

TOM'S
A-COLD

Y
JOHN
COLLIER

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MACMILLAN

TOM'S A-COLD

By the same Author.

HIS MONKEY WIFE.

GEMINI (*Poems*).

(With Iain Lang) JUST THE OTHER DAY.

(Edited) THE SCANDAL AND CREDULITIES OF JOHN AUBREY.

TOM'S A-COLD

A TALE

BY

JOHN COLLIER

Author of "His Monkey Wife."

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INTRODUCTION

IT is so usually expected of novels whose scene is laid in the future that they will have some sociological interest, that even readers who do not care for that sort of thing will be attentive for signs of it, and their attention at least will be disappointed if it does not appear. It is the purpose of the sub-title of this book to hint, and of this Introduction to elaborate, that it contains no sociological interest at all.

To describe emotions and events totally incompatible with present-day life here, it was obviously necessary to choose some other scene: the question was—when or where? I might have chosen neolithic England, but of what advantage to go so far to seek the blank emptiness of life unwrought, when we have nearer at hand the echoing emptiness of ruin? I might have gone afield in space instead of time; perhaps to the Malay Archipelago, or the islands of the Southern Seas. But then my figures must have been black, and my landscape a tropical one, unvisited by most of my readers, and alien to all. Few of us are likely to go a journey of six thousand miles; we are all setting out at least

INTRODUCTION

on one of sixty years. If any of us arrive at the end of that journey, we shall have altered much, and our circumstances may have altered still more. If they are not changed so far as to permit the behaviour I describe, we must go on a little longer, if we still have wind, and perhaps we shall find it then.

Having imagined this state of affairs, it has been my business to describe it closely, just as I would a Malayan settlement or a neolithic meal or ceremony, but not to *account* for it merely because it happens to take place in the future. I believe that, given a certain impetus, things may take this sort of course, and in as short a time, despite the obvious objections, but I am not concerned to document a tale with all the artistic untruths of why and wherefore.

J. C.

Edgar. Tom's a-cold.

Lear. What hast thou been ?

Edgar. A servingman, proud in heart and mind ; that curled my hair, wore gloves in my cap, served the lust of my mistress' heart, and did the act of darkness with her ; swore as many oaths as I spake words, and broke them in the sweet face of heaven ; one that slept in the contriving of lust, and waked to do it. Wine loved I deeply, dice dearly, and in woman out-paramoured the Turk ; false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand ; hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey. Let not the creaking of shoes nor the rustling of silks betray thy poor heart to woman ; keep thy foot out of brothels, thy hand out of plackets, thy pen from lenders' books, and defy the foul fiend. Still through the hawthorn blows the cold wind ; says suum, mun, ha no nonny. Dolphin my boy, my boy ; sessa ! let him trot by. (*Storm still*).

Lear. Why, thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this ? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha ! here's three on's are sophisticated ; thou art the thing itself ; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings ! Come ; unbutton here. (*Tearing off his clothes.*)

Fool. Prithee, nuncle, be contented ; 't is a naughty night to swim in. Now a little fire in a wild field were like an old lecher's heart ; a small spark, all the rest on 's body cold. Look ! here comes a walking fire.

KING LEAR.

CHAPTER I

THE valley, which was in Hampshire, looked much as it must always have done. It was a long scoop in the hills, about half a mile across at its widest, and perhaps two or three miles long. A ruined farmhouse, almost concealed in a copse, and further hidden by a twist in the slopes, lay near the bottom. It was visible from only one or two points on the ridges above.

At some places on the skyline there was no turf, but only nettles and thistles covering some scarred land, where hill-top copses had been grubbed up. The effect of this operation was to prevent any haphazard stranger coming within sight of the ruin without first passing a space in naked silhouette against the sky.

All the hedges on the slopes were laced and interlaced with rusty barbed wire. They were quite impenetrable.

There was a good deal of woodland and thicket straggled about the valley, and where the ground was open it was still hard to see what grew there, for the hedges seemed to have branched out aimlessly into little groves and knots of saplings and bushes. But the fields, anyway, were only

jungles of weeds, with here and there patches of wild-looking oats and corn, growing perhaps rather more thickly than such remnants usually did in that countryside.

A man came out of the ruined farmhouse, looked at a point up on the slope, and sauntered off into the copse behind. Another man came out and followed, and then more men, until about sixty had emerged and dispersed in various directions. Wherever they went they walked for preference in the shelter of the tall hedges: a needless caution, for it was long since the lookout had made a warning signal, but it was an habitual one.

One of the men went up the slope towards the niche where the lookout was sitting.

"He wants you," he said, sitting down beside the young man who had been on guard.

"He can wait till I've done eating," said the other.

"All right. I've told you, Harry," said the newcomer. "Don't forget it."

Harry sank his teeth into the thigh of a rabbit, which he held in his hand. He pulled off and bolted mouthfuls of the flesh, not hurriedly, but as quickly as was consistent with an appearance of leisureliness. There was neither bread nor salt to this meal, but he had two or three handfuls of dandelion leaves in his lap, and after every bite he would grasp a few of these and cram them into his mouth.

“Fine!” he said, when he’d eaten the last, and in a single movement he was on his feet.

He was shorter than the other, but he had the appearance of a giant. His chest was like a barrel, and his neck like that of a bull. He had that sort of figure which has been thickened by heavy labour from early childhood: he was broad out of all proportion to his height, but in spite of this his movements were so active, and the strength behind them so flamboyantly obvious, that he was a pleasure to the eye. He had, too, this air (though it still sat calfishly upon him) that between sentences he looked into the invisible eyes of his sole equal, God or Fate, and his attention extricated itself with an effort from this brooding gaze, and, by the reluctance of its coming, dwarfed the matter in hand.

Beside him, his companion, and most of the other men about the place, appeared rickety and almost frail, though each of them had in their bent and stringy limbs the strength of a twisted oak branch, or root of furze.

These two, set among the sweet weather-bleached tuffets of the grass, had a look to them as wild and quiet as that of the grass itself. There was no swagger in this wildness, nothing of the tame creature turned rogue, but it was a quality, in eye and movement, that was at once extraordinarily fresh and extraordinarily old. It was the look that nature gives to those who live closest to her, the smoothness which necessity

wears into the handles of its hardest-used tools. They were burnt as brown as nuts, and they were dressed in patchy clothes of thin and shiny moleskins.

"All right," said Harry at last, and swung off down the hill.

He went through a grove of scabby elders and appeared again in the yard behind the house. The remnants of barns and sheds stood all about this yard, and the roofs of all of them were broken and ivied like that of the main building, but their walls were surprisingly sound. Under each ruined and gaping thatch, there was, as a matter of fact, a second roof of corrugated iron in perfectly good repair.

Just outside the door of the house a heap of rabbit paunchings lay stinking in the midsummer sun. Some dusty hens picked at this carrion, and among these hens a cock strutted up and down. Now and then he opened his wings and stretched his neck as if to crow, but only a creaking sound came, for his tongue was cut out. In such a place as this, in the year 1995, it had become the custom to keep no crowing cock, for though the country was comparatively peaceful for the present, no one could tell what might happen, or who might come that way.

Harry went in, and down a half flight of steps, to where the dairy and the kitchen and some storerooms had been knocked into one, forming one huge room, arched and pillared here and

there by the main supports of the house, which was a big one.

The room was furnished with some heavy and roughly made tables of raw wood, beside which ran plank benches supported on sawn logs. The walls were almost black with dirt, and daubs of yellowish mortar were worked in over large areas where the plaster had fallen away. On these yellow patches the general fresco of drawings in charcoal showed up to advantage. Over the fireplace, in a cheap frame clumsily cut down to fit it, and with the paint blistered in one corner, was the famous panel by Carracci, in whose apricot glow, in whose diviner simplicity, Bacchus plays for ever to his jolly and drunken old father. It was a surprising sight, but not an utterly incongruous one. Perhaps the damage it had suffered helped to graft it in to the crudity of its surroundings. There were other pictures on the walls, less notable, but equally surprising in such a place, and there were targets for wall games and some old tools and weapons.

The tables were covered with bones and platters, the forms pushed back; the men had had their hasty midday meal and had gone off to their work again. Some women were busy clearing away, and setting afresh some tables in a cavernous recess in the end of the room, which recess had been the great kitchen in the old days. Other women came in by twos and threes, ready for their own meal, which they took with the

children when the men had done. They were wholesome, pleasant creatures, and many of the younger ones were lovely; they chattered like magpies, and called out teasingly and affectionately to Harry when he came in, but yet their faces were marked by a little dulness. There was no chance in their lives. They never saw a stranger.

Two men were sitting at the far end of the room. Harry went up to them.

"Ah, Father," he said to the older of these.

This was, in fact, his grandfather, but the word was not much used to connote relationship in a place where there were no separate hearths, and it had become this old man's nickname. He was an extraordinary old man, one of those to whom age adds much. Over seventy, he had, from being a tall, imposing figure, become as bent and brittle as a bleached bone. His face bore, and to a more remarkable degree, that look of intense intelligence that marked his grandson, but with this difference, that in the young man this intelligence blazed out now and then as does that of the savage, and subsided quickly, as the savage's does, into an animal peace, for he was happy; but in the old man it worked always. His was a bitter, subtle look, like that of a man enslaved, who thinks but dares not act, and sees his harvest wasted and his plans brought to nothing.

He had looked up when Harry entered at the distant door, and had held his eyes on him ever

since. He doted on him, the strongest arm and the boldest mind among all the young men, a future chief, and, since the day he had marked him as such, the seed-bed of his every idea of government, of every grain of culture he had stored up from the long past. The old man had been Chief himself once, but that was years ago, when the problem was all to preserve life, not to shape it, and then, when a little peace had come, and food enough, he had found a rough brood grown up about him, untaught, who had no patience with his plans, and he had been put to sit by the fire, and think. He looked at Harry as at his own resurrection, in which he deceived himself, for he had never been either so easy or so commanding. He looked at him with a jealous love, restless to find a flaw, and to-day he looked at him anxiously also, for there were plans afoot.

But now the other man, the Chief, spoke up ; the Ajax who had superseded Father in command of the settlement. He was one who had never seen a standing town, a garden, or a flock of sheep.

"You come along with us," he said. "I've got something to say to you."

Harry glanced at Father, to see if there was trouble brewing. The old man, however, had composed his face into its usual half-querulous, half-disdainful mask.

The Chief got up with a heavy movement.

He was an ox of a man, fifty odd years old, which was old enough in those days. He carried the only heavy belly that there was about the place, but he carried it well. He was beautiful, coarse, genial, brutal, shrewd, and stupid.

"I've got a job for you," he said, and, muttering something about the pack of women, he led the way out, and up through the wood, to a place where they could talk without being overheard. Harry followed, and looked all the while at the bulk of his leader, who was as broad as himself in bone and muscle, not counting his fat, and half a head taller and a third again as heavy. Harry looked at him, as everyone but the old men did, with a feeling almost of love for this tremendous strength, but he wondered, as none of the others dared do, what his chances would be, if ever they came to a tussle.

Behind them, Father came hobbling along, and they went through the wood, which was hollowed out into a string of bottle-necked little glades, which were concealed potato patches, and they came out on the down above, where they sought the privacy of all bare places. They sat down on the turf.

"It's about these rows there's been over the women," began the Chief.

Harry gave him a wary look from under his eyelids. Through a variety of causes, the men far outnumbered the women in that place, and

most of the young men were un-mated, which had long been a source of trouble.

"It's going a bit too far," said the Chief, "and, what's more, it's not only fights we're getting nowadays: they're only a nuisance, they don't matter. But we're getting division in the camp over this business, and that's what I won't stand for."

"Why, damn it, it's your crony George——" began Harry.

"Shut up," said the Chief. "Listen to what I've got to say. You know what Father's been saying for goodness knows how long: how we ought to launch out and get some more women from somewhere? Well, I've come to agree with him."

"No, you don't," said Father. "The plan's your own. What I've said is——"

"You've said we've got to get women, haven't you?"

"I said, next time a town goes down."

"Next time!" said the Chief. "Next time be damned! I tell you, the towns aren't going to go down. It's five years since they burned Basingstoke. But I'll tell you who *is* going to go down, if there's a split in this place, and that's us."

"The wish is father to the thought," said the old man with a sneer.

"That's more than it is to children, anyway, eh, Harry?"

"I suppose you've persuaded yourself that because a few handfuls of men have held their heaps of rubble for five years, they're safe for ever. You know nothing of what might happen. There's still fighting on the Welsh border, and always will be. You get half a broken army coming——"

"Oh, *lie down!*" cried the Chief. "We've heard all that before, more than once. The thing is, Harry, we've made up our minds to help ourselves."

"We!" cried the old man.

"I, then. *I*," exploded the Chief. "*I* have. Have you got anything to say about that?"

"Only that you may mean George," muttered Harry under his breath.

The Chief heard him, but took no notice. Father nodded angrily.

"I've made up my mind," said the Chief. "I've heard of a place where they're thick as lice—women, I mean. I hear there's some split-offs from a town, with plenty of women. Now what he's afraid of is that we shall get the town down on us."

"They'd be strong enough to eat us up, anyway," put in the other.

"But what I say is," continued the Chief, "would they send out men enough to take a hot place like this, forty miles away, and with nothing in it worth their picking up—and all for a parcel of women? What's more, how are

they to know who we are, or where we come from, or where we go back to, see ? ”

“ A raiding party leaves no tracks, I suppose ? ” cried Father. “ Why, it’s a dummy scheme, cooked up in an hour——”

“ Shut up ! ” cried the Chief.

“ Or are you going alone ? ” said the old man.

“ A dummy scheme, cooked up to—— ! ”

“ Wait a minute,” said Harry. “ How far did you say it was ? ”

“ Forty miles,” said the Chief. “ Over there, by Swindon.”

From their down top they could see the plain stretching its dappled belt of self-sown coppice and dark bog mile after mile away into the blue. It was a young forest, trackless, the haunt of the wild dog, and worse : the dwelling place of gangs wilder than their own. Far off, merging in the horizon’s cloud, was the delicate line of bare and silver hills, the rampart of the Marlborough downs. That was half way.

“ What do you want me to do ? ”

“ I want the places spied out. It’s easy. You’ve got these hills for landmark till you get to the next bare stretch——”

“ You’ve never been down,” struck in the old man passionately. “ The hills are no landmark, once you’re past the Kennet. You could be lost in that ten miles away. Besides——”

“ Never mind,” said Harry. “ I should want to take Crab with me,” he added, to the Chief.

"What, are you nervous?"

"I should want to take Crab with me."

"All right. I suppose you can have him."

"Don't go," said Father. "He knows perfectly well we can rope in all the women we want, safely, if we scour the country when the next town goes down."

"No," said Harry, "I'll go. There's something about a raid. But, Chief, tell me one thing."

"What?" asked the Chief.

"If we *do* come back, you'll surely make the raid?"

