

## CHAPTER XI. THE GREAT COLLAPSE

1

And now the whole fabric of civilisation was bending and giving, and dropping to pieces and melting in the furnace of the war.

The stages of the swift and universal collapse of the financial and scientific civilisation with which the twentieth century opened followed each other very swiftly, so swiftly that upon the foreshortened page of history--they seem altogether to overlap. To begin with, one sees the world nearly at a maximum wealth and prosperity. To its inhabitants indeed it seemed also at a maximum of security. When now in retrospect the thoughtful observer surveys the intellectual history of this time, when one reads its surviving fragments of literature, its scraps of political oratory, the few small voices that chance has selected out of a thousand million utterances to speak to later days, the most striking thing of all this web of wisdom and error is surely that hallucination of security. To men living in our present world state, orderly, scientific and secured, nothing seems so precarious, so giddily dangerous, as the fabric of the social order with which the men of the opening of the twentieth century were content. To us it seems that every institution and relationship was the fruit of haphazard and tradition and the manifest sport of chance, their laws each made for some separate occasion and having no relation to any future needs, their customs illogical, their education aimless and wasteful. Their method of

economic exploitation indeed impresses a trained and informed mind as the most frantic and destructive scramble it is possible to conceive; their credit and monetary system resting on an unsubstantial tradition of the worthiness of gold, seems a thing almost fantastically unstable. And they lived in planless cities, for the most part dangerously congested; their rails and roads and population were distributed over the earth in the wanton confusion ten thousand irrelevant considerations had made.

Yet they thought confidently that this was a secure and permanent progressive system, and on the strength of some three hundred years of change and irregular improvement answered the doubter with, "Things always have gone well. We'll worry through!"

But when we contrast the state of man in the opening of the twentieth century with the condition of any previous period in his history, then perhaps we may begin to understand something of that blind confidence. It was not so much a reasoned confidence as the inevitable consequence of sustained good fortune. By such standards as they possessed, things HAD gone amazingly well for them. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for the first time in history whole populations found themselves regularly supplied with more than enough to eat, and the vital statistics of the time witness to an amelioration of hygienic conditions rapid beyond all precedent, and to a vast development of intelligence and ability in all the arts that make life wholesome. The level and quality of the average education had risen tremendously; and at the dawn

of the twentieth century comparatively few people in Western Europe or America were unable to read or write. Never before had there been such reading masses. There was wide social security. A common man might travel safely over three-quarters of the habitable globe, could go round the earth at a cost of less than the annual earnings of a skilled artisan. Compared with the liberality and comfort of the ordinary life of the time, the order of the Roman Empire under the Antonines was local and limited. And every year, every month, came some new increment to human achievement, a new country opened up, new mines, new scientific discoveries, a new machine!

For those three hundred years, indeed, the movement of the world seemed wholly beneficial to mankind. Men said, indeed, that moral organisation was not keeping pace with physical progress, but few attached any meaning to these phrases, the understanding of which lies at the basis of our present safety. Sustaining and constructive forces did indeed for a time more than balance the malign drift of chance and the natural ignorance, prejudice, blind passion, and wasteful self-seeking of mankind.

The accidental balance on the side of Progress was far slighter and infinitely more complex and delicate in its adjustments than the people of that time suspected; but that did not alter the fact that it was an effective balance. They did not realise that this age of relative good fortune was an age of immense but temporary opportunity for their kind. They complacently assumed a necessary progress towards which they had

no moral responsibility. They did not realise that this security of progress was a thing still to be won--or lost, and that the time to win it was a time that passed. They went about their affairs energetically enough and yet with a curious idleness towards those threatening things. No one troubled over the real dangers of mankind. They, saw their armies and navies grow larger and more portentous; some of their ironclads at the last cost as much as the whole annual expenditure upon advanced education; they accumulated explosives and the machinery of destruction; they allowed their national traditions and jealousies to accumulate; they contemplated a steady enhancement of race hostility as the races drew closer without concern or understanding, and they permitted the growth in their midst of an evil-spirited press, mercenary and unscrupulous, incapable of good, and powerful for evil. The State had practically no control over the press at all. Quite heedlessly they allowed this torch-paper to lie at the door of their war magazine for any spark to fire. The precedents of history were all one tale of the collapse of civilisations, the dangers of the time were manifest. One is incredulous now to believe they could not see.

Could mankind have prevented this disaster of the War in the Air?

An idle question that, as idle as to ask could mankind have prevented the decay that turned Assyria and Babylon to empty deserts or the slow decline and fall, the gradual social disorganisation, phase by phase, that closed the chapter of the Empire of the West! They could not, because they did not, they had not the will to arrest it. What mankind

could achieve with a different will is a speculation as idle as it is magnificent. And this was no slow decadence that came to the Europeanised world; those other civilisations rotted and crumbled down, the Europeanised civilisation was, as it were, blown up. Within the space of five years it was altogether disintegrated and destroyed. Up to the very eve of the War in the Air one sees a spacious spectacle of incessant advance, a world-wide security, enormous areas with highly organised industry and settled populations, gigantic cities spreading gigantically, the seas and oceans dotted with shipping, the land netted with rails, and open ways. Then suddenly the German air-fleets sweep across the scene, and we are in the beginning of the end.

2

This story has already told of the swift rush upon New York of the first German air-fleet and of the wild, inevitable orgy of inconclusive destruction that ensued. Behind it a second air-fleet was already swelling at its gasometers when England and France and Spain and Italy showed their hands. None of these countries had prepared for aeronautic warfare on the magnificent scale of the Germans, but each guarded secrets, each in a measure was making ready, and a common dread of German vigour and that aggressive spirit Prince Karl Albert embodied, had long been drawing these powers together in secret anticipation of some such attack. This rendered their prompt co-operation possible, and they certainly co-operated promptly. The second aerial power in Europe at this time was France; the British, nervous for their Asiatic

empire, and sensible of the immense moral effect of the airship upon half-educated populations, had placed their aeronautic parks in North India, and were able to play but a subordinate part in the European conflict. Still, even in England they had nine or ten big navigables, twenty or thirty smaller ones, and a variety of experimental aeroplanes. Before the fleet of Prince Karl Albert had crossed England, while Bert was still surveying Manchester in bird's-eye view, the diplomatic exchanges were going on that led to an attack upon Germany. A heterogeneous collection of navigable balloons of all sizes and types gathered over the Bernese Oberland, crushed and burnt the twenty-five Swiss air-ships that unexpectedly resisted this concentration in the battle of the Alps, and then, leaving the Alpine glaciers and valleys strewn with strange wreckage, divided into two fleets and set itself to terrorise Berlin and destroy the Franconian Park, seeking to do this before the second air-fleet could be inflated.

