everything else was cruelty and mockery and filthiness and bitterness, it would still be certain that there was a God of love and righteousness. If there were no signs of God in all the world but the godliness we have seen in those two boys of ours; if we had no other light but the love we have between us....

"You don't mind if I talk like this?" said Mr. Britling. "It's all I can think of now--this God, this God who struggles, who was in Hugh and

Teddy, clear and plain, and how He must become the ruler of the world...."

"This God who struggles," she repeated. "I have never thought of Him like that."

"Of course He must be like that," said Mr. Britling. "How can God be a Person; how can He be anything that matters to man, unless He is limited and defined and--human like ourselves.... With things outside Him and beyond Him."

Section 11

Letty walked back slowly through the fields of stubble to her cottage.

She had been talking to Mr. Britling for an hour, and her mind was full of the thought of this changed and simplified man, who talked of God as he might have done of a bird he had seen or of a tree he had sheltered under. And all mixed up with this thought of Mr. Britling was this strange idea of God who was also a limited person, who could come as close as Teddy, whispering love in the darkness. She had a ridiculous feeling that God really struggled like Mr. Britling, and that with only some indefinable inferiority of outlook Mr. Britling loved like God. She loved him for his maps and his dreams and the bareness of his talk to her. It was strange how the straining thought of the dead Teddy had

passed now out of her mind. She was possessed by a sense of ending and beginning, as though a page had turned over in her life and everything was new. She had never given religion any thought but contemptuous thought for some years, since indeed her growing intelligence had dismissed it as a scheme of inexcusable restraints and empty pretences, a thing of discords where there were no discords except of its making. She had been a happy Atheist. She had played in the sunshine, a natural creature with the completest confidence in the essential goodness of the world in which she found herself. She had refused all thought of painful and disagreeable things. Until the bloody paw of war had wiped out all her assurance. Teddy, the playmate, was over, the love game was ended for ever; the fresh happy acceptance of life as life; and in the place of Teddy was the sorrow of life, the pity of life, and this coming of God out of utter remoteness into a conceivable relation to her own existence.

She had left Mr. Britling to his atlas. He lay prone under the hedge with it spread before him. His occupation would have seemed to her only a little while ago the absurdest imaginable. He was drawing boundaries on his maps very carefully in red ink, with a fountain pen. But now she understood.

She knew that those red ink lines of Mr. Britling's might in the end prove wiser and stronger than the bargains of the diplomats....

In the last hour he had come very near to her. She found herself full of

an unwonted affection for him. She had never troubled her head about her relations with any one except Teddy before. Now suddenly she seemed to be opening out to all the world for kindness. This new idea of a friendly God, who had a struggle of his own, who could be thought of as kindred to Mr. Britling, as kindred to Teddy--had gripped her imagination. He was behind the autumnal sunshine; he was in the little bird that had seemed so confident and friendly. Whatever was kind, whatever was tender; there was God. And a thousand old phrases she had read and heard and given little heed to, that had lain like dry bones in her memory, suddenly were clothed in flesh and became alive. This God--if this was God--then indeed it was not nonsense to say that God was love, that he was a friend and companion.... With him it might be possible to face a world in which Teddy and she would never walk side by side again nor plan any more happiness for ever. After all she had been very happy; she had had wonderful happiness. She had had far more happiness, far more love, in her short years or so than most people had in their whole lives. And so in the reaction of her emotions, Letty, who had gone out with her head full of murder and revenge, came back through the sunset thinking of pity, of the thousand kindnesses and tendernesses of Teddy that were, after all, perhaps only an intimation of the limitless kindnesses and tendernesses of God.... What right had she to a white and bitter grief, self-centred and vindictive, while old Britling could still plan an age of mercy in the earth and a red-gold sunlight that was warm as a smile from Teddy lay on all the world....

She must go into the cottage and kiss Cissie, and put away that parcel

out of sight until she could find some poor soldier to whom she could send it. She had been pitiless towards Cissie in her grief. She had, in the egotism of her sorrow, treated Cissie as she might have treated a chair or a table, with no thought that Cissie might be weary, might dream of happiness still to come. Cissie had still to play the lover, and her man was already in khaki. There would be no such year as Letty had had in the days before the war darkened the world. Before Cissie's marrying the peace must come, and the peace was still far away. And Direck too would have to take his chances....