CHAPTER II

LATER on, Harry went to find Crab. Crab was away down the valley, working with half a dozen others at raising clay for the brick making. A man of about the Chief's age was in charge; all the others were in their twenties. In this respect the little working party was a representative section of the whole settlement. There were over a score of men of fifty odd, and three times their number of young men, under thirty, but almost none in between. The nineteen sixties and seventies had not been propitious to child rearing. This circumstance had rendered the authority of the older men the more absolute, and now that they were facing old age, and the young men were growing strong, it rendered it the more precarious, though outwardly it was strong as ever. It was undermined, though, by yet another factor. The older men were pleasant fellows, most of them, but they themselves had been children in a desperate time, and they had grown up rough and wild. Father's coevals, men who remembered the old world, had seen these children of theirs, untaught, revert almost to a savage grossness and thriftlessness

under the pressure of famine and uncertainty, and they had been the more careful, when they were set aside from authority and labour, to teach the grandchildren all they knew. These, reared thus carefully in a better time, had first dreaded their rough sires, and were now on the point of despising them. But as yet the moment had not come, and they still obeyed. They looked to Harry.

Harry, who worked at all jobs, and took orders as quietly as any of them, knew that when the Chief failed, the young men would have no one but himself to rule over them. Accordingly he never asked a favour of his seniors, except when he had such authority behind him as would make refusal impossible. Father, his careful tutor, had taught him a further step, which was, never to display that authority till it was challenged, so that those who would have refused him if it had not existed, had yet got into the habit of acceding to his bare word.

The man in charge stood up in the yellow clay cut, and looked at him smilingly. They all liked him well, and not all the whispering of the Chief's cronies could fix their idle minds on that point in the vague future, when he might be a danger to their power and comfort. Even the Chief only thought of it once in a while.

"I want to take Crab away," he said now, after greetings.

"He can go."

Crab clambered out with alacrity, and the two went off up the slope together, bearing towards the wild end of the valley, away from the house.

"Here, take these," said Harry, and gave his companion the handful of snares he was carrying, as an ostensible reason for their going away together. He went up to a fallen tree, and took from under its trunk a long steel rod, which was his bow, and, having bent it to its string, he groped again under the trunk and pulled out three or four arrows, tipped with long barbed heads.

"I left it up here this morning. There's a cat about again: I found two rabbits mauled."

They went on through the last of the cultivated land, where the first poppies were burning in the patches of grey-green oats. Crab now and then bent down to peg a snare where runways showed in the green. He was Harry's half-brother. There were a lot of half-brothers in this place. These two, however, were as close as twins. Their natures dovetailed; their minds were one mind, and if in their talk Crab held anything back from Harry, it was only that ultimate motive, or that last reserve of ruthlessness, which in a single brain functions inevitably in the darker half. The most conscious person in the camp, he made himself Harry's unconscious-

ness, but when the time was ripe he spoke unveiledly. His limbs had been twisted, by rickets, till he was almost a cripple, and though he was as active as his namesake, and though half his generation were similarly disfigured, he could never ignore ugliness, which was his mirror, nor forgive famine, which had botched him. His pride lived in Harry's body like a hermit crab, and his anger took its only ease in Harry's handsome nature.

"This is where I found the first mauled 'un," said Harry, when they had come to the end of the stretch that was to be snared that night. "And the next was on the other side, higher up."

They slithered through the concealed hole under the wired hedge.

"Up there, twenty steps this side of the beeches."

"If it's kittened it'll be in the clump, and we'll get it. Else it might have come from anywhere, and be a mile off," said Crab.

"Eaten right up to the head, one of them was," said Harry, "and dead and stiff when she found it, I should think. The grass wasn't dabbled, anyway. Besides, it had choked in the wire. It's face was like a pear. She's dropped a brood all right: wouldn't eat carrion else."

"Well, we might kick her up, then. She'll be lying with them now."

The clump covered only half an acre, and as it grew on an outcrop of chalk the undergrowth was not too thick. They went through, swishing at the briars and brambles, probing every hollow under the roots of trees, watching for a movement among the nettles, driving the wood, yard by yard, towards an upper corner, where whatever broke cover must leap out on to a bare patch and offer a target to Harry's arrow or the big stone Crab was holding.

A rabbit shot out and over, but it was going too fast to risk wasting ammunition on. The cat was their quarry. A cat would stop to snarl at them and give them a sporting shot. But nothing more moved. They blundered out at the edge into that void of which beaters are conscious, when the last fringe, on which they have projected every sense, yields nothing.

"There's no bury in the wood. She's kitted in one outside," said Crab. "We'll have to watch some time and dig her out. She's about somewhere near, I saw a tree scratched." He stood thinking.

"Come on," he said suddenly. "There's just a chance," and ducking under the beech curtain of sweet green, he led the way back down along the wood edge, and stopped where a sea of nettles brimmed an almost obliterated marl pit.

In winter, where there were only the bare

dead stalks here, something like a fossilised skeleton, like a pterodactyl's bones dispread in the ancient clays, could be traced on the ground. It was a sketchy outline, in rotten alien wood, of two enormous wings which had broken over each edge of the marl pit.

Not even Father remembered the aeroplane falling here; it must have been in one of the earliest battles that it had stooped, twirling and sliding, out of the now empty sky. Its wood was useless when the first settlers had found it, on coming here. They had taken some of the metal away, and buried the skeleton, rotten clothes and all, in the clean chalk. Brambles had grown over the tail, held up by it: twisted in and out its framework as it rusted and rotted, holding it up. There was still a long close hollow among them.

"She may be here," said Crab quietly.

He went soft-footed to the far end, and advanced, beating very gently, so that if the cat was there she would not spring straight away. She was there; they heard the dry sticks rustle a little, just ahead of the beating. Harry pulled back his arrow to the head. She was out in a flash, and slipped like a lizard over the edge of the pit, stopped to look back, and Harry, standing on the higher side, let drive, and pinned her through the gut. She yelled, picked herself up, and tried to run. Crab sprang up beside her. She menaced him, and he stood still. She tried

to run on again, and he paced beside her. He stretched his stick and touched her on the off side. She crouched, turned her head, spat, and remained still for a moment, the root of her ear in line with the ridge of her back. This was what he had manœuvred for. He pecked with the stick, a neat crisp blow, and her neck was broken. It was good luck; it seldom came off with a cat. He held her up by the tail. Except for the arrow hole in her paunch the skin was undamaged. She was ringed grey and black, broad in the head, short in the muzzle. A thousand changeable generations of domesticity had dropped off this form like a cast garment.

Harry had come round, and they went back together to the pit, where, treading down the tunnel of brambles, they destroyed the wild cat's brood and the ghost of the aeroplane.

"Well," said Crab, sitting down, "and now what is it? So we're going to make that raid after all."

"Trust you to know all about it. How did you guess?"

"Guess! You guess what you wish; you know what is." These people often spoke in proverbs.

"I suppose old Rodney's been talking again. I wouldn't have him in the confab if I was the Chief."

"What? Not use a babbler, when you are Chief? Harry, nothing is more useful than to have someone who will tell the secrets you wish to be known. Suppose you want to frighten somebody, and don't wish, as of course you won't, to descend to making a threat yourself——"

"Yes. Yes. Still, I thought we might talk about it privately," said Harry, slightly annoyed, for the peasant's mania for secrecy had become a general trait. "The thing is, he wants us to go and spy out one or two places he is thinking of, where those sheep people are supposed to be, under the far downs, outside that strong town the stranger told us about—Swindon. He says they're split-offs from the town; they could run back there if there was trouble, so they live quite open in huts."

"The stranger said all that," said Crab. "I don't believe the Chief's heard anything new."

"He says George and Will got hold of a man on the outside track, and he said they'd got a lot of women there."

"It's possible, but I don't believe it. Did you say you'd go?"

"I did, Crab, and I said I'd take you with me. Look here; there are women somewhere; if not in that place, in another. Here we are, stuck here, scratching away in the fields, getting heavy with it—it's not what life could be. We're sick for want of women; you know how

it's getting with us. To wait in a sort of string, five years, ten years; that's what we have to look forward to."

"You needn't wait," said Crab, "you've got a claim already."

"And I don't want it. To take the marriage vow for one of our girls! Not for me. We've been herded too close, I suppose; we know them too well. I sometimes think the same thoughts as they tell about in the books, but it's always about a stranger."

"Old Walter's wife isn't one," said Crab pleasantly.

"Ah, the old devil! His wife dies, and he claims a girl. Yet I couldn't have looked at her otherwise. That made it possible to . . . ah! it's hard to explain. . . . Yet, though I do it, I know that sort of thing must be put down. We must have more women, and we must have a raid, too, if we're to live at all. We'll come back with some news from this journey, Crab."

"Or we might never come back," said Crab.

"If we do, the young men will have less to grumble at, and if we don't they'll be leaderless, and rows can be squashed very easily. Five years more of peace for our master!"

"We shall come back," said Harry.

"If we get the women, how can we stop them getting away, and bringing the whole town down on us?"

"He says the town wouldn't bother anyway."

"That's nonsense."

"He says we could keep them pretty close till they had children, or till they began to see where they're well off. Life's hell in some of those places by all accounts. They're not easy and merry as we are."

"That you can never be sure of. Every place is different, and a lot of them change from year to year. What do we know of this place, so far away, except one or two odd things we've heard from strangers—one in five years? As far as keeping their women goes, the thing to know is whether it's a place like Basingstoke was supposed to be, where they lived in a pack and didn't know or care who their fathers were, and scarcely their mothers, or whether it's like other places, where they'll have no truck with any but their own blood, as they call it. We don't know that."

"It's said Swindon is a bad town; they're like wild dogs, the man said."

"The split-offs may be different. I'll wager they're families. They've got sheep, too. Hm. Well, when do we start?"

"Soon. To-morrow. The moon's right."

"Apart from finding our own way, we'll have to find the right sort of path for the whole lot to travel over."

"We can do it. Father will go over the map with us to-night, and try to work out some land-

marks. After all, it's only three days' journey. People used to go all over the country in the old days."

"Yes, and be lost if they got to a moor ten miles wide. You know how you have to watch the marks, going down to the Kennet even, and it's wilder beyond. But what does Father think of it."

"The same as you, Crab. He thinks George has put the Chief up to it. Also it's not his idea, as he'd say, this raiding. He'd rather wait till we could get them peacefully. But I think some man's work would make all the difference to the youngsters. Besides, it's necessary to show that we can carry out very easily any little task that the Chief may perhaps think to be perilous."

"Ah, well! Must is master for all but the dead. I see I must limp after you." They rose to go.

"Yes, it may be the beginning of anything," added Crab when they had been walking a while. "We'll have a lot to do to-night, Harry. You'll hardly be able to join in the finish of that game."

"I suppose not."

"Perhaps it's as well. Yes . . . to drop it suddenly for some serious business. It would be best, you know (assuming that you have another chance, that is), if you didn't play games except on special nights. Chess, perhaps, but not——"

"Ah, damn it. I see what you're driving at. You and Father are beginning to talk as if I were to be Chief to-morrow, instead of years hence, and maybe never."

"Quite surely, Harry, and in not so many years. Things are moving."

"Years enough, anyhow. Besides, the Chief himself plays all the games, all the time."

"Yes," said Crab, with his sweet and painful smile. "Yes. He's a jolly man. But you must do as I tell you—Chief."

CHAPTER III

WHEN they got back the evening meal was being brought to the board. The long trestles were packed close; the faces were so crammed together, and the cheerless noise of crowd talk was so loud, that it seemed everyone there must be barking out shouts and sentences which sought no listener. A second glance would have found the silent heads, and found it apparent that each of them, dark or fair, was a little world; its closeness to the others a convenience only, an illusion, like that of the spheres in an astronomical drawing. Ponder any one, and it receded into a privacy infinitely remote, into the depths of a pleasant brutish reverie, into the following down and down of that long nail, whose head is a frown, into the depths of hurt heart or puzzled brain. Others, leaving a smile pinned flutteringly on their lips, like a paper on a door, were away in some lovely secret, alone.

The very old men, and the Chief, sat at a small table near the great hearth; the other seniors at an E-shaped one, below them. The youngsters were crammed in rows in the hinder recesses of the room, where, though their small

windows let in the western ray, their numbers were so great that their shadows, like the first ooze of a cuttle-fish, edged their movements with darkness, and gave them scarcely light enough to eat. Harry sat at the head of the first of these long tables, and Crab sat at its foot.

Women brought the dishes up from the row of stoves. It was a pig night. Except perhaps for their stores of wire, their herd of half-wild swine, which supplied them with a pig every week, was the gang's greatest treasure. Had they dared to allow it to increase, they might have had pork and bacon every day, but the pigs had to range for their food, and too many would have been conspicuous and attractive. As it was, they had to live mostly on rabbits, the flavour of which had become habitual past monotony. They had other things on great occasions. Hares had become rare and pheasants were practically extinct, but plover and wood-pigeon were still fairly plentiful, and partridges still reared their broods among the wild grain.

Besides these, there were squirrels, hedgehogs, snipe, wild duck, and small birds brought in from time to time, but these went mostly to the older men. The gang reared a few fowls, and many bees, and they ate the large white snail which the Romans introduced, and they had also their eel ponds, which they hazardously kept stocked, and which they fed with the chopped entrails of their rabbits and pigs.

They raised potatoes, swedes and beans. Then they had some degenerated apples and pears, which they were improving; soft fruits, hedge fruits, wild salads and fungi in season, and an infinitesimal quantity of grain. But much of this, and most of the dried beans, went into the long tunnels they had dug in the hillside, where they kept reserves against the possible advent of a force so powerful as to compel them to abandon their stronghold and take to the woods. Then they could creep back when all was quiet again, and begin their life anew.

Meanwhile, with all these things, they lived well. Only the older men could remember the flavour of rat.

To-night the pork came in. Everyone smiled, talked at random, watched from the corner of his eye the women and the carvers. Crab, when the dish was set before him, took up a great silver fork, which had come from the ruins of a castle, and a heavy razor-edged knife ground down from a bayonet sixty years old. He cut three thick slices from the best of the joint, put them on a pewter plate, laid down his carvers, walked round to the head of the table, and set the plate before Harry. Then he returned and hacked the rest to pieces, piling up clay and wooden platters, which were whisked up and passed round to each next senior, for they sat in order of age.

At the upper table, the old men were sucking

at the crackling with their toothless gums. Two of them were noisy, and let the fat run down into their beards. The other two, Aldebert and Father, did not. They were the priests of the past. Their sons were its scoffers, and their grandsons, those of them who thought at all, worshipped it in a new guise and called it—their future.

“He is the best of savours.”

“Sapors,” said Father, “not savour, that is not Lamb.”

“No,” said Aldebert, “I remember it well.”

“Sapor it is,” said Father. “Savour, sapor, sapir. Ah, if I may pun, that’s the halfway house between flavour and sentience: that is Lamb.”

“Ah! hell!” said the Chief, “I remember that lamb. That’s a good many years ago. Yet I remember it. Wonderful! They had that every day, didn’t they, in your time? I say, they’ve got sheep, you know, those people.”

“I was hesitating,” said Father delicately to Aldebert, “to cap your quotation with, ‘A delight, which, if not sinful, is yet like to sinning.’ I feared it might divert our leader’s thoughts from emptying his plate to filling his bed. But, you see; he is in Wiltshire ahead of us: in two strides.”