Both over Berlin and Franconia the assailants with their modern explosives effected great damage before they were driven off. In Franconia twelve fully distended and five partially filled and manned giants were able to make head against and at last, with the help of a squadron of drachenflieger from Hamburg, defeat and pursue the attack and to relieve Berlin, and the Germans were straining every nerve to get an overwhelming fleet in the air, and were already raiding London and Paris when the advance fleets from the Asiatic air-parks, the first intimation of a new factor in the conflict, were reported from Burmah and Armenia.

Already the whole financial fabric of the world was staggering when that occurred. With the destruction of the American fleet in the North Atlantic, and the smashing conflict that ended the naval existence of Germany in the North Sea, with the burning and wrecking of billions of pounds' worth of property in the four cardinal cities of the world, the fact of the hopeless costliness of war came home for the first time, came, like a blow in the face, to the consciousness of mankind. Credit went down in a wild whirl of selling. Everywhere appeared a phenomenon that had already in a mild degree manifested itself in preceding periods of panic; a desire to SECURE AND HOARD GOLD before prices reached bottom. But now it spread like wild-fire, it became universal. Above was visible conflict and destruction; below something was happening far more deadly and incurable to the flimsy fabric of finance and commercialism in which men had so blindly put their trust. As the airships fought above, the visible gold supply of the world vanished below. An epidemic of private cornering and universal distrust swept the world. In a few weeks, money, except for depreciated paper, vanished into vaults, into holes, into the walls of houses, into ten million hiding-places. Money vanished, and at its disappearance trade and industry came to an end. The economic world staggered and fell dead. It was like the stroke of some disease it was like the water vanishing out of the blood of a living creature; it was a sudden, universal coagulation of intercourse....

And as the credit system, that had been the living fortress of the

scientific civilisation, reeled and fell upon the millions it had held together in economic relationship, as these people, perplexed and helpless, faced this marvel of credit utterly destroyed, the airships of Asia, countless and relentless, poured across the heavens, swooped eastward to America and westward to Europe. The page of history becomes a long crescendo of battle. The main body of the British-Indian air-fleet perished upon a pyre of blazing antagonists in Burmah; the Germans were scattered in the great battle of the Carpathians; the vast peninsula of India burst into insurrection and civil war from end to end, and from Gobi to Morocco rose the standards of the "Jihad." For some weeks of warfare and destruction it seemed as though the Confederation of Eastern Asia must needs conquer the world, and then the jerry-built "modern" civilisation of China too gave way under the strain. The teeming and peaceful population of China had been "westernised" during the opening years of the twentieth century with the deepest resentment and reluctance; they had been dragooned and disciplined under Japanese and European--influence into an acquiescence with sanitary methods, police controls, military service, and wholesale process of exploitation against which their whole tradition rebelled. Under the stresses of the war their endurance reached the breaking point, the whole of China rose in incoherent revolt, and the practical destruction of the central government at Peking by a handful of British and German airships that had escaped from the main battles rendered that revolt invincible. In Yokohama appeared barricades, the black flag and the social revolution. With that the whole world became a welter of conflict.



So that a universal social collapse followed, as it were a logical consequence, upon world-wide war. Wherever there were great populations, great masses of people found themselves without work, without money, and unable to get food. Famine was in every working-class quarter in the world within three weeks of the beginning of the war. Within a month there was not a city anywhere in which the ordinary law and social procedure had not been replaced by some form of emergency control, in which firearms and military executions were not being used to keep order and prevent violence. And still in the poorer quarters, and in the populous districts, and even here and there already among those who had been wealthy, famine spread.

3

So what historians have come to call the Phase of the Emergency Committees sprang from the opening phase and from the phase of social collapse. Then followed a period of vehement and passionate conflict against disintegration; everywhere the struggle to keep order and to keep fighting went on. And at the same time the character of the war altered through the replacement of the huge gas-filled airships by flying-machines as the instruments of war. So soon as the big fleet engagements were over, the Asiatics endeavoured to establish in close proximity to the more vulnerable points of the countries against which they were acting, fortified centres from which flying-machine raids could be made. For a time they had everything their own way in this, and

then, as this story has told, the lost secret of the Butteridge machine came to light, and the conflict became equalized and less conclusive than ever. For these small flying-machines, ineffectual for any large expedition or conclusive attack, were horribly convenient for guerilla warfare, rapidly and cheaply made, easily used, easily hidden. The design of them was hastily copied and printed in Pinkerville and scattered broadcast over the United States and copies were sent to Europe, and there reproduced. Every man, every town, every parish that could, was exhorted to make and use them. In a little while they were being constructed not only by governments and local authorities, but by robber bands, by insurgent committees, by every type of private person. The peculiar social destructiveness of the Butteridge machine lay in its complete simplicity. It was nearly as simple as a motor-bicycle. The broad outlines of the earlier stages of the war disappeared under its influence, the spacious antagonism of nations and empires and races vanished in a seething mass of detailed conflict. The world passed at a stride from a unity and simplicity broader than that of the Roman Empire at its best, to as social fragmentation as complete as the robber-baron period of the Middle Ages. But this time, for a long descent down gradual slopes of disintegration, comes a fall like a fall over a cliff. Everywhere were men and women perceiving this and struggling desperately to keep as it were a hold upon the edge of the cliff.

A fourth phase follows. Through the struggle against Chaos, in the wake of the Famine, came now another old enemy of humanity--the Pestilence, the Purple Death. But the war does not pause. The flags still fly.

Fresh air-fleets rise, new forms of airship, and beneath their swooping struggles the world darkens--scarcely heeded by history.

It is not within the design of this book to tell what further story, to tell how the War in the Air kept on through the sheer inability of any authorities to meet and agree and end it, until every organised government in the world was as shattered and broken as a heap of china beaten with a stick. With every week of those terrible years history becomes more detailed and confused, more crowded and uncertain. Not without great and heroic resistance was civilisation borne down. Out of the bitter social conflict below rose patriotic associations, brotherhoods of order, city mayors, princes, provisional committees, trying to establish an order below and to keep the sky above. The double effort destroyed them. And as the exhaustion of the mechanical resources of civilisation clears the heavens of airships at last altogether, Anarchy, Famine and Pestilence are discovered triumphant below. The great nations and empires have become but names in the mouths of men. Everywhere there are ruins and unburied dead, and shrunken, yellow-faced survivors in a mortal apathy. Here there are robbers, here vigilance committees, and here guerilla bands ruling patches of exhausted territory, strange federations and brotherhoods form and dissolve, and religious fanaticisms begotten of despair gleam in famine-bright eyes. It is a universal dissolution. The fine order and welfare of the earth have crumpled like an exploded bladder. In five short years the world and the scope of human life have undergone a retrogressive change as great as that between the age of the Antonines and the Europe of the

ninth century....