Letty came through the little wood and over the stile that brought her into sight of the cottage. The windows of the cottage as she saw it under the bough of the big walnut tree, were afire from the sun. The crimson Rambler over the porch that she and Teddy had planted was still bearing roses. The door was open and people were moving in the porch.

Some one was coming out of the cottage, a stranger, in an unfamiliar costume, and behind him was a man in khaki--but that was Mr. Direck! And behind him again was Cissie.

But the stranger!

He came out of the frame of the porch towards the garden gate....

Who--who was this stranger?

It was a man in queer-looking foreign clothes, baggy trousers of some soft-looking blue stuff and a blouse, and he had a white-banded left arm. He had a hat stuck at the back of his head, and a beard....

He was entirely a stranger, a foreigner. Was she going insane? Of course he was a stranger!

And then he moved a step, he made a queer sideways pace, a caper, on the path, and instantly he ceased to be strange and foreign. He became amazingly, incredibly, familiar by virtue of that step....

No!

Her breath stopped. All Letty's being seemed to stop. And this stranger who was also incredibly familiar, after he had stared at her motionless form for a moment, waved his hat with a gesture--a gesture that crowned and scaled the effect of familiarity. She gave no sign in reply.

No, that familiarity was just a mad freakishness in things.

This strange man came from Belgium perhaps, to tell something about Teddy....

And then she surprised herself by making a groaning noise, an absurd silly noise, just like the noise when one imitates a cow to a child. She said "Mooo-oo."

And she began to run forward, with legs that seemed misfits, waving her hands about, and as she ran she saw more and more certainly that this wounded man in strange clothing was Teddy. She ran faster and still faster, stumbling and nearly falling. If she did not get to him speedily the world would burst.

To hold him, to hold close to him!...

"Letty! Letty! Just one arm...."

She was clinging to him and he was holding her....

It was all right. She had always known it was all right. (Hold close to him.) Except just for a little while. But that had been foolishness.

Hadn't she always known he was alive? And here he was alive! (Hold close to him.) Only it was so good to be sure--after all her torment; to hold him, to hang about him, to feel the solid man, kissing her, weeping too, weeping together with her. "Teddy my love!"

Section 12

Letty was in the cottage struggling to hear and understand things too complicated for her emotion-crowded mind. There was something that Mr. Direck was trying to explain about a delayed telegram that had come soon

after she had gone out. There was much indeed that Mr. Direck was trying to explain. What did any explanation really matter when you had Teddy, with nothing but a strange beard and a bandaged arm between him and yourself? She had an absurd persuasion at first that those two strangenesses would also presently be set aside, so that Teddy would become just exactly what Teddy had always been.

Teddy had been shot through the upper arm....

"My hand has gone, dear little Letty. It's my left hand, luckily. I shall have to wear a hook like some old pirate...."

There was something about his being taken prisoner. "That other officer"--that was Mr. Direck's officer--"had been lying there for days." Teddy had been shot through the upper arm, and stunned by a falling beam. When he came to he was disarmed, with a German standing over him....

Then afterwards he had escaped. In quite a little time he had escaped. He had been in a railway station somewhere in Belgium; locked in a waiting-room with three or four French prisoners, and the junction had been bombed by French and British aeroplanes. Their guard and two of the prisoners had been killed. In the confusion the others had got away into the town. There were trucks of hay on fire, and a store of petrol was in danger. "After that one was bound to escape. One would have been shot if one had been found wandering about."

The bomb had driven some splinters of glass and corrugated iron into Teddy's wrist; it seemed a small place at first; it didn't trouble him for weeks. But then some dirt got into it.

In the narrow cobbled street beyond the station he had happened upon a woman who knew no English, but who took him to a priest, and the priest had hidden him.

Letty did not piece together the whole story at first. She did not want the story very much; she wanted to know about this hand and arm.

There would be queer things in the story when it came to be told. There was an old peasant who had made Teddy work in his fields in spite of his smashed and aching arm, and who had pointed to a passing German when Teddy demurred; there were the people called "they" who had at that time organised the escape of stragglers into Holland. There was the night watch, those long nights in succession before the dash for liberty. But Letty's concern was all with the hand. Inside the sling there was something that hurt the imagination, something bandaged, a stump. She could not think of it. She could not get away from the thought of it.

"But why did you lose your hand?"

It was only a little place at first, and then it got painful....