“What’s that?” said the Chief, bewildered and truculent.

"He's joking with you, my boy," said Aldebert, his old father, to propitiate him. "We were not talking about the lamb we ate that time, but about a man called Lamb."

"Well, let him say so then," said the Chief. "*What* were you talking about?" he demanded of Father.

"About Lamb, the writer," said the old man. "And there was another writer called Bacon. He! He! He!"

"Ah, you silly old devil," said the Chief, and sank his face in his big pot of mead. At this table, mead was drunk every night; at the others, only on feast days.

At the next table, where the men of fifty sat, Rodney was holding forth. His black beard, which grew patchily almost up to his eyes, could not conceal the hideous scars on his face, for where these were bad, the hair refused to grow, and the worst of them all could never be hid by hair, for it was his nose, split as if it had been burst, straight down the middle. This dreadful face, which had once been as round and red and pleasant as an apple, now talked, talked, talked, as if in a perpetual effort to divert men's attention from their eyes to their ears.

He went on in his hurried, squelching voice, "So I stepped out on the track, and when he s-saw me, he . . . he . . . he . . . he said, 'Who are you?' just like that. 'Who are you? Where do you come from?' Of course, I wasn't

going to tell him anything. 'Not far from here,' says I.

" 'Do you want a woman?' says he. 'A fine girl. A beauty, if she had something to eat every day for a week or two.'

" 'Where is she?' says I.

" 'She lagged behind,' says he. 'She's coming up.'

" 'Lame?' says I.

" 'Weak,' says he. 'She's dying on me. That's why I've made up my mind,' says he, 'to let her go to a well-fed-looking man.'

" 'She mayn't like the l-look of me,' I said.

" 'Maybe that's why I'm asking you to take her,' says he.

" Well, then the woman came up, and she gave me a look. She was all right: young, but as thin as the prongs of this fork.

" 'What do you want for her?'

" 'A meal to eat, and a meal to carry,' says he, 'and all the rest you can put on to how you look after her.'

" With that she began to screech at the two of us. 'Get away,' she says to me, with one or two hard words as well. 'I'll die along of you,' she says to him, and begins to hang round his neck.

" I took no notice of that. 'Sit here,' I said to him. 'I'll bring you the food in an hour from now, and plenty of it. From that, you'll see she won't want for much.'

"So I came over the rise, and I went to the Chief, and I told him.

" 'Take what you want,' says he. 'But don't take anything special for him to talk about: only rabbits and potatoes.'

"I took a good bagful, and went back, and damme if they weren't gone. She must have got round him. And that was my last chance of a woman, and that was five years back, after they burnt Basingstoke."

He relapsed into silence, and began to pick his teeth as one who intends to say no more.

"Go on, about the way he came back," said someone at the other side of the table.

"Oh! Ah! *that!*" said Old Rodney. "Well, everybody knows about that. Still, this is how it was. Next night but one there was such a hullabaloo, about the time we were turning in. Screams and yells like the devil, just up at the top end of the wood. 'God Almighty, we're attacked!'

"Well, they started handing out arms, and some made for the iron shutters, but one or two had gone outside; and they came back and said it was only one man screaming (it sounded like half a dozen sentries with their throats cut). And anyway there wasn't any number of men coming that side, because they'd have heard 'em in the wood. Then in came one of the look-outs. He said they'd seen a chap creeping down the path, and when he'd passed them, they'd

stood up and pointed him out to George, who was posted just under the next hedge, and this chap came straight down and hit straight on the hollow under the wire, and through he goes, and just as he squeezes through on the other side, George is standing by and pins him through the small of the back: sinks his blade a foot into the ground. He went on screaming for quite a while, George not troubling to finish him. Poor devil!

"Next morning, I went out to have a look at him, and damn me if it wasn't the chap who'd had the woman. He'd been after our potatoes, or something. So I thought I might as well have a look round to see where she was.

"I found her in the end, up by Coldhanger. She'd dug herself in (I reckon it was when she heard the screaming); she'd torn her way in and under that bloody thick mess of stones and brambles; properly gone to ground. Ha! I wouldn't have scrubbed my way in there like that, not for a Welsh bull to eat, all by myself. She'd thrown the bloody earth out behind her. That's how I came to see where she was. Thrown the bloody earth out!

"Well, we got her out of it. She said nothing. She looked at us, well, like a rabbit in your hand. She panted all the while. She wouldn't eat, nor speak, and in a day and a night, she was dead.

"I didn't think any more about that, at the time. Three or four weeks later I went round

past Coldhanger, saw the place, came back, and, damn my eyes! I could see her fingers digging away at that earth, and the thorns in her face. Because she *was* scratched."

"So she was," said his neighbour. "That's true enough."

"And that was the last refugy woman that's come this way," said a third man.

"Yes, they don't come over these hills now. Things aren't so desperate down below. It doesn't look as if there's anything for 'em in a day's march this way."

"I bet we'd get 'em, if we went to the river, and hung about there," said another.

"Not nowadays," said a fifth.

"Well, we'll hear what he's got to say about it to-night. We've got to sit on, after they've cleared away, he said," murmured the hatchet-faced man at the head of the table, who had been silent up till now. He was George.

Harry got up, and walked out at a door at the end. His way led past the high table. On his return, Father called out to him, "Come here, my boy. There's room on the bench for you. We've done eating. We're going to hear a speech."

The Chief, who liked Harry well enough, except he thought he might be better dead, and who had no sense of the strategic value of formalities, raised no objection to this. Harry sat down and looked at the crowded room from a

new angle. From this place he could neither see Jimmy's mimicry, nor hear John Simmons' jokes, but looking in their direction, he remembered what a nuisance they had made of themselves in the last few days, through butting into the quarrel. He remembered, too, that Jimmy had shown rather a doubtful courage at one moment.

The tables were cleared at last. The men looked round expectantly. The few women who were standing about wore expressions of elaborate indifference. They were in this quandary, like all the women in England: that when they sneered they showed their faulty teeth.

The Chief rumbled in his throat. He shoved round, with a grinding sound, the huge and roughly shaped chair, stained red, in which he sat, and now, with a clear space in front of him, he faced the room. His moleskins gleamed like coal, his gigantic limbs were fiery with sunburn where they were not black with hair. His broad face glowed strongly, like a furnace, between the beard below and the bull's fringe of grizzled curls above. The dome of his head was bald and shiny. Each phrase came in a short, angry rush, forceful enough to command respect, but not subtle nor lofty enough to inspire reverence. There were short halts between the phrases. Father, sitting beside him, took advantage of these halts to move his lips as if prompting

when he knew the Chief was going to say some sound and popular thing.

"This week, I have decided to add to the numbers of our womenfolk. If I'd had my way, we should have done it a long time ago." (Father raised his hand as if to hide a smile.)

"The place we shall raid is three days' journey away. I send two men now to find out the lay of the land. Next month, enough shall go to take the women: if the place is all right, that is. How many, and which of you, will be arranged later. Who shall have the women shall be arranged later.

"It will be done so no one knows who we are, or where we come from. But in case of misfortune, I am going to stop all but urgent work this week. This place must be made strong. Harold."

"Yes, Chief." A lean man stood up at the second table.

"You, and your men, must come off the potatoes two days out of three, widen the ditch, cut the forty-foot beeches in Todsdean, and build a new palisade. Walter."

"Yes, Chief." And he continued, allocating new duties to each group of men. The stock of arrows was to be increased, reserves of water kept ready for flushing the remnants of thatch, stores moved, some into the house and some to the caves five miles away, traps were to be dug and spiked, and, as a last reserve, a straight

half-mile of hedgerow, which passed close against an end of the house, was to be re-wired and tunnelled under from the cellars, thus providing a retreat, and a half-mile start along pit-falled paths, in case it should be necessary to burn and evacuate.

By the time all this was concluded, it was past nine o'clock, and the light was failing; so the evening games were not played after all. Wood was thrown on to the open fire, and those who wished sat by its light, but most were already tired and went to their beds.

The older men went to rooms on the intact first floor of the house, and the younger men to the bothies in the outbuildings, or, if they were married, to little cubicles there.

"We might as well go up and study your route," said Father to Harry, who nodded and beckoned to Crab.

"Are you coming, Chief?"

"What's the hurry? It'll do to-morrow, won't it?" said the Chief, who had refilled his pot, and was intending to drink till he drowsed over the fire.

"We may as well get an idea of it to-night, and put our memories right in the morning," said Harry.

"It would be a pity if we got lost," said Crab, in a voice so devoid of expression that the silly phrase could only be an innuendo.

The three of them went up the dark stairway to

where a little door was set at an angle to the oak treads. As they approached this door, a strange sound leaked through it, singing in an old cracked, tinkling voice, as wispy and hesitant as the notes of a beggar's musical box. It was just audible, twenty feet, and God knows how many years, away.

*Thy hand, Belinda ; darkness shades me :
On thy bosom let me rest :
More I would, but death invades me.
Death is now a welcome guest.*

They opened the door. A little stinking dip burned yellow in the room, and powdered the last blue daylight in the lovely window, wreathed with hop-vine. Venus, like a trembling, golden drop, happy in her sweet sky, mocked the wretched glimmer within.

The grasshopper voice had come from an old man who was bedridden. He ceased singing as they entered. He greeted Father, who came first, with the clairvoyant smile of one intensely homesick ; one who sees, not the worn-out companion of his exile, but that unique creature, precious to him as himself, whose mind is a casket of remote memories, memories of that other life which is his spirit's habitation.

The other old men had been boys in the year of the first war and the first revolution ; sons or younger brothers of the adults who had retired

here, of whom this weary old man was the last. Father, though he was by far the halest of the survivors of those days, had been in his middle teens, and had some recollection of what life had been before the debacle; besides, he had known this old man's home, where he had been taken to visit by his brother who had founded the settlement. Now, for two years old Tom Willoughby had been lying on this wretched bed, in a room in which people who seemed strangers to him came and went. His mind was so settled in the past that he gazed vacuously even on his sons. Father's was the only face that was not foreign to him, except for one that was so constantly near that he could no longer realise it was not part of himself, as much as his own grey and chilly hand.

This was her face, who sat by the pallet bed, and looked up at the incomers with no welcoming glance. A tired-out hostility was settled on her brow. Her mangy silver hair hung over her eyes like a sheep-dog's fringe: one tooth stuck up hideously from her lower jaw. This hag, Lady Alicia Willoughby, was Tom's wife, married to him, and his bed-sores, and this narrow room, till death did them finally join in a straiter and more private cell, where outsiders would cease from troubling, and jealousy be at rest.

Lately, when Father looked at Lady Alicia, he felt that he had almost ceased to hate her, and it made him fear he was growing old. Hers

was a strange, ironic story. Sixty odd years ago, before London had become a catacomb, this law lord's daughter had lifted her hard, handsome face, big-chinned, black-eyed, in those peculiar circles which were still violently feminist, still raging with the psychological impulse long after the political excuse was wiped away, raging in a sort of rape after a victory. Then, as if she was tired of the little position her bold harsh voice had won her, she had married young Willoughby, the Wiltshireman, the pheasant shot, the collector of Stubbs: one of those who lived the perfect life unconsciously almost, innocent of the fact that intellectual salvation must be won by a loud and militant faith and not by works. With this her charming barbarian, as she called him, who was two years her junior, Lady Alicia was settling down to find local colour, as it were, for that long protest her conversation, when war, defeat, revolution and blockade had burst in swift succession on the country, and she found herself mewed up with a score or so of her husband's friends in this valley hidden in the chalk hills.

They had stayed there, in desperate straits, while invading armies had fought for possession of the land, and, what was worse for them, while homeless bands roved the country for food, sometimes penetrating even these barren hills where no army came. With one or two adoptions of stragglers, they had survived till the

sound of the guns had died away, till the aeroplanes withdrew from their skies to some European front, till the starving rabble had died from their lack of food, or from the food they found; they had survived into an almost empty England, where what little groups remained lived wary lives, either in such remote holdings as their own, or in the ruins of towns, always on the defensive, militant only when their crops failed, and they must raid or die. But even while the danger from without was at its worst, which was not long, *for millions can die of plague and famine as quickly as can one*, Lady Alicia had fought her own battle within. She had fought it mostly single-handed, for the other women were too much afraid of the world outside to argue over points of status at home.

Alicia feared nothing; she was of that odd temperament that cannot visualise even the most imminent physical menace to itself, and she was angry in her demands for release from menial duties (which Tom managed for her by doing her share), and for a seat on councils which were entirely preoccupied by matters of husbandry and defence. Then, when their leader was killed, she intrigued to have Tom made Chief, but he had been humble to her too long, and Father was chosen. She then found some grounds for her ego-feminism, for Father, for the repression of the malcontent, made rules which in their letter applied to all the

women, though they lay slack on the passive majority.

All through her middle age she had been fertile in shifts to obstruct his every move, and it was her sabotage as much as anything else that had led to his downfall, in a time of crisis, and to the rise of the present Chief. That genial savage was of the complexion that has naturally a contempt for women, and, far from being grateful for Alicia's manœuvres, or even conscious of them, he found in her something which raised his contempt to hatred, and he roared her out of the general room, till she and her crippled husband lived like mice above stairs, while below the Chief vented on the other women that hatred which she had inspired in him, till in the end no woman dared raise her voice in the general talk, and they sat apart at mealtimes, and talked with their men only in private.

Father sometimes remembered to revenge himself by sly allusions to this state of affairs, but his enemy was old, and by now she scarcely cared any longer. But when he forgot to do this, and turned to chat pleasantly to her bed-ridden husband, calling the life back to his face by allusions to things they had loved in the old days, then this poor old trot would be cut to the very heart, for she was desolately lonely, and here, where she could not join in, was all the sharing of pleasure that ever she saw.

So now she looked up with a scowl as they

entered the room, an amazing scowl, there was so much life in it for a creature so old, and she began to mumble at them for coming so late, but the old man interrupted her, for he was delighted to see Father come in, to withhold him from his haunted insomnia, feverish under the nasty coverlet of skins.

"No, no, my dear," he said, "there's no early or late in this room, only dark and light, and what's that to me? I don't like the dark, it's true. It's perfectly simple, Gilbert," he went on to Father. "Now, in the light, when the sun's here, when it's shining on the bed, then I sometimes seem to be at home. Now how do you explain this? I look at the sun-ray, I look at the little specks of dust in it, they move like stars, the ray gets as blue . . . well. You'll remember how still it was, leaning back in a long chair, we always sat outside late, and we used to talk about something, looking up into that sky, as blue——"

"That was Jack," said Father.

"Ah, yes, you're Gilbert. Well, Gilbert, you're supposed to be a budding genius. Now how do you explain this?" He stopped.

"What?" said Father.

"Oh!" cried the old man querulously. "It's the dark. The dark never takes me back into a good bright day. But a few specks of dust in a sun-ray, they can remind me of those nights we used to sit out talking till our clothes were

wet with dew. It's not my memory failing. I can remember the days. It's this dark, hanging about me. I don't like the dark. So you can understand, my dear boy, that I'm devilish glad to see you. And your friends too. Sit down. Sit down. I'm devilish glad to see you. What's the news?"