4

Across this sombre spectacle of disaster goes a minute and insignificant person for whom perhaps the readers of this story have now some slight solicitude. Of him there remains to be told just one single and miraculous thing. Through a world darkened and lost, through a civilisation in its death agony, our little Cockney errant went and found his Edna! He found his Edna!

He got back across the Atlantic partly by means of an order from the President and partly through his own good luck. He contrived to get himself aboard a British brig in the timber trade that put out from Boston without cargo, chiefly, it would seem, because its captain had a vague idea of "getting home" to South Shields. Bert was able to ship himself upon her mainly because of the seamanlike appearance of his rubber boots. They had a long, eventful voyage; they were chased, or imagined themselves to be chased, for some hours by an Asiatic ironclad, which was presently engaged by a British cruiser. The two ships fought for three hours, circling and driving southward as they fought, until the twilight and the cloud-drift of a rising gale swallowed them up. A few days later Bert's ship lost her rudder and mainmast in a gale. The crew ran out of food and subsisted on fish. They saw strange air-ships going eastward near the Azores and landed to get provisions and repair the rudder at Teneriffe. There they found the town destroyed and two big

liners, with dead still aboard, sunken in the harbour. From there they got canned food and material for repairs, but their operations were greatly impeded by the hostility of a band of men amidst the ruins of the town, who sniped them and tried to drive them away.

At Mogador, they stayed and sent a boat ashore for water, and were nearly captured by an Arab ruse. Here too they got the Purple Death aboard, and sailed with it incubating in their blood. The cook sickened first, and then the mate, and presently every one was down and three in the forecastle were dead. It chanced to be calm weather, and they drifted helplessly and indeed careless of their fate backwards towards the Equator. The captain doctored them all with rum. Nine died all together, and of the four survivors none understood navigation; when at last they took heart again and could handle a sail, they made a course by the stars roughly northward and were already short of food once more when they fell in with a petrol-driven ship from Rio to Cardiff, shorthanded by reason of the Purple Death and glad to take them aboard. So at last, after a year of wandering Bert reached England. He landed in bright June weather, and found the Purple Death was there just beginning its ravages.

The people were in a state of panic in Cardiff and many had fled to the hills, and directly the steamer came to the harbour she was boarded and her residue of food impounded by some unauthenticated Provisional Committee. Bert tramped through a country disorganised by pestilence, foodless, and shaken to the very base of its immemorial order. He came

near death and starvation many times, and once he was drawn into scenes of violence that might have ended his career. But the Bert Smallways who tramped from Cardiff to London vaguely "going home," vaguely seeking something of his own that had no tangible form but Edna, was a very different person from the Desert Dervish who was swept out of England in Mr. Butteridge's balloon a year before. He was brown and lean and enduring, steady-eyed and pestilence-salted, and his mouth, which had once hung open, shut now like a steel trap. Across his brow ran a white scar that he had got in a fight on the brig. In Cardiff he had felt the need of new clothes and a weapon, and had, by means that would have shocked him a year ago, secured a flannel shirt, a corduroy suit, and a revolver and fifty cartridges from an abandoned pawnbroker's. He also got some soap and had his first real wash for thirteen months in a stream outside the town. The Vigilance bands that had at first shot plunderers very freely were now either entirely dispersed by the plague, or busy between town and cemetery in a vain attempt to keep pace with it. He prowled on the outskirts of the town for three or four days, starving, and then went back to join the Hospital Corps for a week, and so fortified himself with a few square meals before he started eastward.

The Welsh and English countryside at that time presented the strangest mingling of the assurance and wealth of the opening twentieth century with a sort of Dureresque medievalism. All the gear, the houses and mono-rails, the farm hedges and power cables, the roads and pavements, the sign-posts and advertisements of the former order were still for the most part intact. Bankruptcy, social collapse, famine, and pestilence

had done nothing to damage these, and it was only to the great capitals and ganglionic centres, as it were, of this State, that positive destruction had come. Any one dropped suddenly into the country would have noticed very little difference. He would have remarked first, perhaps, that all the hedges needed clipping, that the roadside grass grew rank, that the road-tracks were unusually rainworn, and that the cottages by the wayside seemed in many cases shut up, that a telephone wire had dropped here, and that a cart stood abandoned by the wayside. But he would still find his hunger whetted by the bright assurance that Wilder's Canned Peaches were excellent, or that there was nothing so good for the breakfast table as Gobble's Sausages. And then suddenly would come the Dureresque element; the skeleton of a horse, or some crumpled mass of rags in the ditch, with gaunt extended feet and a yellow, purple-blotched skin and face, or what had been a face, gaunt and glaring and devastated. Then here would be a field that had been ploughed and not sown, and here a field of corn carelessly trampled by beasts, and here a hoarding torn down across the road to make a fire.

Then presently he would meet a man or a woman, yellow-faced and probably negligently dressed and armed--prowling for food. These people would have the complexions and eyes and expressions of tramps or criminals, and often the clothing of prosperous middle-class or upper-class people. Many of these would be eager for news, and willing to give help and even scraps of queer meat, or crusts of grey and doughy bread, in return for it. They would listen to Bert's story with avidity, and attempt to keep him with them for a day or so. The virtual cessation of postal

distribution and the collapse of all newspaper enterprise had left an immense and aching gap in the mental life of this time. Men had suddenly lost sight of the ends of the earth and had still to recover the rumour-spreading habits of the Middle Ages. In their eyes, in their bearing, in their talk, was the quality of lost and deoriented souls.

As Bert travelled from parish to parish, and from district to district, avoiding as far as possible those festering centres of violence and despair, the larger towns, he found the condition of affairs varying widely. In one parish he would find the large house burnt, the vicarage wrecked, evidently in violent conflict for some suspected and perhaps imaginary store of food unburied dead everywhere, and the whole mechanism of the community at a standstill. In another he would find organising forces stoutly at work, newly-painted notice boards warning off vagrants, the roads and still cultivated fields policed by armed men, the pestilence under control, even nursing going on, a store of food husbanded, the cattle and sheep well guarded, and a group of two or three justices, the village doctor or a farmer, dominating the whole place; a reversion, in fact, to the autonomous community of the fifteenth century. But at any time such a village would be liable to a raid of Asiatics or Africans or such-like air-pirates, demanding petrol and alcohol or provisions. The price of its order was an almost intolerable watchfulness and tension.