"But I didn't go into a hospital because I was afraid they would intern me, and so I wouldn't be able to come home. And I was dying to come home. I was--homesick. No one was ever so homesick. I've thought of this place and the garden, and how one looked out of the window at the passers-by, a thousand times. I seemed always to be seeing them. Old Dimple with his benevolent smile, and Mrs. Wolker at the end cottage, and how she used to fetch her beer and wink when she caught us looking at her, and little Charlie Slobberface sniffing on his way to the pigs and all the rest of them. And you, Letty. Particularly you. And how we used to lean on the window-sill with our shoulders touching, and your cheek just in front of my eyes.... And nothing aching at all in one....

"How I thought of that and longed for that!...

"And so, you see, I didn't go to the hospital. I kept hoping to get to England first. And I left it too long...."

"Life's come back to me with you!" said Letty. "Until just to-day I've believed you'd come back. And to-day--I doubted.... I thought it was all over--all the real life, love and the dear fun of things, and that there was nothing before me, nothing before me but just holding out--and keeping your memory.... Poor arm. Poor arm. And being kind to people. And pretending you were alive somewhere.... I'll not care about the arm. In a little while.... I'm glad you've gone, but I'm gladder you're back and can never go again.... And I will be your right hand, dear, and your left hand and all your hands. Both my hands for your dear lost left one.

You shall have three hands instead of two...."

Section 13

Letty stood by the window as close as she could to Teddy in a world that seemed wholly made up of unexpected things. She could not heed the others, it was only when Teddy spoke to the others, or when they spoke to Teddy, that they existed for her.

For instance, Teddy was presently talking to Mr. Direck.

They had spoken about the Canadians who had come up and relieved the Essex men after the fight in which Teddy had been captured. And then it was manifest that Mr. Direck was talking of his regiment. "I'm not the only American who has gone Canadian--for the duration of the war."

He had got to his explanation at last.

"I've told a lie," he said triumphantly. "I've shifted my birthplace six hundred miles.

"Mind you, I don't admit a thing that Cissie has ever said about America--not one thing. You don't understand the sort of proposition America is up against. America is the New World, where there are no races and nations any more; she is the Melting Pot, from which we will

cast the better state. I've believed that always--in spite of a thousand little things I believe it now. I go back on nothing. I'm not fighting as an American either. I'm fighting simply as myself.... I'm not going fighting for England, mind you. Don't you fancy that. I don't know I'm so particularly in love with a lot of English ways as to do that. I don't see how any one can be very much in love with your Empire, with its dead-alive Court, its artful politicians, its lords and ladies and snobs, its way with the Irish and its way with India, and everybody shifting responsibility and telling lies about your common people. I'm not going fighting for England. I'm going fighting for Cissie--and justice and Belgium and all that--but more particularly for Cissie. And anyhow I can't look Pa Britling in the face any more.... And I want to see those trenches--close. I reckon they're a thing it will be interesting to talk about some day.... So I'm going," said Mr. Direck. "But chiefly--it's Cissie. See?"

Cissie had come and stood by the side of him.

She looked from poor broken Teddy to him and back again.

"Up to now," she said, "I've wanted you to go...."

Tears came into her eyes.

"I suppose I must let you go," she said. "Oh! I'd hate you not to go...."

Section 14

"Good God! how old the Master looks!" cried Teddy suddenly.

He was standing at the window, and as Mr. Direck came forward inquiringly he pointed to the figure of Mr. Britling passing along the road towards the Dower House.

"He does look old. I hadn't noticed," said Mr. Direck.

"Why, he's gone grey!" cried Teddy, peering. "He wasn't grey when I left."

They watched the knickerbockered figure of Mr. Britling receding up the hill, atlas and papers in his hands behind his back.

"I must go out to him," said Teddy, disengaging himself from Letty.

"No," she said, arresting him with her hand.

"But he will be glad--"

She stood in her husband's way. She had a vision of Mr. Britling suddenly called out of his dreams of God ruling the united states of the

world, to rejoice at Teddy's restoration....

"No," she said; "it will only make him think again of Hugh--and how he died. Don't go out, Teddy. Not now. What does he care for you?... Let him rest from such things.... Leave him to dream over his atlas.... He isn't so desolate--if you knew.... I will tell you, Teddy--when I can....

"But just now--No, he will think of Hugh again.... Let him go.... He has God and his atlas there.... They're more than you think."