"The news?" said Father. "Why, very pleasant news, Tom. These young chaps are going over to Swindon, and they'll pass——"

"You're not to talk to him about that," said the old woman. "It excites him. You should know very well."

"Why! They'll pass through Monks Lye," said Tom. "Well!"

"We're going to look up the way there on the map," said Father. "Then I thought you could tell them how the land lay between your place and Swindon."

"That I can," cried he, champing his pink frog's mouth with eagerness. "Every inch of it."

"I couldn't remember it exactly," said Father. "Though I ought to, to be sure. But between us——" He turned to join Harry and Crab in looking at the map on the opposite wall.

"Oh, my memory's good enough," cried old Tom after him. "Why, my dear"—they heard him go on to his wife—"why, let's see . . . I suppose they'd go up from Avebury. Now they'd come to . . . what would it be first?"

The map covered the whole end wall of the room, which was boarded from floor to ceiling. Into the wood they had cut careful copies of all the ordnance maps they had, which, in the paper form, had now become tattered past unrolling. The wood was chalk-washed from time to time, and the lines of the map were re-traced in black. With each renovation, however, some of the old landmarks had been left out, or reproduced less conspicuously, until, in the end, a peculiar inversion of values had taken place. The main roads were no longer the frame-work of the diagram. The faint lines that marked them scarcely caught the eye beside the careful plotting of certain downland paths, or of tracks through the tangled, hazel-arched old green lanes. Something was noted at every turn of these, while the Bath Road was blank along miles of its unstressed course; they could only guess that it might be a low strip in the forest. Most villages, and even Hungerford itself, were no longer noted by their names, nor did the plan of their buildings spread along the road. A cursory scratch and the word "ruins" was all. Swamps, pits, and a few solitary houses had inherited the detail. Railways, however, survived as conspicuous as ever, though with a different significance; they were now sources of the best metal.

Father took a nail and surreptitiously deepened the half-obliterated name of Monks Lye, which

had not been re-traced after the last chalk-wash.

“Here, Harry. Here, Crab,” he said. “Look, this is where Far Down ends. Up to here, you know. Here you must go down, but not until you reach the second mark. The way past the Bedwyn ruins is a bad one. The road was shot to pieces there, years ago, and both bridges went down and dammed the Kennet; it’s a vile swamp, with deep holes in it. So you’ll go down here. You’ll make, as best you can, to this knoll, keeping the north star dead on your right all the time. To keep your line the better, notice that from any rising ground you would see the Clump Hill looking out from behind the shoulder of the Beacon. Mark the way for us, remember. From this knoll, you will see the fringe of Savernake, high forest running north and south. That, you must avoid; there are strange stories of that wood. You will strike due north then, for the Kennet again. There are more swamps, see, but if you take a cast from the foot of your knoll—take a quarter circle north-east to north-west, half a mile out—you will cross a thicket, hollow beneath, where an old ox-drove was. Keep by this. It runs along the crest of a little chalk ripple, high enough to keep you dry foot almost to Kennet’s edge.”

“We’ll mark,” said Harry.

“We shall have to take a panel,” said Crab,

“and copy this on it before we go, and mark what we find.”

“It'll have to be a panel,” said Father, “paper's too short. Well, here you are, two miles from Marlborough. Then you've the open downs till you're within sight of Swindon. Now old Tom'll be glad to chatter about the last few miles. Listen to him attentively.”

“One moment, though. Your ox-drove, if you pick it up again, t'other side of Marlborough will lead you to Avebury, eight miles. You will find there some rubble, some ashes, and some large stones. I have told you about the large stones, which are rather older than the rest. Lie out the day there, if possible.”

“Now, Tom,” said he, linking his arms in those of the young men, and moving them towards the bed, “tell them how to go on from Avebury, through your country. They want to know more than the map shows of all the stretch between your place and Swindon.”

“Why, that's just what we've been talking about,” said Tom. “Well, my friends, you want to know what that place of mine looks like. It's no show place, you know. For one thing, you'll think it very narrow for any sort of drive. Yes, but driving the birds out on the open down, that's very different from sending them over into somebody else's cover. They come back. Oh, yes, they come back. What it amounts to is, you get a lot of small stands——”

"If you came over the downs from Avebury, you'd see it running out like a tongue, wouldn't you?" asked Father.

"You'd see where Handring spinney runs along on top," said the old man.

"This place runs up towards Swindon, all along a slope to the east," said Father to Harry. "That spinney runs all along the top for two or three miles."

"Two miles and a half," said the old man, "with a gap . . . No, I planted the gap."

"It's beech, mostly, isn't it?" asked Father.

"Beech and ash," said old Tom. "Then under it there's a string of rough pasture, then under that there's a string of hangers, there's a lot of oak in those. Then the bottom's mine all along, there's some good ground there, meadows first, and arable up towards the Swindon end. It's an odd sort of place. I'll tell you how——"

"So you see it would be like this," said Father, drawing with a coal on the table. "A tall wood on the top edge, then scrub in——"

"No, rough pasture."

"Yes, Tom. Then a tall wood, three-parts down the slope, and probably that would be merged with the strong new growth on the lower meadows. Anyway, you see how the cover lies."

"Half-way along, under the lower hanger, you'll see a big oak, a giant," said old Tom.

"What comes after your place?" said Father.
"It slopes down to the north, doesn't it?"

"Don't worry about that. You'll see that oak. Now that's where we used to lunch on shooting days: just half-way along, you see. Now I'll tell you what I think's as good a sight as ever a man can see. That tree in October, with its leaves still glossy, and great golden boughs in the shades, and a team of clumbers underneath. That's all. How's that for a picture, Jack? Chuck down a pheasant or two by the white dogs, the feathers like fire in the shade. The white of a hare's paunch, eh? We've seen it times enough, I think. I wish I'd had somebody to paint it, and I wish I had the picture here now. I wish I was there now. I wish I was there."

His face puckered up suddenly.

"Go along, my boys," said Father. "We'll work that patch out in the morning."

CHAPTER IV

AT eight o'clock, next evening, Harry and Crab set out, that they might make the going by daylight for the first few miles, since it was over country in which they felt secure.

They wore capes of rabbit-skins, dressed with the fur on, and reaching nearly to their knees. These, which had been chosen with a nice regard to roughness of make, and the ordinariness of tatters, concealed at once their well-made clothes, their opulent wallets, and their formidable arms. They looked neither rich enough to rob, nor aggressive enough to strike at once in self-defence.

Their weapons were three-fold. Each carried in his hand a heavy staff of seasoned ash, iron-shod, and strengthened all along by a spiral of wire. This was socketed in the handle to receive a bayonet. The bayonet, carried in the belt, was of army pattern B141/1937, ground down to eight inches of blade, and useful as knife, dagger, or spearhead. Braced up under the armpit, in a leather scabbard, was a short and heavy sword. The bayonets were gleanings from the Salisbury-Basingstoke line of trenches; the swords were home-made, of the leaf pattern, and beautiful.

They went up over the short grass and the harebells, and as they looked up, they saw the buzzard wheeling above them, like a bird of gold in the rays of the westering sun. Their narrow path ran awhile along a shelf on the inner shoulder of the down, then up, and lost itself in the wind-singing grasses of the broad top. Hundreds of feet below, stretched out the treacherous miles of plain. To their left, far away, they could see the silver hills and the dark beech clumps of Wiltshire; to their right the plain, quilted with woods, rolled Londonwards, as far as their eyes could see. It looked helpless.

Crab looked, and stroked his chin.

Harry looked, and smiled ecstatically, ravenously. This sight always moved him to transfiguration. He looked at it, after the first spasm of desire had taken flight, with the infinite and iron gentleness of the conqueror who is also a king.

"If we were a few thousand strong, and could fortify these hills all along," he said to Crab, "we could hold a good slice of what we look on."

"The towns'll get there first," said Crab.

"Damn them, the rats. We could spread along the inner side, though. We must become a sort of town ourselves, there's no doubt about it, or the rats will have it all. The Chief won't move, though."

"In states, administrations, otherwise impregnable, are easily made to fall during crises,"

said Crab, pretending to champ toothless gums.

"Father to the life!" cried Harry. "Good! But, damn it, we're not a state; we're my ignorance, and your youth, and Father's age, and the Chief's muscles, and the gang's don't-care, and that damned black-faced devil, George."

"All states are you and Father and the Chief and George," said Crab.

"And we're going to bring a party of Helens to complete it, eh?"

"Administrations fall during crises," said Crab.

So they walked on, and the sun dropped, until, all in a moment, the shadows down on the plain became long, violet stripes, violently intersecting the buttercup and green. Then everything took on the blue bloom of a grape, melted, and was gone. The wind freshened. Their path became indistinct. They had to stop to avoid ceaselessly stumbling over the little thorn and juniper bushes that had spread over the sheepless downs.

The bushes, all the more because they were now unseen, made cataracts in the streaming wind. Sitting, all ears, with little sense of the solid earth left, they felt it to be a wild night. But the stars grew and stood steady, and then, quickly, the young moon sprang out and up from the horizon's cloud, and lit the next great face of the down, and then all the downs stood out, pale and clear and eternal, and the wind seemed to have fallen to a sigh.

"We ought to get to that knoll," said Harry, "from which he said we could see Savernake."

"Eight miles," said Crab, "and five hours till dawn. We could get beyond it, if we wanted to, if the going's good."

"No," said Harry, "we'll bed down there an hour or so, and when the light comes we can look back, and maybe improve the route."

They kept on along the top, and came to the first mark, which was a riven tree, and when they got there, they felt the midnight hunger pretty strongly, so they sat down and took out their wallets. These contained lumps of fat smoked bacon of about two pounds weight, and a number of very hard and highly compressed cakes, rather like dog biscuits, made of lean meat and flour and eggs. These were really excellent, and tasted all the more so since the gang never had enough food with flour in it.

There was plenty of time. They ate and chatted, and ate and were silent, and the moon shone as bright as day. Crab lifted his wolfish profile against the sky as if to bay the faint Pleiades, with whom, the seven sisters, the golden story-book girls, he was in love.

Harry looked at Crab's shaggy and twisted locks, and at the queer protrusion of the back of his head, how the cranium swept back into his thin neck, and there, beyond the nape of Crab's neck, emerged from the nearer coppice, black in silhouette against the moon, he saw

something which made him reach out, grasp Crab's hand—"Look! What is it?"

"Good God!" said Crab, even more taken aback, for his fancy had been farther away.

"Ssh!" said Harry. "I know what it is. It's a cow. No, a horse. It's a horse." Actually, it was one of England's rarer animals, a Welsh pony, a mare of fourteen hands, pretty heavy with foal.

Crab stared. His visual sense was not as keen as Harry's. It was hard to recognise the creature, tossing its head in the moon's mad light, from one or two pictures seen in books. He looked hard. Anyway, it couldn't be a bear. One of the gang had once seen a bear. Father said, that like the more frequent wolves, it must have been an escaped creature from a park where they were once kept in Bedfordshire, which was far away.

The pony edged a little farther out from the coppice.

"God!" said Harry. "The gang ought to have that. They say you can't catch them. Let's urge it over towards the valley. We'll lose it if we try to get closer. Stay here, till you hear me tap—then advance as she moves. Keep her from going down the hill."

"All right."

Harry disappeared into the shadow, crouching on his belly. The wind lay over in the south-east, the quarter from which they had come.

The mare was between them and the valley. She stood cropping. She must have been disturbed, somehow, earlier on.

Suddenly, Crab heard a faint tap-tapping about a hundred yards to his right. It was Harry, beating his knife against his leather scabbard. Gently, and intermittently, it continued. Crab made the same noise, almost inaudibly. The mare heard, snuffed the air, began to crop again, snuffed doubtfully, and finally edged off unhurriedly among the junipers.

Crab crept along from one to another of these, freezing into imitation of them now and then, and keeping to the edge of the slope, until he was near the mare again. After a few minutes they began tapping anew, and again the mare was disturbed without being put to flight, and again she shifted her quarters two or three hundred yards in the direction they wanted.

This manœuvre was repeated several times, and they began to feel that they could drive her right down into the valley, and among their wired hedges, but they had no knowledge of the cumulative nervousness of horses, and behaved as if they were driving wild pigs, till the mare's uneasiness changed to panic, and she flung up her head, flirted her tail, and drummed off over the great hollow-sounding whale-back of chalk. They ran after her, half a mile away from the edge, but she was lost to them.

"What a tremendous great thing," said Harry,

too much impressed even to be furious at it disappointing him. "Fancy being mounted on the top of one of those, eh? You could crush men down."

"I wonder if it'll drift down into the valley," said Crab.

"Come on, anyway," said Harry. "Let's cut straight across. It'll land us just beyond the first mark."

Neither of them was familiar with the tops of these further downs, whose half-mile sweeps and hundred-acre dimples were so gentle and yet so swift in their flow that they seemed to move like a running sea, and now, with the mist and the moon, Harry and Crab came out west of mark two instead of east of it. They hurried on round the curve of the last down, but farther along it than they had any means of telling, for the fact is, that, while these downs are distinct as faces when you see them from afar, when you are upon one it is as if you were kissing one of those same faces, when you can see nothing but a rim of cheek and a dip of eye, unrecognisable for nearness to your own.

So they came out at mark three, and mark three was a shape cut in the chalk, and coming on it in that light, and at the top end, and so near, they could not tell it from mark two, which was also a chalk cut, though of different figure. So they came down to the plain half a mile round, and facing three or four points farther

west than their path lay. The stars were not of much help to them, for they thought of the marks before the star, and then, when they were down the hill, they were in the morning mist which lay below, and the stars were not to be seen. This halted them till the light came and the mist rolled up the hill, concealing the shape of the mark, but showing them the bulk of the down, to which they set their backs, and by which they steered their course. The dawn was beyond the hills and beyond the mist clouds, so they saw nothing of the sun till two hours later.

By this time they had reached a low knoll, one of the middle run of hummocks that lie between the Berkshire and the Marlborough downs, and they thought it was the knoll which lay on their mapped-out route. They lay down under a bush and wrapped their rabbit-skin cloaks about them and fell asleep. They woke and scratched, and looked at the distant downs and the sun, and found it hard to confirm their position, for the sinking humps on the skyline seemed to have changed their shape. However, this did not bother them much, for there on the skyline lay a line of woodlands, extending each way as far as they could see in the heat haze.

"That's Savernake all right," said Crab, "and if that's west it must be after midday instead of before. We've slept long. Yet I'm tired. But I suppose we may as well sleep again."

He was wrong. Savernake lay out of sight to

the west, and this wood was south-west of them. It was a chain of larch and beech covers really, which had become connected up during the last sixty years, and the larches, especially, gave to its edge that peculiar definite cliff-like quality which Father had described as being characteristic of Savernake.

Therefore, when night came, and it was time to set forth, they took a course almost parallel with the line of this wood, and pointing therefore, at an acute angle, to the high forest itself.

The swamps were appalling. It had been a wet spring, and there was not a low-lying field in the country but the long absence of the plough, and the decay of drainage, and the growth here and there of dripping trees, had degraded it to the ancient, hateful bog again.