Then the approach to the confused problems of some larger centre of population and the presence of a more intricate conflict would be marked



by roughly smeared notices of "Quarantine" or "Strangers Shot," or by a string of decaying plunderers dangling from the telephone poles at the roadside. About Oxford big boards were put on the roofs warning all air wanderers off with the single word, "Guns."

Taking their risks amidst these things, cyclists still kept abroad, and once or twice during Bert's long tramp powerful motor cars containing masked and goggled figures went tearing past him. There were few police in evidence, but ever and again squads of gaunt and tattered soldier-cyclists would come drifting along, and such encounters became more frequent as he got out of Wales into England. Amidst all this wreckage they were still campaigning. He had had some idea of resorting to the workhouses for the night if hunger pressed him too closely, but some of these were closed and others converted into temporary hospitals, and one he came up to at twilight near a village in Gloucestershire stood with all its doors and windows open, silent as the grave, and, as he found to his horror by stumbling along evil-smelling corridors, full of unburied dead.

From Gloucestershire Bert went northward to the British aeronautic park outside Birmingham, in the hope that he might be taken on and given food, for there the Government, or at any rate the War Office, still existed as an energetic fact, concentrated amidst collapse and social disaster upon the effort to keep the British flag still flying in the air, and trying to brisk up mayor and mayor and magistrate and magistrate in a new effort of organisation. They had brought together

all the best of the surviving artisans from that region, they had provisioned the park for a siege, and they were urgently building a larger type of Butteridge machine. Bert could get no footing at this work: he was not sufficiently skilled, and he had drifted to Oxford when the great fight occurred in which these works were finally wrecked. He saw something, but not very much, of the battle from a place called Boar Hill. He saw the Asiatic squadron coming up across the hills to the south-west, and he saw one of their airships circling southward again chased by two aeroplanes, the one that was ultimately overtaken, wrecked and burnt at Edge Hill. But he never learnt the issue of the combat as a whole.

He crossed the Thames from Eton to Windsor and made his way round the south of London to Bun Hill, and there he found his brother Tom, looking like some dark, defensive animal in the old shop, just recovering from the Purple Death, and Jessica upstairs delirious, and, as it seemed to him, dying grimly. She raved of sending out orders to customers, and scolded Tom perpetually lest he should be late with Mrs. Thompson's potatoes and Mrs. Hopkins' cauliflower, though all business had long since ceased and Tom had developed a quite uncanny skill in the snaring of rats and sparrows and the concealment of certain stores of cereals and biscuits from plundered grocers' shops. Tom received his brother with a sort of guarded warmth.

"Lor!" he said, "it's Bert. I thought you'd be coming back some day, and I'm glad to see you. But I can't arst you to eat anything, because I

'aven't got anything to eat.... Where you been, Bert, all this time?"

Bert reassured his brother by a glimpse of a partly eaten swede, and was still telling his story in fragments and parentheses, when he discovered behind the counter a yellow and forgotten note addressed to himself.

"What's this?" he said, and found it was a year-old note from Edna. "She came 'ere," said Tom, like one who recalls a trivial thing, "arstin' for you and arstin' us to take 'er in. That was after the battle and settin' Clapham Rise afire. I was for takin' 'er in, but Jessica wouldn't 'ave it--and so she borrowed five shillings of me quiet like and went on. I dessay she's tole you--"

She had, Bert found. She had gone on, she said in her note, to an aunt and uncle who had a brickfield near Horsham. And there at last, after another fortnight of adventurous journeying, Bert found her.

5

When Bert and Edna set eyes on one another, they stared and laughed foolishly, so changed they were, and so ragged and surprised. And then they both fell weeping.

"Oh! Bertie, boy!" she cried. "You've come--you've come!" and put out her arms and staggered. "I told 'im. He said he'd kill me if I didn't marry him."

But Edna was not married, and when presently Bert could get talk from her, she explained the task before him. That little patch of lonely agricultural country had fallen under the power of a band of bullies led by a chief called Bill Gore who had begun life as a butcher boy and developed into a prize-fighter and a professional sport. They had been organised by a local nobleman of former eminence upon the turf, but after a time he had disappeared, no one quite knew how and Bill had succeeded to the leadership of the countryside, and had developed his teacher's methods with considerable vigour. There had been a strain of advanced philosophy about the local nobleman, and his mind ran to "improving the race" and producing the Over-Man, which in practice took the form of himself especially and his little band in moderation marrying with some frequency. Bill followed up the idea with an enthusiasm that even trenched upon his popularity with his followers. One day he had happened upon Edna tending her pigs, and had at once fallen a-wooing with great urgency among the troughs of slush. Edna had made a gallant resistance, but he was still vigorously about and extraordinarily impatient. He might, she said, come at any time, and she looked Bert in the eyes. They were back already in the barbaric stage when a man must fight for his love.

And here one deploras the conflicts of truth with the chivalrous tradition. One would like to tell of Bert sallying forth to challenge his rival, of a ring formed and a spirited encounter, and Bert by some miracle of pluck and love and good fortune winning. But indeed nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, he reloaded his revolver very carefully,

and then sat in the best room of the cottage by the derelict brickfield, looking anxious and perplexed, and listening to talk about Bill and his ways, and thinking, thinking. Then suddenly Edna's aunt, with a thrill in her voice, announced the appearance of that individual. He was coming with two others of his gang through the garden gate. Bert got up, put the woman aside, and looked out. They presented remarkable figures. They wore a sort of uniform of red golfing jackets and white sweaters, football singlet, and stockings and boots and each had let his fancy play about his head-dress. Bill had a woman's hat full of cock's feathers, and all had wild, slouching cowboy brims.

Bert sighed and stood up, deeply thoughtful, and Edna watched him, marvelling. The women stood quite still. He left the window, and went out into the passage rather slowly, and with the careworn expression of a man who gives his mind to a complex and uncertain business. "Edna!" he called, and when she came he opened the front door.

He asked very simply, and pointing to the foremost of the three, "That 'im?... Sure?"... and being told that it was, shot his rival instantly and very accurately through the chest. He then shot Bill's best man much less tidily in the head, and then shot at and winged the third man as he fled. The third gentleman yelped, and continued running with a comical end-on twist.

Then Bert stood still meditating, with the pistol in his hand, and quite regardless of the women behind him.

So far things had gone well.

It became evident to him that if he did not go into politics at once, he would be hanged as an assassin and accordingly, and without a word to the women, he went down to the village public-house he had passed an hour before on his way to Edna, entered it from the rear, and confronted the little band of ambiguous roughs, who were drinking in the tap-room and discussing matrimony and Bill's affection in a facetious but envious manner, with a casually held but carefully reloaded revolver, and an invitation to join what he called, I regret to say, a "Vigilance Committee" under his direction. "It's wanted about 'ere, and some of us are gettin' it up." He presented himself as one having friends outside, though indeed, he had no friends at all in the world but Edna and her aunt and two female cousins.

There was a quick but entirely respectful discussion of the situation. They thought him a lunatic who had tramped into, this neighbourhood ignorant of Bill. They desired to temporise until their leader came. Bill would settle him. Some one spoke of Bill.

"Bill's dead, I jest shot 'im," said Bert. "We don't need reckon with 'IM. 'E's shot, and a red-'aired chap with a squint, 'E'S shot. We've settled up all that. There ain't going to be no more Bill, ever. 'E'd got wrong ideas about marriage and things. It's 'is sort of chap we're after."

That carried the meeting.

Bill was perfunctorily buried, and Bert's Vigilance Committee (for so it continued to be called) reigned in his stead.

That is the end of this story so far as Bert Smallways is concerned.

We leave him with his Edna to become squatters among the clay and oak thickets of the Weald, far away from the stream of events. From that time forth life became a succession of peasant encounters, an affair of pigs and hens and small needs and little economies and children, until Clapham and Bun Hill and all the life of the Scientific Age became to Bert no more than the fading memory of a dream. He never knew how the War in the Air went on, nor whether it still went on. There were rumours of airships going and coming, and of happenings Londonward. Once or twice their shadows fell on him as he worked, but whence they came or whither they went he could not tell. Even his desire to tell died out for want of food. At times came robbers and thieves, at times came diseases among the beasts and shortness of food, once the country was worried by a pack of boar-hounds he helped to kill; he went through many inconsecutive, irrelevant adventures. He survived them all.

Accident and death came near them both ever and again and passed them by, and they loved and suffered and were happy, and she bore him many children--eleven children--one after the other, of whom only four succumbed to the necessary hardships of their simple life. They lived

and did well, as well was understood in those days. They went the way of all flesh, year by year.

## THE EPILOGUE

It happened that one bright summer's morning exactly thirty years after the launching of the first German air-fleet, an old man took a small boy to look for a missing hen through the ruins of Bun Hill and out towards the splintered pinnacles of the Crystal Palace. He was not a very old man; he was, as a matter of fact, still within a few weeks of sixty-three, but constant stooping over spades and forks and the carrying of roots and manure, and exposure to the damps of life in the open-air without a change of clothing, had bent him into the form of a sickle. Moreover, he had lost most of his teeth and that had affected his digestion and through that his skin and temper. In face and expression he was curiously like that old Thomas Smallways who had once been coachman to Sir Peter Bone, and this was just as it should be, for he was Tom Smallways the son, who formerly kept the little green-grocer's shop under the straddle of the mono-rail viaduct in the High Street of Bun Hill. But now there were no green-grocer's shops, and Tom was living in one of the derelict villas hard by that unoccupied building site that had been and was still the scene of his daily horticulture. He and his wife lived upstairs, and in the drawing and



dining rooms, which had each French windows opening on the lawn, and all about the ground floor generally, Jessica, who was now a lean and lined and baldish but still very efficient and energetic old woman, kept her three cows and a multitude of gawky hens. These two were part of a little community of stragglers and returned fugitives, perhaps a hundred and fifty souls of them all together, that had settled down to the new conditions of things after the Panic and Famine and Pestilence that followed in the wake of the War. They had come back from strange refuges and hiding-places and had squatted down among the familiar houses and begun that hard struggle against nature for food which was now the chief interest of their lives. They were by sheer preoccupation with that a peaceful people, more particularly after Wilkes, the house agent, driven by some obsolete dream of acquisition, had been drowned in the pool by the ruined gas-works for making inquiries into title and displaying a litigious turn of mind. (He had not been murdered, you understand, but the people had carried an exemplary ducking ten minutes or so beyond its healthy limits.)

This little community had returned from its original habits of suburban parasitism to what no doubt had been the normal life of humanity for nearly immemorial years, a life of homely economies in the most intimate contact with cows and hens and patches of ground, a life that breathes and exhales the scent of cows and finds the need for stimulants satisfied by the activity of the bacteria and vermin it engenders. Such had been the life of the European peasant from the dawn of history to the beginning of the Scientific Era, so it was the large majority of the

people of Asia and Africa had always been wont to live. For a time it had seemed that, by virtue of machines, and scientific civilisation, Europe was to be lifted out of this perpetual round of animal drudgery, and that America was to evade it very largely from the outset. And with the smash of the high and dangerous and splendid edifice of mechanical civilisation that had arisen so marvellously, back to the land came the common man, back to the manure.

The little communities, still haunted by ten thousand memories of a greater state, gathered and developed almost tacitly a customary law and fell under the guidance of a medicine man or a priest. The world rediscovered religion and the need of something to hold its communities together. At Bun Hill this function was entrusted to an old Baptist minister. He taught a simple but adequate faith. In his teaching a good principle called the Word fought perpetually against a diabolical female influence called the Scarlet Woman and an evil being called Alcohol. This Alcohol had long since become a purely spiritualised conception deprived of any element of material application; it had no relation to the occasional finds of whiskey and wine in Londoners' cellars that gave Bun Hill its only holidays. He taught this doctrine on Sundays, and on weekdays he was an amiable and kindly old man, distinguished by his quaint disposition to wash his hands, and if possible his face, daily, and with a wonderful genius for cutting up pigs. He held his Sunday services in the old church in the Beckenham Road, and then the countryside came out in a curious reminiscence of the urban dress of Edwardian times. All the men without exception wore frock coats, top

hats, and white shirts, though many had no boots. Tom was particularly distinguished on these occasions because he wore a top hat with gold lace about it and a green coat and trousers that he had found upon a skeleton in the basement of the Urban and District Bank. The women, even Jessica, came in jackets and immense hats extravagantly trimmed with artificial flowers and exotic birds' feather's--of which there were abundant supplies in the shops to the north--and the children (there were not many children, because a large proportion of the babies born in Bun Hill died in a few days' time of inexplicable maladies) had similar clothes cut down to accommodate them; even Stringer's little grandson of four wore a large top hat.

That was the Sunday costume of the Bun Hill district, a curious and interesting survival of the genteel traditions of the Scientific Age. On a weekday the folk were dingily and curiously hung about with dirty rags of housecloth and scarlet flannel, sacking, curtain serge, and patches of old carpet, and went either bare-footed or on rude wooden sandals. These people, the reader must understand, were an urban population sunken back to the state of a barbaric peasantry, and so without any of the simple arts a barbaric peasantry would possess. In many ways they were curiously degenerate and incompetent. They had lost any idea of making textiles, they could hardly make up clothes when they had material, and they were forced to plunder the continually dwindling supplies of the ruins about them for cover.