Once, as they floundered and cursed, a light became visible not far away. They guessed it was a stronghold, and essayed to creep near to it, to find out its size if possible, since it seemed to lie on what was to be the gang's march. But about here, the ground became more treacherous than ever, till they began to fear they might be swallowed up. The path was impossible to find. While they were casting about, this way and that, two men advanced on them, seeming to walk on the very surface of the morass.

Harry did not wait to be questioned, but flung back his muffling rabbit-skins, drew out his sword, and looked at the body of the first man to choose

where he would strike him. Then he looked at the narrow dyke which lay between them, to see where he should leap, and when they saw his intention, and saw also what sort of a customer he was, they decided not to wait his arrival, but ran off along their indistinguishable path to warn their fellows. Crab, meanwhile, was stuck knee-deep in a quagmire, sinking deeper with one foot as soon as he lifted the other. For once in his life, he was making as much show of rage as Harry did when he was crossed.

"What the devil?" said Harry, when he had lugged him out. "How you ground your teeth."

"It was to keep them from chattering," said Crab. "I am a little subject to fear—here, this is the path—and I thought that if one of those devils could keep you busy for a time, I should be very much at the mercy of the other."

"My teeth never chatter," said Harry simply. "The worse it looks, the angrier I get. Oh, God, I do get angry."

"Guard me carefully," said Crab, "and hear me with reverence, for who else can tell you so accurately when to be afraid?"

With that, they took up their line again, and they found the ground beginning to rise, and they crossed a little ridge, and a stream on the other side, and just as the dawn came they found themselves among trees. They were on the new fringes of Savernake Forest.

They thought they were in another of the innumerable young spinneys they had been passing through for some miles back. Actually, these spinneys covered by far the greatest proportion of the land, hereabouts. They had been spreading for sixty years, merging with one another, and with the great outlying woods, and now they were veritably an extension of Savernake, many times the size of the old forest.

They sat down where a spreading beech covered a sandy bank, and ate each his quarter-pound ration of fat bacon and his hard biscuit. The sun came up, and made the dewdrops which hung on the wet twigs flash like rubies.

They peeped out, and went down to the stream again, to wash the caked mud from their shanks and clothes. Then they went back to their tree, found that there were some buries farther along the bank, set a wire or two on the off-chance, and composed themselves to sleep.

At first in the strangeness they tossed and turned.

"I cannot sleep," said Harry. "I feel as if we were ringed round. Every time I doze off, I feel things moving in on us, and my heart jumps out of my chest."

"We *are* ringed round," said Crab. "But I'll tell you where the danger's thickest. There."

"Where?" cried Harry, sitting up in a flash.

"Ah, not so near," said Crab. "Right over

there, I meant." He was pointing towards home.

"I know what you mean," said Harry. "The Chief. Yet I can't feel angry about it, Crab. Nor even believe in it, really, though I know it's true. I like him."

"That's because you see only the Chief himself, the jolly tub who laughs and swears. I see more. I see the way your paths are converging, and soon must cross. I see him beginning to think of how he put down Father, and how in a few years he himself will be old. I've seen a chance word make him think of it, and I've watched him stop in his laugh. Then he always looks at you. There's no one else he need worry about, and he knows it. How often, Harry, when you've come in to where he and George are talking, have they stopped dead and eyed you strangely?"

"Often enough in the last few months," said Harry.

"You don't allow for George's influence. Yet he and the Chief are one, and he does the thinking. *He* thinks about the way you're growing up, I assure you."

"Damn it, I've been grown up these last five years or more," said Harry.

"As man, yes, perhaps. But their trouble is, you've gone on growing into a potential Chief."

"I must be Chief one day," said Harry. "But

if they've sense enough to see that, they've sense enough to see I'd stand by as long as the Chief did nothing absolutely mad."

"Yes," said Crab, "and as long as you wanted nothing badly enough. Two 'as longs,' and both of them becoming more likely every year. They know it. I'll tell you something. Young Walter would be better at this present job than you, and less loss if he failed in it. The Chief chose him first, when it was all vague; told Rodney on Saturday. Then George came back from rounding up the new litters at valley's end, sat with the Chief an hour, and the Chief changed his choice to you."

"Ah, that's to be remembered, when we get back. But while we're out, let's bless him for it. For don't you see how fine it is, Crab? I admit I feel uneasy when I'm on my back, but when I stand up on a knoll and look forward, and see all the dappled woods lying below, and think how any step may bring us on something we've never even thought of, something monstrous or even something fine, and how we are going through where none of our folk have been, over hill and down dale alone, straight for our mark, and we shall find it, and see our lovely quarry, and plan the whole raid, because we shall be the only ones who know . . . well! Besides, think of that face that we may find, that is there, somewhere, blooming like a rose in a thicket, and knows nothing of us working

our way through. To find a lovely thing, with a wild mind, and set it in our valley! Why, that would be to have and hold the strangeness that has always been over the rim of the down, the strangeness one's heart has ached to seize on and know. Is that nonsense, Crab?"

"When it's said to me, it is," said Crab. "Let's try to sleep again."

They slept till late in the afternoon, tired out. At times, their faces were black with flies, but they did not wake: they were used to flies. When they woke, they looked at their wires, found they had had no luck, and decided to press through to the other side of the spinney, whence they could peep out and mark what path they were to start on when the light failed.

They went through the mile or so of recently grown stuff, which was thick enough, close packed beeches of sixty years old, or less, but under which nothing much grew, and then they came to the old forest with its mighty trees, its tossing, flashing green high above, its cathedral shafts of light slanting through into the middle air, and at the bottom, twenty feet above their heads, a choked greyness of death and rot. The hazels, the lean hollies, the vile scabby elders, shot up, where they were still alive, into long and evil perpendiculars, bushed with dead and rotten twigs below, and at their very tops bursting into one tuft of floating leaves, which, only

where they chanced yellowly to entangle a sun-shaft, seemed worthy of the high pillar of deformity and decay on which they were reared. Across these perpendiculars, which still, at any rate, had the attitude of living things, leaned in utter abandon the dead, straight trunks of other trees. They were dead, but they had no room to fall. Snaky brambles, and honeysuckle like string, both with one leaf-stalk to four foot of stem, both with six dead stems to one living one, bound the dead trees to the deathly ones.

No task could be more difficult, nor more hateful, than to struggle through this wood. They thought they could push through. At the first shaking of the dry obstructions, a stifling dust filled the mouth and nose and eyes. The ground was treacherous, boggy here, burrowed there, and there looped with tiny tough sub-brambles, which tightened at the ankle with the snap and purpose of a snare. The barrier of stems and trunks betrayed them at every hold. One sapling, grasped at, had a sharp brier on its other side, another, at which one clutched as the foot slipped, crumbled into horrid powder in the hand, and the splitting upper part scattered down about their ears. It seemed almost a deliberate treachery, and enraged Harry, so that he struck the next stem to smash it out of his path, but that stood humbly or mockingly indestructible. It was alive.

Harry gritted his teeth, and was about to draw his sword to hew it down.

"Stop," said Crab, who saw him, and the next moment he himself kicked in a sort of frenzy against a stump which had tripped him up. Then they came to a whole stretch, over a furlong of it, where the ground was leprous with the collapsing, swarming hills of the great red ant, and where every twig seemed to rain down the creatures on them.

When they had got through this, they were drenched with sweat, their lips were drawn back unnaturally over their teeth, and their eyes were bloodshot and wincing. They had never been in a forest before, and their own little spinneys had been cut for brushwood so regularly that they were like the woods of the old days.

They came out on what was, perhaps, the bed of a stream which had dried up in fairly recent years, and was not yet much overgrown. They stumbled along this, tripped up constantly by the low-growing briars and brambles which were concealed in the knee-deep bracken of June. Over this bracken rose clouds of flies, flies of such pertinacity and of such unusually bitter stings, that though they were free, by six foot, of the malevolent tangle of bush, they still felt that their confusion was caused knowingly by the thronging, evil wood.

"Phew! Let's sit down and cool off," said Harry. "God! this bloody place! Doesn't it

get on your nerves, eh? You feel some devil is playing with you, and yet won't show himself for you to get at him."

They rested, fanning themselves, for half an hour.

"We've got into Savernake, of course," said Harry. "It must be. How on earth did we get so far wrong? And how the devil are we going to get out?"

"That's simple enough," said Crab. "That's the way we came." He pointed into the gloomy tangle.

"What, go back there? Just as it's getting dark, too? Why, we could miss our way a hundred times, twisting and turning in there."

"Thank you," said Crab. "I had rather you'd said it. I agree. We might stand too good a chance of gratifying you by a sight of the devil who made this place. Which way, though?"

He scratched his head and looked up and down the darkening divide.

"What's that?" Both stared and listened.

A long, ululating, multitudinous cry rose and fell in the distance. An excited cry, a ravenous cry.

"It's only a pack of wild dogs, I suppose, but it sounds as if your devil was at least giving you the sound of his voice." The cry rose again.

"Yes, it must be wild dogs," said Harry. "It doesn't sound like wild dogs, though, does it? But of course, they all sound different."

"Indeed," said Crab. "I have just realised, for the first time, that they all sound surprisingly alike. Listen!"

"Then what can that be?" said Harry, his face convulsed with that almost rabid ferocity which was his reaction to alarms.

"It's up-wind, and going off, anyway," said Crab.

Harry relaxed.

"We can't go about here by night," said Crab. "Let's find some secure place, and sit tight till dawn. It's only four or five hours."

"Yes," said Harry, "let's get up in a tree. Come, let's find one."

"Yes, let's go quickly."

They went, in utter silence, along the slit between the trees, and after a little way they came to a place where it seemed to widen out; the darkness prevented them seeing to what extent. Here, on the corner, a titanic beech spread its limbs, and into this they climbed without more than the exchange of a nudge and a pointing hand. They settled themselves in the branches, and fell eagerly upon their delayed supper, but while they were still eating, the hideous cry rose again nearer at hand. It was dark; the moon was quilted over, and no ray pierced the curtain of leaves. Their faces, turned to one another as if moved by a single muscle, were dim white blurs.

"Creatures of some sort," muttered Harry,

very low. He guessed what they were, but a strong feeling rose in him that if he spoke the word "wolves" in this listening wood, the pack would straightway appear beneath the tree. Crab knew, too, and they had both heard some extravagant tales of what these growing wolf-packs could do, even to small companies of well armed men. They climbed higher, and kept needlessly silent all night. They did not descend when the first light came, for they wanted to give the pack full time to lie up, but they were cold and stiff with the hardness of their perches, so when the sun began to put forth strength, they edged round the trunk, to a place where the light fell through, and might comfort them with its warmth.

From this spot they could see across the clearing, which had been impenetrably dim the previous night. It was shaped rather in a figure of eight, with the middle open, and with each section about half an acre in extent. Their tree was situated at one end of this double glade, and the stream had evidently once run through the middle of it.

They looked through the gap into the farther section, round the edge of which some specially large trees stood. Suddenly the face of one of these trees quivered, there was a clatter as of feet on metal within it, and one of the boughs dipped, and a man came running along the huge, level limb, dipping it still further, till, when he

was near its swaying end, he bent and slithered off it, hung with one hand, dropped a foot or two to the bough next below, teetered on the end, slithered off again, hung, and dropped ten feet to the ground. He ran out, shouting, to the middle of the clearing.

"Oh," thought Crab, but he dared not speak. "That's the devil of the wood that Harry wanted to see."

But apart from his extreme hideousness, this man was not very formidable. He was terribly stunted, his face was savage and idiotic as well, and he was unarmed. Nevertheless, there was something terrifying about him. His voice, beside the rough, sweet tones of the gang, with their background of cultured English, was almost inhuman, it gabbled with such an obliterated speech.

Harry and Crab watched in amazement. Suddenly the trees became alive, the branches heaved and swayed, they revealed at one point a strange crazy nest; it looked as if it was built of brushwood and corrugated iron. A swarm of these creatures now gesticulated and chattered in the middle of the space. It was hard to tell their ages, but there seemed to be no grey heads among them. The women were distinguishable by their dugs and by the absence of the patchy, scrubby beards that the men wore. Their clothes were, at the best, no more than a dog-skin round the loins. Two or three were quite naked.

There was a strong likeness between all their faces, which was natural enough, for of all the thousands who took to the woods in the famine times, only one pair had survived and reared a family: a pair of those atavistics which have always been discoverable in England. These were their grandchildren, and great-grand children, By some accident of circumstance, their very degeneracy had fitted them to survive, and of the young they produced only those had lived on, and inter-mated, who were possessed of their parents' prognathous jaws, ridged eyebrows, spindly legs and retreating foreheads.

They came over into the nearer glade, while Harry and Crab slithered round the trunk of the tree. This horde, about thirty strong, then gathered round a ring of loose sods in the centre of the clearing, and three or four of their men took hold of some wattled branches that underlay the loose earth and lifted the whole out. A second layer was removed in the same way. A vile stench came out of this pit. It was evidently their larder.

A man stepped down and began to throw out pieces of meat. It was difficult to tell whether these dark gobbets had been cooked or not, or what meat they were, but it was very obvious that they were tainted almost to rottenness. These creatures, however, fell on them with avidity, the men setting their teeth in and jerking their heads to pull pieces off, while the

women, when they had bitten off a piece, would sometimes take it from their teeth and stuff it into the mouth of the nearest child. One child, who had strayed to the fringe by the tree in which Harry and Crab were sitting, took off a hedge snail from a frond of bracken and ate it, shell and all.

When they had eaten, they lay about for a while in the sun. One of the boys became amorous, and, without shifting from his place in the ring, began to handle a rather older female very openly. Some gabbling which then arose seemed to be good-humouredly referring to this. Crab thought, for the first time, that he understood a few of their phrases. The female, though, either became embarrassed, or pretended embarrassment, for she got up and broke through the bracken and concealed herself behind the down-sweeping green branches of the very tree in which Harry and Crab were hiding.

Her admirer shouted out after her once or twice, as if to bid her return, and laughter rose from the rest. The boy got up, made some sort of remark, which was well received, ran in and captured his willing partner, a yard from the trunk of the tree. She offered him, nevertheless, the false snarl of an animal coyness, till he flung her down, whereupon, looking up among the branches, she shortly discerned the figures of Harry and Crab, who could find no chance of concealment.

In a moment she had sprung up, screeched to her companion and ran out into the clearing, screeching louder to the rest of the tribe. At once the place was emptied, the trees shook, and the whole squalid crew had regained their dwellings.

It happened so quickly that Harry and Crab were left staring, their wits too scattered for them to move.

Then, as they looked, they saw one of the tribe leap out again from his tree, clutching a little bow in his hands, then another with a rough spear, and at that, without exchanging a word, they jumped crashing down, and made off along the open track. A yell behind told them they were being pursued.

CHAPTER V

HARRY and Crab fled away down the old gully, eager to increase their start as much as possible, for though even Crab could easily have out-distanced these misshapen creatures on clear ground, they feared that at any turn the tangled wood might stand across their path. In that stuff, these forest men would ten to one travel the faster. At the first bend, Harry looked back, and saw them streaming down the path. He thought there were eight or ten of them, and two at least had bows. It was the bowmen that most decided him on flight, though even if they had not been there he was not so foolish as to risk an issue against such numbers.