All the simple arts they had ever known they had lost, and with the

breakdown of modern drainage, modern water supply, shopping, and the like, their civilised methods were useless. Their cooking was worse than primitive. It was a feeble muddling with food over wood fires in rusty drawing-room fireplaces; for the kitcheners burnt too much. Among them all no sense of baking or brewing or metal-working was to be found.

Their employment of sacking and such-like coarse material for work-a-day clothing, and their habit of tying it on with string and of thrusting wadding and straw inside it for warmth, gave these people an odd, "packed" appearance, and as it was a week-day when Tom took his little nephew for the hen-seeking excursion, so it was they were attired.

"So you've really got to Bun Hill at last, Teddy," said old Tom, beginning to talk and slackening his pace so soon as they were out of range of old Jessica. "You're the last of Bert's boys for me to see. Wat I've seen, young Bert I've seen, Sissie and Matt, Tom what's called after me, and Peter. The traveller people brought you along all right, eh?"

"I managed," said Teddy, who was a dry little boy.

"Didn't want to eat you on the way?"

"They was all right," said Teddy, "and on the way near Leatherhead we saw a man riding on a bicycle."

"My word!" said Tom, "there ain't many of those about nowadays. Where was he going?"

"Said 'e was going to Dorking if the High Road was good enough. But I doubt if he got there. All about Burford it was flooded. We came over the hill, uncle--what they call the Roman Road. That's high and safe."

"Don't know it," said old Tom. "But a bicycle! You're sure it was a bicycle? Had two wheels?"

"It was a bicycle right enough."

"Why! I remember a time, Teddy, where there was bicycles no end, when you could stand just here--the road was as smooth as a board then--and see twenty or thirty coming and going at the same time, bicycles and moty-bicycles; moty cars, all sorts of whirly things."

"No!" said Teddy.

"I do. They'd keep on going by all day,--'undreds and 'undreds."

"But where was they all going?" asked Teddy.

"Tearin' off to Brighton--you never seen Brighton, I expect--it's down by the sea, used to be a moce 'mazing place--and coming and going from London."

"Why?"

"They did."

"But why?"

"Lord knows why, Teddy. They did. Then you see that great thing there like a great big rusty nail sticking up higher than all the houses, and that one yonder, and that, and how something's fell in between 'em among the houses. They was parts of the mono-rail. They went down to Brighton too and all day and night there was people going, great cars as big as 'ouses full of people."

The little boy regarded the rusty evidences acrosss the narrow muddy ditch of cow-droppings that had once been a High Street. He was clearly disposed to be sceptical, and yet there the ruins were! He grappled with ideas beyond the strength of his imagination.

"What did they go for?" he asked, "all of 'em?"

"They 'AD to. Everything was on the go those days--everything."

"Yes, but where did they come from?"

"All round 'ere, Teddy, there was people living in those 'ouses, and up

the road more 'ouses and more people. You'd 'ardly believe me, Teddy, but it's Bible truth. You can go on that way for ever and ever, and keep on coming on 'ouses, more 'ouses, and more. There's no end to 'em. No end. They get bigger and bigger." His voice dropped as though he named strange names.

"It's LONDON," he said.

"And it's all empty now and left alone. All day it's left alone. You don't find 'ardly a man, you won't find nothing but dogs and cats after the rats until you get round by Bromley and Beckenham, and there you find the Kentish men herding swine. (Nice rough lot they are too!) I tell you that so long as the sun is up it's as still as the grave. I been about by day--orfen and orfen." He paused.

"And all those 'ouses and streets and ways used to be full of people before the War in the Air and the Famine and the Purple Death. They used to be full of people, Teddy, and then came a time when they was full of corpses, when you couldn't go a mile that way before the stink of 'em drove you back. It was the Purple Death 'ad killed 'em every one. The cats and dogs and 'ens and vermin caught it. Everything and every one 'ad it. Jest a few of us 'appened to live. I pulled through, and your aunt, though it made 'er lose 'er 'air. Why, you find the skeletons in the 'ouses now. This way we been into all the 'ouses and took what we wanted and buried moce of the people, but up that way, Norwood way, there's 'ouses with the glass in the windows still, and the furniture

not touched--all dusty and falling to pieces--and the bones of the people lying, some in bed, some about the 'ouse, jest as the Purple Death left 'em five-and-twenty years ago. I went into one--me and old Higgins las' year--and there was a room with books, Teddy--you know what I mean by books, Teddy?"

"I seen 'em. I seen 'em with pictures."

"Well, books all round, Teddy, 'undreds of books, beyond-rhyme or reason, as the saying goes, green-mouldy and dry. I was for leaven' 'em alone--I was never much for reading--but ole Higgins he must touch em. 'I believe I could read one of 'em NOW,' 'e says.

"'Not it,' I says.

"'I could,' 'e says, laughing and takes one out and opens it.

"I looked, and there, Teddy, was a cullud picture, oh, so lovely! It was a picture of women and serpents in a garden. I never see anything like it.

"'This suits me,' said old Higgins, 'to rights.'

"And then kind of friendly he gave the book a pat--

Old Tom Smallways paused impressively.



"And then?" said Teddy.

"It all fell to dus'. White dus'!" He became still more impressive. "We didn't touch no more of them books that day. Not after that."

For a long time both were silent. Then Tom, playing with a subject that attracted him with a fatal fascination, repeated, "All day long they lie--still as the grave."

Teddy took the point at last. "Don't they lie o' nights?" he asked.

Old Tom shook his head. "Nobody knows, boy, nobody knows."

"But what could they do?"

"Nobody knows. Nobody ain't seen to tell not nobody."

"Nobody?"

"They tell tales," said old Tom. "They tell tales, but there ain't no believing 'em. I gets 'ome about sundown, and keeps indoors, so I can't say nothing, can I? But there's them that thinks some things and them as thinks others. I've 'eard it's unlucky to take clo'es off of 'em unless they got white bones. There's stories--"

The boy watched his uncle sharply. "WOT stories?" he said.

"Stories of moonlight nights and things walking about. But I take no stock in 'em. I keeps in bed. If you listen to stories--Lord! You'll get afraid of yourself in a field at midday."

The little boy looked round and ceased his questions for a space.

"They say there's a 'og man in Beck'n'am what was lost in London three days and three nights. 'E went up after whiskey to Cheapside, and lorst 'is way among the ruins and wandered. Three days and three nights 'e wandered about and the streets kep' changing so's he couldn't get 'ome. If 'e 'adn't remembered some words out of the Bible 'e might 'ave been there now. All day 'e went and all night--and all day long it was still. It was as still as death all day long, until the sunset came and the twilight thickened, and then it began to rustle and whisper and go pit-a-pat with a sound like 'urrying feet."

He paused.

"Yes," said the little boy breathlessly. "Go on. What then?"

"A sound of carts and 'orses there was, and a sound of cabs and omnibuses, and then a lot of whistling, shrill whistles, whistles that froze 'is marrer. And directly the whistles began things begun to show, people in the streets 'urrying, people in the 'ouses and shops busying

themselves, moty cars in the streets, a sort of moonlight in all the lamps and winders. People, I say, Teddy, but they wasn't people. They was the ghosts of them that was overtook, the ghosts of them that used to crowd those streets. And they went past 'im and through 'im and never 'eeded 'im, went by like fogs and vapours, Teddy. And sometimes they was cheerful and sometimes they was 'orrible, 'orrible beyond words. And once 'e come to a place called Piccadilly, Teddy, and there was lights blazing like daylight and ladies and gentlemen in splendid clo'es crowding the pavement, and taxicabs follering along the road. And as 'e looked, they all went evil--evil in the face, Teddy. And it seemed to 'im SUDDENLY THEY SAW 'IM, and the women began to look at 'im and say things to 'im--'orrible--wicked things. One come very near 'im, Teddy, right up to 'im, and looked into 'is face--close. And she 'adn't got a face to look with, only a painted skull, and then 'e see; they was all painted skulls. And one after another they crowded on 'im saying 'orrible things, and catchin' at 'im and threatenin' and coaxing 'im, so that 'is 'eart near left 'is body for fear."

"Yes," gasped Teddy in an unendurable pause.

"Then it was he remembered the words of Scripture and saved himself alive. 'The Lord is my 'Elper, 'e says, 'therefore I will fear nothing,' and straightaway there came a cock-crowing and the street was empty from end to end. And after that the Lord was good to 'im and guided 'im 'ome."

Teddy stared and caught at another question. "But who was the people," he asked, "who lived in all these 'ouses? What was they?"

"Gent'men in business, people with money--leastways we thought it was money till everything smashed up, and then seemingly it was jes' paper--all sorts. Why, there was 'undreds of thousands of them. There was millions. I've seen that 'I Street there regular so's you couldn't walk along the pavements, shoppin' time, with women and people shoppin'."

"But where'd they get their food and things?"

"Bort 'em in shops like I used to 'ave. I'll show you the place, Teddy, if we go back. People nowadays 'aven't no idee of a shop--no idee. Plate-glass winders--it's all Greek to them. Why, I've 'ad as much as a ton and a 'arf of petaties to 'andle all at one time. You'd open your eyes till they dropped out to see jes' what I used to 'ave in my shop. Baskets of pears 'eaped up, marrers, apples and pears, d'licious great nuts." His voice became luscious--"Benanas, oranges."

"What's benanas?" asked the boy, "and oranges?"

"Fruits they was. Sweet, juicy, d'licious fruits. Foreign fruits. They brought 'em from Spain and N' York and places. In ships and things. They brought 'em to me from all over the world, and I sold 'em in my shop. I sold 'em, Teddy! me what goes about now with you, dressed up in old

sacks and looking for lost 'ens. People used to come into my shop, great beautiful ladies like you'd 'ardly dream of now, dressed up to the nines, and say, 'Well, Mr. Smallways, what you got 'smorning?' and I'd say, 'Well, I got some very nice C'nadian apples, 'or p'raps I got custed marrers. See? And they'd buy 'em. Right off they'd say, 'Send me some up.' Lord! what a life that was. The business of it, the bussel, the smart things you saw, moty cars going by, kerridges, people, organ-grinders, German bands. Always something going past--always. If it wasn't for those empty 'ouses, I'd think it all a dream."

"But what killed all the people, uncle?" asked Teddy.

"It was a smash-up," said old Tom. "Everything was going right until they started that War. Everything was going like clock-work. Everybody was busy and everybody was 'appy and everybody got a good square meal every day."

He met incredulous eyes. "Everybody," he said firmly. "If you couldn't get it anywhere else, you could get it in the workhuss, a nice 'ot bowl of soup called skilly, and bread better'n any one knows 'ow to make now, reg'lar WHITE bread, gov'ment bread."

Teddy marvelled, but said nothing. It made him feel deep longings that he found it wisest to fight down.

For a time the old man resigned himself to the pleasures of gustatory

reminiscence. His lips moved. "Pickled Sammin!" he whispered, "an' vinegar.... Dutch cheese, BEER! A pipe of terbakker."

"But 'OW did the people get killed?" asked Teddy presently.

"There was the War. The War was the beginning of it. The War banged and flummocked about, but it didn't really KILL many people. But it upset things. They came and set fire to London and burnt and sank all the ships there used to be in the Thames--we could see the smoke and steam for weeks--and they threw a bomb into the Crystal Palace and made a bust-up, and broke down the rail lines and things like that. But as for killin' people, it was just accidental if they did. They killed each other more. There was a great fight all hereabout one day, Teddy--up in the air. Great things bigger than fifty 'ouses, bigger than the Crystal Palace--bigger, bigger than anything, flying about up in the air and whacking at each other and dead men fallin' off 'em. T'riffic! But, it wasn't so much the people they killed as the business they stopped. There wasn't any business doin', Teddy, there wasn't any money about, and nothin' to buy if you 'ad it."

"But 'ow did the people get KILLED?" said the little boy in the pause.

"I'm tellin' you, Teddy," said the old man. "It was the stoppin' of business come next. Suddenly there didn't seem to be any money. There was cheques--they was a bit of paper written on, and they was jes' as good as money--jes' as good if they come from customers you knew. Then

all of a sudden they wasn't. I was left with three of 'em and two I'd given' change. Then it got about that five-pun' notes were no good, and then the silver sort of went off. Gold you 'couldn't get for love or--anything. The banks in London 'ad got it, and the banks was all smashed up. Everybody went bankrup'. Everybody was thrown out of work. Everybody!"

He paused, and scrutinised his hearer. The small boy's intelligent face expressed hopeless perplexity.