At the bend, the track still continued, but there was a tree felled across it so that the branches blocked all the way. They struggled through, ran a hundred yards, found another bend, and, beyond it, another tree down. They cursed, and got through this, and there, twenty yards on, was another. Before they had got over the next two or three hundred yards, which were open, they heard shouts, and saw the two

bowmen, who were leading their pursuers, springing out from the limbs of the last felled tree. Then another tree faced them. They fought their way through and found yet another, this time close ahead. Harry gripped Crab's arm.

"Stop," he said.

"What?" said Crab.

"We don't want to be shot in the back. We must lie up for those with the bows, and then take our chance with the rest."

There was no time to say more. Crab screwed himself up under the bole of the tree, Harry gave one leap into a thorn-brake and crouched down out of sight.

They heard quick breathing like a dog's, and feet moving quickly and surely from limb to limb in the close-packed head of the tree. There was none of the crashing and splintering they themselves had made. The two waiting men crouched, petrified. Everything depended on whether the leaders would charge straight through or decide at this particular tree to become cautious, and wait for the others, who were not more than fifty yards behind. It all happened in less than ten seconds, but that is a long time.

One man sprang out on to a level branch six feet above the ground. He looked forward as if in hope to get a shot at the fugitives before they got to the next tree. Assuming they had

gone through, he jumped down. While he was in the air, Harry rose to meet him, and caught him with his sword just below the navel. He struck out with his left hand as the blade was engulfed in the man's guts, and thus flung the falling body back a little, and prevented the sword getting wedged where the ribs joined the spine.

As the man was struck, his fellow appeared on the bough. He let fly at Harry, and, as the arrow sped, Crab leapt forward and brought down his sword on the man's foot, cutting it through, to all intents and purposes, across the instep. When he felt the blade, the man rocked, lost his head, and jumped forward. He came down on the mutilated foot and spun over. Crab leapt on him, dashed his heel into his face, and stabbed him half a dozen times in the belly. He still writhed, like an unkillable creature in a nightmare.

Harry came across in two steps and thrust his point in just above the collarbone. The man choked, seemed to deflate, and lay limp. The arrow was sticking in the little fold of shirt under Harry's armpit.

"Don't waste your blows," said Harry roughly.

Crab at once became calm, steadied his hand by compelling it to fix his bayonet to the staff he had dropped beside him, and as he did so, the branches shook and the other pursuers were upon them.

Harry picked up the fallen man's bow, pulled the arrow out of his shirt in one jerk, fitted it, and let fly at the first-comer, almost without taking aim. The arrow flew high, straight into his open mouth. He choked, and rolled on the ground under the tree, where he lay writhing, making a hideous noise. The next man appeared, threw his spear wildly, missed, and darted back just in time to escape a combined rush. The pursuers halted and gabbled on the other side of the tree.

The man underneath tried to crawl back under the branches, but he could not get through. Finding himself unable to, he seemed to fall into a delirium of terror, and suddenly dragged himself out from under the limb that lay between them, and reared his head at his enemies' feet. The short arrow stood out straight from his hunched tongue, and the tip of it showed at the back of his neck. He made his hideous sound again. Crab cut him through the nape.

"How many arrows?" said Harry.

"One here, and two here," said Crab, "that's all. This bow is broken."

"Take the other. Where's my staff?" He picked it up and fitted his bayonet to it. He thrust the point into the ground two feet behind him, the handle ready to his hand. If there was a rush, this and an arrow from Crab might account for two before the fighting got to close

quarters. There was no rush, but there was a sudden cracking below them on the path, and a spear was flung out of the fringe of trees. The thrower, however, was so chary of exposing himself that he gave himself no space to give force to his fling, and the spear was easily side-stepped and fell among the branches just behind them. Crab shot, where the lifted arm had shown, but the bow was a poor crooked thing, and the arrow rattled among the twigs above, and fell. All the same, there rose a howl of terror, and the man went crashing and shrieking among the trees.

"I think there's only five or six of them left," said Harry. "And we've got the bow. Let's make for the next tree, eh?"

"Look out for an ambush," said Crab. "We didn't hear that devil go through the wood till he'd slung his shot."

"Yes, but they may have sent someone back for some more men, or more bows and arrows," said Harry. "Come on, we must risk it."

They went along the track, for they dared not commit themselves to the trees until it was absolutely necessary, and now they went slowly, pausing often to menace a thicket, or to peep round a bend. All along, the felled trees obstructed the path.

After about a mile, the path came to an end, and there was nothing for it but to take to the wood again. They had not struggled long among

the undergrowth when both conceived an agonising sense of being dogged closely. They could go neither quietly nor fast; there were moments when they slipped or were stuck in wet patches, or seemed helpless in clutch of thorns or brambles. At such moments each felt his flesh crawl in agonised expectation of a spear in his unprotected back.

Soon, however, the wood became a little easier to penetrate. They found themselves on another of those tracks which, though they are imperceptible to the untrained eye, are to be found and lost and perhaps found again, even in the most formidable of virgin forests. Sometimes dried-up streams have left these yielding ways, and sometimes they are the deer's path, or the boar's. Sometimes they seem to exist without reason, like the natural parting in hair. Harry and Crab came on one of these tracks; that is, they now found that, however impenetrable the screen before them appeared, there was always one place where they could creep through without having to break their way, and so they got on much faster, and by the afternoon they came to a sweeter part of the wood where the sweeping branches kept the ground clear, and, no longer fearing attack, they stopped to eat a few mouthfuls, and then they struck off northward over the good ground between the giant trees.

"Look at the stumps," said Harry as they went. "This wood has been thinned out not

so long ago. They were once forest trees like the rest. There must be some big place near here; we had better go cautiously."

They were going down a long ride cut through the wood, stepping from trunk to trunk along its edge, when they heard a whistling and shouting as if to dogs, and peeping out, they saw a large company file past through the patch of light at the end of the ride. Over twenty men went by, some leading large fawn-coloured dogs, rather like their own mastiffs, but lighter in build, while others were yoked to stout poles on which wild pigs were slung. Some terriers ran in and out among them. As far as the watchers could see, they were well clad, and they went so boldly and easily that they seemed to swagger. It was a fine sight.

When the sound of their voices and their whistlings had died away, Harry turned to Crab.

"They're from some strong place by their walk. If it's Marlborough, we're back on our way again."

"How are we to find out?" said Crab.
"I'm very nearly done."

"Let's see what sort of track they were on; then we'll make up our minds. We can lie up awhile if you like, as long as we don't leave it too late to get a sight of their place by daylight. If it's Marlborough we shall see the ruins."

They went on cautiously to the track along which the huntsmen had passed, and found it to

be a wide smooth way with nothing but a little thorn growing here and there in the turf. It was, in fact, the old Bath Road. At the sight of it, Crab mastered his weariness.

"Let's get along this," said he. "We may find a spot where we can lie up and look at the place."

After manœuvring for a couple of hours, they had skirted the town to the south and were lying in a clump of bushes on a high place to the west of it. From here they could see the ruins of the old town, and the new stronghold set on the highest point of it, on the brink of the great basin that dropped away behind. A tremendous fort had been built here. On their side, the vestiges of the town had been built up into a series of defensive walls, ringing in all that side of the citadel which was not made safe by the steep slope behind. Between each row of walls the ground was cultivated; men and women were hoeing between the rows of crops. There were some arable fields in the distance. In another section between the rings of walls there were sties and pens. The fort itself was shaped like a half-moon, cleaving to the lip of the basin. Half the stones of the ruins must have been used in its construction. Its outer walls were devoid of windows, towering greyly up over a dry ditch. Harry saw that there must be one or more courtyards within, for the pigs to be driven into, in case of siege.

"How many families would that hold, do you think?" said Crab. "Several hundreds, anyway."

"What a place!" said Harry.

He could not have done looking at it. The ugly, raw-grey mass was to him a joy to behold. It was with difficulty that Crab persuaded him to leave a position so dangerously near, and to retire a mile or two into the thick of the wood.

"What a thing to have a place like that! You could hold out against any number. How would they eat, who laid siege to it? They know their strength, the devils. See how it stands up against the sky. Why, they're masters for miles around."

"Thank goodness for the miles, and the marshes, and the bare hills that'll keep them from coming our way," said Crab.

"Sooner or later . . ." said Harry. "By God! we must change our way of living. Ha! I feel I want to go back to-day, Crab."

"Yes, perhaps the Chief may have something for you to do."

They lay up till nearly midnight, and then they cautiously skirted the town and got out on the downs, where they covered the ground very fast, for the country was so open, and the moon so clear, that they could mark their way by some distant clump of beeches, and leap downhill, and breathe themselves by walking up-hill, till they got to it. The first light found them within a

mile of Avebury, for they had been keeping the old metalled road in sight on their left, for they were now determined to avoid any possible risk of losing themselves again. They saw from the gentle eastward slope the long avenue of grey stones, crossing, at a narrow angle, the line of scraggy thorns and tall beeches that marked where the remains of the by-road ran.

They turned here, and walked through the long June grasses, whose seeds stuck to them, wet with the dawn dew, and they went up the stone avenue to where the ruined houses were, their blackened walls standing only a few feet high, grass-topped, with the glittering wet in the grass, and their cellars open, the earth mangled, and the high sycamores, whence sharp bird song came, springing up through the floors and standing in the morning sun. All around stood the great grey stones, blind, featureless, the survivors of suns and rains and men.

"They look," said Crab, "like a mouthful of great teeth, chewing the place up."

They had eaten and were standing upon that point of the vallum from which the whole ring is visible.

"What a simple world theirs was, who laid these stones," said Harry. "They had their law——"

"That, Father says, was probably complex," said Crab, "like those of the black men."

"Complex law, and simple life, Father said.

That's the fact of the matter. Our trouble is, that we have no law apart from the Chief's will, which vacillates, and his power, which in extreme need must be likely to meet extreme opposition, and then he will fear to enforce it."

"If you are going to be abstract," said Crab, "you must allow me to usurp your part in return, and to become practical. Answer me, yes or no. Will the Chief perceive, consider, act upon the implications of this Marlborough development in the way we would?"

"Of course not," said Harry.

"Then," said Crab, "tell me: do you think that unless we respond to it, and vastly alter our policy, we shall survive, except as the gang of outlaws which we became, in fact, on the day that Marlborough built that fort?"

"No," said Harry, "I see what must be done. We——"

"Don't say it yet. Don't say it yet. If you do, you are a murderer, traitor, snake; man to be hanged. Don't say it until you have answered all my questions, and then . . . it will have said itself."

"What the devil?" said Harry, surprised. "I was only going to say——"

"Harry, you were about to utter deadly treachery——"

"No, no, not I."

"Either to the Chief——"

"No."

“Or to something vastly more important than any pleasant, insolent, thick-headed, pot-bellied man of fifty can be. I mean, to that sense of the fine life that Grandfather has passed on to us. Marlborough, do you see, has put one into your left hand and one into your right—the Chief, and the good life—and one you *must* let fall.”

Harry lolled back his head, chewing the sweet out of a grass stem, and looked up into the mild blue sky. In all the profound of maiden blue, only a far lark's song stirred, beating like that little pulse which shows us a sleeping girl is alive, alive.

Crab's voice resumed, after one of those seconds which are between the earth's heart-beats, when the downs cease for a moment. “The question is,” Crab's voice said, “which?”

Harry thrust it away. “It is not for me to choose. Let things take their course.”

“By not choosing, you choose, I see it clearly, our end. What can we become on the day when we have made our life, beautiful and weak, and Marlborough decides to take in our country? Marlborough's outpost, dutiful men for a fistful of grain a day, dutiful to these . . . or Marlborough's outlaws. Ah, well! if the last's to be the case, it's good that our sons will be so unpleasant. We shall lose all interest in their descendants. Those, I assure you, will soon begin

to look like the creatures we saw in Savernake. The choice is between vassalage or taking to the woods, and action, and it rests with you.

"I can see, though," went on Crab bitterly, "that——"

"Ah, Crab, these are not matters to be talked of in this place. Look how the stones stand, Ten thousand generations of murder, and there they are, with ashes about them and the lark above. Are we now to start the turn again? Here we are, back at Eden's gates; and who dares to strike Cain's blow and set us off on the old track once more? Think of the thrusts which that one would breed, eh, Crab? Think of its grandchildren and great-grandchildren for generations to come. Grandpa thrust, and cut and batter his son and daughter. Stab, throttle and crush, assault, decoy and ambush. Ah, what a legion of shrieks; what a cataract of groans and gurgles! My dear Crab, let fate make us what it will, rather than we carve some distant good end out of so many bad ones."

"My dear Harry, I rejoice that you are babbling like an idiot, and still more that you know it. Come!"

"The fact is, Crab, I have no quarrel with the Chief."

"Damn it. There we slip out of your slack hands into the mud. Can you not invent a quarrel?"

"I can think of nothing."

"We are lost. If you were in the right heart, your brain would be thronged and be-shouted with quarrels. It would be like the gateway of Marlborough: you should not sleep for newcomers and their noise. You would find knives in your hands, grown there, out of nothing."

"Say swords, my dear Crab."

"Harry, you are in the right. I am a little twisted, as you see. To me, swords seem so brutally too much, so quick to multiply and so imperfectly sure. But when the need comes, I think knives, and poison collects upon my tongue."

"Swallow it. You are immune. I will not kill the fat man with a bacon carver, and have him wake and see me. Nor have I resentment enough to sweat him in a straight fight. Crab, I have, I believe, more of him than of you in me. He and I are the sort that love life, and mean neither harm nor good. What, can't he live five or ten years more, when I may bear him down with a laugh, and put him to sit by the fire, as he did Father?"

"He'll be dead before Marlborough comes, or they'd make a fire for him to sit by."

"Thank our stars they're no friends to Swindon, anyway, if reports are true, or this job would decide the issue. Crab, this talk loads me down with weariness. I can't struggle along with it. Let's sleep."

"You wayward devil!"

"Truly, the thoughts exhaust me. What a small thing a reason is, compared with what may hang on it!"

"Yes, I know you. You need a toothache, and then you'll tear the world up. Well, let's sleep."

"Oh, my dear Crab, let's."

CHAPTER VI

NEXT night they could not start till late, for the moon was not up till the night was half done, but the going was good most of the way, and after two hours the first dawn found them only two or three miles south of Swindon.

"This," said Harry, "is where old Tom's place must have been."

"Maybe it was that long rise across the dip," said Crab. "If we've come seven miles, it may well be. Well, he's got enough wood now in all conscience."

"We'd better keep along the edges of the woods," said Harry. "In an hour or so we should be looking down on Swindon."

They came at last to the top of the rise, which on the other side fell away steeply in terraces, and, looking over, they saw the town below them, its ruined roofs looking unutterably squalid in the level rays of the rising sun. This place was only a warren compared with Marlborough: that could be seen even from the heights above. It was clear that no great attempt at re-building had been made. As far as they could judge,

even the ramparts were still in course of construction. Although the place had been occupied consistently, those who held it had lived a rat's life until a short time ago. The city of the old days was razed almost to the ground. In its ruins, largely in its cellars, a few hundred starving wretches had survived year after year, secure from envy in the weakness of their refuge, and from rapine by their notoriously miserable emptiness.

In the last few peaceful years, a great change had come over this town. It had come by a flock of sheep, heaven knows how, and some Columbus or Napoleon or Stalin had risen to meet the moment, and withheld his ravenous fellow-wretches from tearing this booty limb from limb, as first they had proposed to do.

To have a flock of sheep is to be rich, to be rich is to have a future, to have a future is to become thrifty, indefatigable, laborious. Swindon, having starved without choice for half a century, now elected to starve on for a year or two more, for thrift's sake, and its flock increased, and its tillage began to spread ; and its rubble barricades, and decoy alleys, and cellar pitfalls began to be reinforced by a built wall.

The Swindon people, who had been a rabble so long, were still dirty, depraved and cruel. They were drunken, they were incestuous, and their food was filth, but in one respect they had

lived on a higher plane than did any other community in the south-west counties. They had still reserves of linen, which had been used up years before in the other towns. In Swindon, some large stocks had been left in weather-proof basements, and the few who settled there had been too shiftless and dreary to make full use of it. It is washing that wears out a linen garment. Now, besides their supply of shirts and shifts, they had a further fineness. One or two Welshmen there knew how to spin and weave, and now each man had a homespun coat, and each girl a dyed wool gown, overshirt or smock. The Marlborough captain, or the Widmer Valley Chief, each wealthy, secure and potent in comparison, virtuous and civilised, too, would have looked like savages beside these dandified cellar rats.

So Harry and Crab looked down on the town, and hastily right and left to see if they could see traces of the shepherd settlement they were in search of, hastily because they were nearer to Swindon than they had expected or wished to be, and were eager to draw back a little.

They could see where the downs lay, and it was under the downs, they had been told, that the huts were. They worked their way along the wood to the best vantage-point for surveying the slopes.

"What the devil do people do with sheep?" asked Harry. "Do they turn them into the

woods to find food, or what? Do they drive them out in the early morning, do you think?"

"All I know is, they have dogs about them," said Crab, "and I think they only eat grass, but I can't remember where I heard it."

"They go *ma-a ma-a*," said Harry. "Father used to make the sound for us, do you remember, when we were small?"

"They have bells—the sheep bells—drowsy tinklings—it's in a poem."

"I can't hear any bells ringing."

"As long as we don't hear the dogs too near," said Crab, "let us be thankful. See the gap there? Let us get up to that, and we'll have a view all along the valley."

They made their way forward with infinite caution, and at last were crouching on the fringes of the wood, looking down into a wide valley, and across to some rolling downs. Below them, at the bottom of the hill, was a stronghold of a peculiar nature.

The ring of huts that they had heard of, had by this time merged into a low round tower, of considerable circumference, and with a yard in its centre. This structure stood opposite the gate of an enormous rectangular earthwork, which enclosed about two acres of ground in walls of perhaps fifteen feet high, and equally thick. In this enclosure were hundreds of sheep, whose bleatings were now clearly to be heard. Opposite the round tower, and so near as to be almost

under its walls, stood a peculiar engine, which was, in fact, a crane, and this was mounted on a piece of the rampart which must have been reinforced by mortared stones, and it overhung a slotted gateway into which was fitted, bound together by enormous chains, a flat mass of tree-trunks.

Exactly what these last devices were, or how they worked, was not at first clear to the watchers on the hill above, but they had not been lying long under their cover of brambles when the place began to stir with the activities of morning. Smoke began to rise. Something rattled on the roof of the tower, and six pigeons, gleaming white, rose and circled in the sunlight, and flew over in the direction of Swindon. The distant bleating increased in volume, they heard the barking of dogs and some banging, all very faint and far, but very distinctly. Then suddenly, as happens in the downs, they heard from this place, nearly half a mile away, two voices speaking so pat and clear that they sounded as if they were within the listeners' heads. Someone was teasing, saying yes and no, each time with a giggle, and someone else was reiterating a question in a high-pitched metallic tone.

The quiet and magic air, which rendered this illusion possible, was soon torn by the agonised grinding and creaking of the great gate of the tower, which was then opened, and some men came out. They carried a chain and tackle,

and a gigantic bar. The chain was fitted to the massive portcullis and to the crane, and the bar was slotted into a sort of windlass below, and the men, with shouts, bent themselves to turning the bar, and as they did so, the portcullis rose in its deep grooves, and was halted six feet or so from the ground.

Some others now ran in among the sheep, and the dogs that had lain there sprang up, and the baaing rose like the sound of a sea, and the meal-coloured backs surged like waves.

Like a river yellowly in spate the sheep poured through the opening, and their backs, which in the greater space heaved with a slower rhythm, here in the narrows chopped and danced like flood waters over rocks. Sometimes, as when a sunken obstruction, or even a mere viciousness in the water's grain, will make a spout or curl in one place, so, as they rushed through the opening, sheep after sheep in one particular spot would be lifted off its feet, dropped again, and would pass on. This flood was divided by the round tower, round which it eddied to the higher side, and then it formed a column mounting up and up a bare track to the top of the downs, and in this column, which mounted with the steadiness and unity of mercury rising from a bulb, there were still sheep dropping back or hurrying forward to find their own companies, ewes bleating after lambs, sheep with rotten feet nipped by the dogs to keep them in place, sudden

checks, above which shouts and barks cracked like whips, and yet it was all one thing, with one even ululating sound in which a thousand creatures spoke in panic, hunger, anger, eagerness, pain, fussiness, high spirits, impatience, possibly even in love. The sheep went up the hill, and, bobbing, choked a cleft at the far top of the path, overflowed the sides of it, and spread out over the bare undulations beyond.

Two hares set up by circling dogs ran round the valley's brim to the woody side, their hind legs tossing back necklaces of pearly dew at every bound. This was a rare sight. They escaped unnoticed, which was as well, for had they been seen to slip off to lie in the wood, it may have been that huntsmen would have followed, though the leverets were still at suck, but as it was, the handsome creatures, easy and unpursued, came loping along the wood's edge, picking and choosing where they should strike in, and they swung along within a few yards of where Harry and Crab were crouching.

Those two lay, through the morning hours, dozing by turns, and by turns looking down on the settlement below them. They reckoned there were fifty or sixty people living in the place, and there seemed to be about as many women as there were men. They were not sure, but they thought from the movements of the men who had gone up with the sheep that

there were no oldsters among them, they all seemed straight and active. It seemed probable, therefore, that if they could make a clean sweep they might get a dozen women of suitable age. On the other hand, it was very difficult to see how any sort of raid could be successfully carried out.

Siege was out of the question. The tower was plainly capable of holding out against far greater numbers than theirs. A direct attack by night was not to be thought of.

"Could it be done by day?" murmured Crab, in the whisper which they had learned it was wiser to adopt.

"Look at that devil on the parapet," said Harry. "It's six hundred yards from here. That's two or three minutes, even if the hill-side's as simple as it looks; if there's wire or pitfalls, we'd have to slow up. To make a rush in is hopeless. We'd be seen and they'd give the alarm in no time."

"Yes, they've dropped one man at the top of the path. From where he stands, he has the look-out below in view, and he himself, I suppose, can see, and is seen, by other look-outs on the more distant downs. Shall I crawl up the wood and confirm that? I can see over, I think, from the top end."

"Do," said Harry, and Crab, with a wriggle, was gone from his side and had stolen away under the rippling brambles. No one could move as

quietly as Crab, and everyone could move more quietly than Harry. Harry attributed this to his enormous shoulders, but he was wrong. It is a nervous and not a physical difficulty, that last screwing up of the whole being to an unnatural slowness and control. The faculty, or the lack of it, and all that is kin to it, runs through the man's whole nature. He who can look for five minutes without dizziness, at a yard square of broken twigs, and at the end advance hand or foot to the one spot which will take it mutely, is he who can choose his own fact from all the cluttered facts that bewilder us, and he who can scrape his belly along, slowly, and plough his nose inch after careful inch among the grass stems, and the leaves, of which each one has half rotted this year, and next year shall rot the other half; he whose two-inch advance of elbow shall be made so, neither more nor less, not to spare the pink snail nor avoid the sharp thorn; he who will not raise his head to look, for it is not time; he who will not glide a hurried yard to allay his soul's back-ache, which longs to ease itself in chance, on his belly shall he go all the days of his life, and he shall look at truth, blinking it neither to spare nor to avoid, with a cold and a lidless eye. Your lion, on the other hand, must, if he breaks his back to crawl ten yards, spring the other ten, hit or miss, and slowness and silence and the earth's touch to his chin, though he may condescend to them often

enough, are yet an intolerable burden to him, so that he cannot succeed in them long.

Crab, then, slid away. Harry looked down on the stronghold and saw some naked children run out, and he heard a girl singing, and then he saw two men come from the direction of Swindon, carrying something, which was actually a wicker basket. This was set down and opened, and the pigeons flew out like risen souls and perched on a ridged roof, and then flew down to feed in the sheep pen.

Crab came back. "That's right," he said, "there's evidently a chain of watchers from down top to down top."

"Do you think," said Harry, "it would be any good if a dozen of us got into the big place and hid under the wall, just before dawn, so that when they raised the gate——"

"There's the dogs there. Besides, the men who turn that beam would see you."

"We might plaster ourselves against the wall of the tower, under the windows at the back, and run round before they could shut the gate. But still the dogs would hear, or scent us, I suppose. Or some chance——"

"There must be some solution," said Crab. "This place is not made to guard women, but sheep. By day, at least, their security partly depends on the fact that people can't run off with sheep as fast as people can give chase without them. It follows——"

"Look," said Harry. "If the man at the top of the path were removed, there'd be no connection between him on the tower and those on the downs. Then, if we could get into the tower, we could get away again without a party dogging our heels, slowing us, and leaving tracks to guide the gang from Swindon."

"I believe," said Crab, "that the removal of that sentry is not impossible, but I must go and confirm one thing. That is, whether a dip I saw—a dry dew-pond, probably, with some thistles growing in it—is on the tower side of the skyline. If it is, it will be useful, for it's just about a hundred yards from where the sentry stands, and he, you see, is well over to this side of the path. The dogs don't go near it."

"That sounds good," said Harry. "He could be tempted there, out of sight of the others. . . . How many men could hide in it?"

"I'll find out."

"He could be shot full of arrows as he approached, providing there were enough men to make sure of killing him outright."

"If he'd come near enough, one man might deal with him."

"We mustn't risk anything at that point, though. Anyway, go and find out the exact position, and the amount of cover in it, and so on. Leave me your panel."

"All right. I may be some time. I may have to worm a way out among the tall grass on

the side of this wood in order to get a second line on the level of the place."

"Be careful."

Crab slid off again.

Harry began to scratch a plan on the reverse of the panel. The possibilities of a day attack depended entirely on whether a rush in could be made before the gates were closed. He was estimating with elaborate care the distances between the various odd bits of cover which lay behind the earthworks on the other side of the tower. He thought that if a few men could gain a clump of trees that lay near, under cover of darkness, then, when the flocks had disappeared over the rise, they could creep out, advance along in the shelter of the wall, watch the ambushed sentry fall, and, as he fell, rush at the gate. If they could either kill or take everybody in the tower, they would then have a long start and leave no one behind to describe them. Though they must inevitably leave tracks in the wood, he thought they would leave none on the open downs, where in a few miles they could leave all pursuit hopelessly behind. But the attempt at rushing in would be a near thing, too near; he was only playing with the scheme.

By this time the sun was towering overhead, and had burned all the blue out of the sky, except along the horizons, where a hot Titian blue remained. Above, the sky was like pearl. The big oaks in the valley below turned lead colour,

quivered, and were almost melted from sight in the writhing haze. The promontory of woodland, through which Crab had gone, rose to Harry's right. The tall beeches, utterly still, stood in a lucent trance against the blue of the lower sky.

The nobility of this curve, its stillness, and its intense colour, all flung up against the gulf of blue, islanded in the swimming molten greys of the lower landscape, made it seem part of a frieze, something classic and eternal, an abode of gods.

The movements of attack became light in Harry's mind, like a ballet, and then they were nothing, and he lay waiting Crab's tardy return, and the heat, which poured into the shade where he lay, as into a clear backwater, seemed to float him away, loosening him from his body and from time, and as he looked at the Olympian grove beside him he simultaneously felt and satisfied a deep nostalgia for a place in which he had never been, and for a life which he had never lived. But while he was in the ecstasy of seeing this beauty which before he had only guessed at vaguely, or beheld piecemeal (or perhaps, after all, he had known it well and had forgotten), and while he embraced it with his desire, that sixth sense, the only one that ever knows beauty, a frond of beech leaves swung outward like a gate, and a handsome girl came out and stood in the gem-like shade, as if waiting to take a

last breath of hot shadow before she plunged into the burning arid airs of the open slope.

She stood, thirty yards off, and her face, which was long and narrow, was darkly burned by the sun, so that her eyes were like crystal even at that distance, and her hair was bleached to a platinum fairness about her narrow head. She wore a woollen frock dyed a fine yellow, and cut very low about the breast, so that a shift of white linen formed the front part. She leaned back and stretched up her bare arm, and broke off a spray of leaves for a fan.

Harry lay rigid, all his life ravenous in his eyes. He had never before seen a woman dressed in anything but dreary skins, and, skins or no skins, he had never seen one a tenth as beautiful. She seemed like a goddess, radiant. What a thing beauty is! This girl bore herself nobly and gaily, because she was of the shepherds, and had light and pleasant work to do, but what most made her seem divine to Harry, was a fresh and untrammelled look she had, which was the look of a girl of sixteen, only this girl was more than twenty, and it was nobly adult in her, and conscious. Hers was a rare freedom, as a matter of fact, for though she was twenty-three, she had never borne a child. This freedom, and her great beauty, raised her above her fellow shes, and lent her the air of a princess in a story.

To breathe herself the more, she pulled back

the flap of her shift and exposed her sweet breast to the leafy fan. One or two tiny curls and twists of her flaxen hair were flattened in the sweat of her forehead, burning fair in the brown. She opened her mouth, which was so cut that it meant more than a man's arm and sword, and in it no doubt her red tongue was a red spike, and she breathed the heat out of her! Then she walked out into the glare on the hill's brow, and it seemed as if she had vanished. Her white and yellow, her fair hair, her sunburn, were all burnt up, like glass in fire. Harry stared, and she was gone over the brow. He lay amazed.

He could not think about the girl. There was nothing to think. Besides, he found himself tired out. A tiny frog, strayed from some wet place behind in the wood, came with a jump quite near to his head, as he lay flat and still under the brambles. Looking out of his half-closed eye, it was the only thing he could see. The rise and fall of its breathing was the only thing in the world.

Crab was beside him, saying that the pond would hold three, that it was below the level of the skyline, that he had had to lie up, for he had heard footsteps in the wood.

"Did you hear anyone?" he asked.

Harry grunted.

"I wonder which way he went, then," said Crab, peering out, and cocking his ear. "I hope

he hasn't got wind of us. What's the next move, anyway?"