"That's 'ow it 'appened," said old Tom. He sought for some means of expression. "It was like stoppin' a clock," he said. "Things were quiet for a bit, deadly quiet, except for the air-ships fighting about in the sky, and then people begun to get excited. I remember my lars' customer, the very lars' customer that ever I 'ad. He was a Mr. Moses Gluckstein, a city gent and very pleasant and fond of sparrowgrass and chokes, and 'e cut in--there 'adn't been no customers for days--and began to talk very fast, offerin' me for anything I 'ad, anything, petaties or anything, its weight in gold. 'E said it was a little speculation 'e wanted to try. 'E said it was a sort of bet reely, and very likely 'e'd lose; but never mind that, 'e wanted to try. 'E always 'ad been a gambler, 'e said. 'E said I'd only got to weigh it out and 'e'd give me 'is cheque right away. Well, that led to a bit of a argument, perfect respectful it was, but a argument about whether a cheque was still good, and while 'e was explaining there come by a lot of these here unemployed with a great banner they 'ad for every one to read--every one could

read those days--'We want Food.' Three or four of 'em suddenly turns and comes into my shop.

"'Got any food?' says one.

"'No,' I says, 'not to sell. I wish I 'ad. But if I 'ad, I'm afraid I couldn't let you have it. This gent, 'e's been offerin' me--'

"Mr. Gluckstein 'e tried to stop me, but it was too late.

"'What's 'e been offerin' you?' says a great big chap with a 'atchet; 'what's 'e been offerin you?' I 'ad to tell.

"'Boys,' 'e said, 'ere's another feenancier!' and they took 'im out there and then, and 'ung 'im on a lam'pose down the street. 'E never lifted a finger to resist. After I tole on 'im 'e never said a word...."

Tom meditated for a space. "First chap I ever sin 'ung!" he said.

"Ow old was you?" asked Teddy.

"'Bout thirty," said old Tom.

"Why! I saw free pig-stealers 'ung before I was six," said Teddy.

"Father took me because of my birfday being near. Said I ought to be blooded...."



"Well, you never saw no-one killed by a moty car, any'ow," said old Tom after a moment of chagrin. "And you never saw no dead men carried into a chemis' shop."

Teddy's momentary triumph faded. "No," he said, "I 'aven't."

"Nor won't. Nor won't. You'll never see the things I've seen, never.

Not if you live to be a 'undred... Well, as I was saying, that's how the Famine and Riotin' began. Then there was strikes and Socialism, things I never did 'old with, worse and worse. There was fightin' and shootin' down, and burnin' and plundering. They broke up the banks up in London and got the gold, but they couldn't make food out of gold. 'Ow did WE get on? Well, we kep' quiet. We didn't interfere with no-one and no-one didn't interfere with us. We 'ad some old 'tatoes about, but mocely we lived on rats. Ours was a old 'ouse, full of rats, and the famine never seemed to bother 'em. Orfen we got a rat. Orfen. But moce of the people who lived hereabouts was too tender stummicked for rats. Didn't seem to fancy 'em. They'd been used to all sorts of fallals, and they didn't take to 'onest feeding, not till it was too late. Died rather.

"It was the famine began to kill people. Even before the Purple Death came along they was dying like flies at the end of the summer. 'Ow I remember it all! I was one of the first to 'ave it. I was out, seein' if I mightn't get 'old of a cat or somethin', and then I went round to my bit of ground to see whether I couldn't get up some young turnips

I'd forgot, and I was took something awful. You've no idee the pain, Teddy--it doubled me up pretty near. I jes' lay down by 'at there corner, and your aunt come along to look for me and dragged me 'ome like a sack.

"I'd never 'ave got better if it 'adn't been for your aunt. 'Tom,' she says to me, 'you got to get well,' and I 'AD to. Then SHE sickened. She sickened but there ain't much dyin' about your aunt. 'Lor!' she says, 'as if I'd leave you to go muddlin' along alone!' That's what she says. She's got a tongue, 'as your aunt. But it took 'er 'air off--and arst though I might, she's never cared for the wig I got 'er--orf the old lady what was in the vicarage garden.

"Well, this 'ere Purple Death,--it jes' wiped people out, Teddy. You couldn't bury 'em. And it took the dogs and the cats too, and the rats and 'orses. At last every house and garden was full of dead bodies. London way, you couldn't go for the smell of there, and we 'ad to move out of the 'I street into that villa we got. And all the water run short that way. The drains and underground tunnels took it. Gor' knows where the Purple Death come from; some say one thing and some another. Some said it come from eatin' rats and some from eatin' nothin'. Some say the Asiatics brought it from some 'I place, Thibet, I think, where it never did nobody much 'arm. All I know is it come after the Famine. And the Famine come after the Penic and the Penic come after the War."

Teddy thought. "What made the Purple Death?" he asked.

"'Aven't I tole you!"

"But why did they 'ave a Penic?"

"They 'ad it."

"But why did they start the War?"

"They couldn't stop theirselves. 'Aving them airships made 'em."

"And 'ow did the War end?"

"Lord knows if it's ended, boy," said old Tom. "Lord knows if it's ended. There's been travellers through 'ere--there was a chap only two summers ago--say it's goin' on still. They say there's bands of people up north who keep on with it and people in Germany and China and 'Merica and places. 'E said they still got flying-machines and gas and things. But we 'aven't seen nothin' in the air now for seven years, and nobody 'asn't come nigh of us. Last we saw was a crumpled sort of airship going away--over there. It was a littleish-sized thing and lopsided, as though it 'ad something the matter with it."

He pointed, and came to a stop at a gap in the fence, the vestiges of the old fence from which, in the company of his neighbour Mr. Stringer the milkman, he had once watched the South of England Aero Club's

Saturday afternoon ascents. Dim memories, it may be, of that particular afternoon returned to him.

"There, down there, where all that rus' looks so red and bright, that's the gas-works."

"What's gas?" asked the little boy.

"Oh, a hairy sort of nothin' what you put in balloons to make 'em go up. And you used to burn it till the 'lectricity come."

The little boy tried vainly to imagine gas on the basis of these particulars. Then his thoughts reverted to a previous topic.

"But why didn't they end the War?"

"Obstinacy. Everybody was getting 'urt, but everybody was 'urtin' and everybody was 'igh-spirited and patriotic, and so they smeshed up things instead. They jes' went on smeshin'. And afterwards they jes' got desp'rite and savage."

"It ought to 'ave ended," said the little boy.

"It didn't ought to 'ave begun," said old Tom, "But people was proud. People was la-dy-da-ish and uppish and proud. Too much meat and drink they 'ad. Give in--not them! And after a bit nobody arst 'em to give in.

Nobody arst 'em...."

He sucked his old gums thoughtfully, and his gaze strayed away across the valley to where the shattered glass of the Crystal Palace glittered in the sun. A dim large sense of waste and irrevocable lost opportunities pervaded his mind. He repeated his ultimate judgment upon all these things, obstinately, slowly, and conclusively, his final saying upon the matter.

"You can say what you like," he said. "It didn't ought ever to 'ave begun."

He said it simply--somebody somewhere ought to have stopped something, but who or how or why were all beyond his ken.