Harry hesitated before replying. He looked down and saw in the hot depths below a gleam of yellow pass, like the luminous shadow of a fish, across the withered grass before the great pen. It disappeared into the gate of the tower. Harry looked at the clump of trees behind, at the intervening scrub, at the long earth wall, at the gates, at the sentries below and above, and the plan moved in his mind with the order and the steely crash of a machine.

"Take a spell of sleep, Crab," he said, "and I'll watch. We'll move off to-night."

"What, to spy out the other settlement?" asked Crab.

"No, we'll go home."

CHAPTER VII

WHEN night had come, and they had seen that no sentry was posted near the copse, they became impatient to get away, for Harry, in his eagerness to seize upon the girl, felt to the far valley as the racer does to the post round which he must turn before he rushes back to the goal. Not so Crab, who was consumed with an intense nostalgia for the curves of his own downs, and the surge of voices, and the smell of the packed room at evening. Yet they had to travel slowly, partly because after the first night the moon had gone, and they had to creep along by day, and partly because, having missed their way in coming, they had to find and mark a new way in their return.

They pressed on, sick of the wretched meals they scraped up, oppressed by the constant need for caution, weary of the insolence of unfamiliar horizons. They found, though, a straight way, well to the east of Marlborough and across country where no sheep had yet come, and which was mostly too exposed for other settlers. All the way they saw no one, except once, when they came out above the railway line and saw

in the distance a little group of figures prising up one of the rusty rails to bear it away.

In the end they came to swamps, but for these they cared nothing, for they looked up when the morning mist was gone, and saw their own high downs and the marks upon the tops of them.

They crossed the last two or three miles of fen by the earliest light of the next day's dawn, and hurried on through the broad day into their own country. It seemed amazing that the place was still the same. They turned in upon the path, and the first look-out bobbed up and waved his hand when he saw who they were, and they went down through the glades of the wood, where the men who were hoeing at the potato patches looked up and smiled with faces that were patient and unblemished; and then they crossed the sweltering farmyard and threw down their weapons with a clatter inside the door, for it was forbidden to carry weapons in the common rooms, and they entered and found Father and the Chief, sitting silently by the cold hearth.

Both looked round at Harry's heavy entrance; Father with a tremulous exultant look, and the Chief with that look of relief which men wear when Fate intervenes to the end that meets their wishes, though not their judgment.

As for the wanderers, when they entered the great kitchen and heard the blue-fly on the pane,

and smelt again the hot fetid gust that blew in from the yard outside, the tension of their nerves relaxed and let in on them the fatigue of the past ten days.

Father, who saw their faces age ten years all in one wiping of the brow, just as a mummy's face makes up its age when it is brought to the light again, interrupted the Chief's torrent of welcoming and questioning.

"Stretch out," said he, and to the Chief he added, "Let them rest and eat before we ask them questions."

To refresh them the better, he began telling them of odd things that had happened since they had been away, for he knew that there is nothing that more healingly receives a returned one than to hear account of what has taken place, and nothing that wearies him more than to be called on first of all to tell his tale.

So while they fed and drank cider, he talked.

"There was an eagle over the valley three or four days ago," he said. "They'll begin to nest here soon, like the ravens. We tapped a new spring just at the top of the wood, where we were digging out some sand to make cement of. It means that we can irrigate all the crops there now, as well as being a second supply for the house. Your Hecate's pupped, Harry, and two of them are really very near the true mastiff type. We shall fix it soon. The others were God knows what. I had them drowned."

"You did away with the best-looking of them," said the Chief.

"Indeed? Can you describe to me the points of a mastiff?" asked Father. "Have you ever seen one?"

"No," said he, "nor want to. You've kept two ugly flat-faced devils as ever I've seen, that I do know."

"There's one sad thing," went on Father. "Tell me, did you see that place, Monks Lye, that Tom was always talking about?"

"We saw something that might have been it," said Crab. "It's hard to say."

"Ha! Poor old devil!" struck in the Chief. "He's dead. Died of bloody excitement. 'They'll see it,' he kept on saying all day. 'They'll see it. I shall hear all about it. How soon will they come?' Damn it, he got so impatient he died of it, and that's the end of him, and all his crazy talk.

"We've got to live in the world as it is," he said, after a silence.

"What's the good of it, anyway?" he said. "The poor old devil making all that sing-song all the time; it was only a mad idea in his head. That wouldn't fill his belly."

"Well, anyway," he said, "we've wasted time enough. Now let's hear what happened."

Harry and Crab looked at one another.

"You tell," said Harry. Crab told how they had missed their way and got into Savernake, and

had seen Marlborough ; but he glossed over what they had seen there, and uttered no word as to their own reactions to it. He continued to describe everything up to their looking down on the shepherds' fort.

"It's like this," said Harry, and he took a dead coal out of the hearth and drew on the surface of the table, referring now and then to his panel. His fit of lassitude was gone again ; he began to shout a little as he described what he thought should be done.

"So that's your calculation, is it ?" said the Chief. "A hundred yards from the copse to the wall, a hundred along. Where would you reckon to be seen ?"

"Half-way along the wall," said Harry. "If they weren't watching what was happening up above."

"Hm !" said the Chief. "It's chancey."

"No," said Harry.

"It's bloody well chancey," said the Chief. "I tell you."

"Ah !" said Harry. "I say I can feel the whole thing," he roared.

"Quietly, boy," said the Chief. "I don't like the look of it, I say."

Harry saw vanishing his hope of the girl in yellow, before whom he had settled he was to appear suddenly, with his shining sword, and his trench helmet, and fury and victory in his look.

"I don't like it. Why didn't you go and look at the other one?"

"Because," said Harry, "I wish to raid this one. That's why."

"You! You wish. Blast you. It's I do the wishing in this place. You wish? You!"

"Stay," said Father, with something of a leer. "The boy means that he thought it would be good to raid. He didn't mean he wished it. He knows he has no right to wish anything."

Harry laughed shortly, and glared at the Chief. But though he glared, he could find no real anger in his heart against this huge fellow, who had been his hero when he was a boy.

"He'll be commanding next," said the Chief, still angry. He growled to himself a little. "Tell me about Marlborough," he said at last. "I don't like the sound of this half-baked scheme."

And he sunk his nose in the cup, his eyes looking at them over the top, with sudden good humour. He thought he had been too harsh with the boys. After all, why quarrel?

"Do you mean," said Father, "that you've made up your mind about this raid? Are the boys to go out and spy the other place?"

"If we do," thought Harry, "we'll lie up ten miles away, and then come back and tell 'em a fine story, and then lead them to the tower."

"Or are you going to put it to the whole gang?" said Father, after a pause. "I think

the young men should have the right to choose. Otherwise, you'll have ceaseless trouble."

"We've had enough bloody trouble," said the Chief uneasily. "All the same, Father, you see what I mean. If that sentry they talk about on the top there, if he gives a good screech, eh? We'll have them hanging about us all the way to these very walls, eh? And supposing the next man along the downs looks back and sees his mate isn't there, and comes back to look over the top, eh?"

"Ah," said Harry, "when we've settled him, one of us'll take up his position, squatting on the turf, so they'll never suspect anything."

"They'll hear the women scream," said the Chief.

"No," said Harry. "Look; this one at the top of the path, he's nearly a mile from the tower. The next one, he's nearly half a mile on, isn't he, Crab?"

"Quite," said Crab.

"If they hear a faint noise," went on Harry, "it'll be nothing they can be sure of. They'll look back to the first post, and that's our man, and he sits as if all's well. See?"

"It's not the sort of thing I should have engineered," said the Chief, "but I'll think it over. I like everything to be above-board. Now I must go and look at the new defences. If the gang go your way, my opinion is, we'll need 'em." He lumbered out.

"Let's go right up to the top of the down," said Crab, "and look over, and give ourselves the pleasure of discussing this matter freely."

"Very well," said Father. "I'll bring my midday piece to eat beside you."

Crab was thinking that it would be good for Harry, baulked thus, and told he must not wish, to look a little at the kingdoms of the earth, with Father and himself at his ear. When they were seated on the fine grass, thin as needles, and with a puff of scent to it, he began conversation.

"What a strange thing a chief is!" said he. "I think I shall devote my life to a study of that creature. I will note down his nature. I will make a book. However, no one shall read it, Father, except you and I. For if the crowd read it, we should never have a chief at all, since the greatest part of it will be a description of what a chief is not. Not more than other men, for example, in judgment, conscience, subtlety or nobility. Nobility! I have seen a sucking chief swallow down words which would make my old dog bite. Yet he'll seem noble, later on. But, my book, chiefs shan't read it, for at the end there'll be a line or two saying what a chief is. The name of the unknown thing that, working blind, yet makes greatness. If he knew what it was. . . . Let me tell you about Marlborough, Father."

Crab described the fort. Harry lifted his head and looked across to where in the west

there was a silver tapestry of round hill and dark beech clump traced faintly in the cool part of the sky. His heart seemed to burst out of his opening bosom and to fly, lovely and horrid as the eagle, to seize on the girl in yellow. Yet, though it seemed to fly, it remained hot and swollen and labouring in his breast. He longed to strike his fingers into his flesh and tear it open, to let that angry, aching heart out. Or failing that, someone else's flesh might be torn for the easement of his own. He thought of how his sword had thrust up into the woodman's bowels, and he wished such a fight could happen again, that in strokes like that he could find some relief. He bit his knuckles and stared out avidly to the distant silver land.

"The place is clearly going to thrive," Crab was saying, "and I don't think there is a great chance of our ever prevailing against it. But we cannot do better than spend our hours and our lives in the attempt. It's clear, though, that we must begin a concentrated programme at once, not in five years, nor even in two or three."

"You believe, then, with never a doubt, that what I have told you is right?" said Father, who seemed momentarily to have become very old.

"Good God, yes," said Crab. "It's self-evident, surely."

"I think so," said Father. "But when I

see you take it up so religiously, I think, after all, what an appalling responsibility it is. An idea which surely ninety-nine men out of a hundred would laugh at, and to see you pledging the gang to a hopeless fight for it. And if, as you say, we must begin work at once——”

“He said a good thing,” said Crab, jerking his head towards the now unconscious Harry. “He said he thought a reason was as nothing, compared with what acts might follow on it.”

“Did he, indeed?” said Father.

“Mere rhetoric when he said it,” said Crab. “But it moved even me. Now that’s queer, for I never feel that a reason can be small or an act great. I would destroy half the world,” said Crab, with a pale smile, “if I could find as much justification for it as prompted me to sit on this patch of grass and not on that.”

“Well, that moves me,” said Father. “When I hear you say that, I have no doubts, for it is your own genius speaking. But you make me tremble sometimes, my boy, when you take up my notions and speak so like a Mahomet. To pledge the gang——”

“Hold on, Father!” cried Crab. “I might pledge Ursus, my three-legged dog, to something of a programme, but till *he* moves” (indicating Harry again) “my notions, or yours,

need concern no one else. Besides, if you distrust your thoughts, consider this. What we believe in, a world founded on the books, is a pretty thought. Shall we take the dangerous path for the sake of a pretty thought? Yes, of course, I say, and so do you, but if you fear to make the choice necessity will thrust it on you. What else is there but to sink into utter barbarism? How deep that can be, he and I know better than you."

"We ought to consider the possibility of making peace with Marlborough."

"We shall, sooner or later, if they are of our sort. But suppose, as you say is almost sure, they are like all men but our enlightened selves, greedy snatchers at the next comfort, what then? Are we to share in the making of a shack prosperity, a hurried revival of that machine age you talk of, a hastening to the same degradation, but by a shorter path, with fewer groans and no flashes of beauty by the way. To be like the mob of your yesterday! Better die out rather, for that's to be damned on earth. To live in that tradesman's world—ugh!" Crab scratched under his moleskin, where a louse itched him. "That must be prevented. But if the long odds trouble you, decide otherwise, for it's for you, or the Chief, to decide at present. But when you are dead, and your white bones are in this chalk, staring up at the frozen stars, the world will still wheel,

and I'll be crawling about on it, and we will destroy Marlborough (yes, if I poison the Kennet for it) and Harry shall run the South and face Wales."

Harry had turned and heard the last of this.

"All that," said Crab, catching his eye and flinging out an arm at the dappled land below.

"Ha!" said Harry. "So we will, Crab. And all that you say is true, both of you. Damn it, you know I agree. Only I tell you this, if knowing it to be true were enough, some chief in the three thousand years gone by would have stood by it. But it wants more than that. You think, and to you the thing is done. But you can no more rule by thought alone, or by truth alone, than you can fill your belly so. For me, at any rate, there must be a nearer touch to action."

He sighed. It was as if a cloud had come, dark and clear, and the wind sighed.

"I see," he said, "if I am to take this, what it is I must feel pressing upon my brows, muttering at my back, eating into my bowels. Sometimes, already, I see a man scowl or sneer, and that man's face is branded on me, here." He pulled at his shirt as if to show his chest. "If I am to be Chief, my flesh and blood must be galled by every murmur against me. What thwarts me, dries up my blood till I have crushed it, will be my cancer and kill me unless I prevail

against it. What will enable me to bear this? Not an intellectual compensation at any rate; rather the physical joys which are the other hemisphere of this matter, and make a whole life of it."

"I admire in chiefs," murmured Crab, "since you are surveying your inheritance—I admire in chiefs their capacity for achieving the results of thought without the effort or even the capability of thinking. They desire some toy and reach for it with an arm strong with the strength of ten men, or a thousand. They contrive for it with the minds of half a dozen who have grown lean in study. Or rather, not with the minds, for it is in the nature of mind to perceive alternatives and divergences, and the essence of chieftainship not to, but with the claw or fang that each laborious mind has created."

"It seems to me that I consider alternatives more than you like," said Harry.

"Only when you are not a chief, my dear Harry. In your true self you will heed no fact that would deter you. No, you insist, and insisting, become a fact yourself, and weigh the balance down to your side, as never argument could."

"Ah," said Harry, and looked over to the silver hills.

"You are happy, you chiefs, and you seldom know it. We, on the other hand know very exactly what happiness is, and note, when the

bird sings or beauty smiles, that here is happiness, if only we were chiefs to enjoy it. I don't mean in command, you know. I mean just that sort of animal. The sort that knows power. There is no happiness but in power."

"Oh, come," said Harry, "how about . . . well . . . er——"

"How about what?" said Crab.

Father looked at Harry inquiringly.

"This is very odd," he said. "Do you know, Crab, he was going to say 'How about love?' What, Harry, is it the poetry books, or have you been planning out the raid with perhaps an excess of foresight? I implore you, my boy, guard yourself against any vulgar errors concerning love. Machiavelli, whom you shall read, if you please, more attentively than romances, says that a new Prince shall promote faction among his subjects to keep their minds from rebellion. I say, give them love. Love has drained away more ambition and dissolved more vows between man and man than has any faction that was ever devised. And, as no faction will do, it leaves your man-power unsapped. No one will fight harder for you than he who loves. If he is loved, he will fight like a lion to defend his mistress; if he is not, he will fight like a Turk to escape damnation. What's more——"

"Besides," interrupted Crab, who was one for keeping to the point, "those who love happily must be chiefs in that. Will you usurp

the world, you devil, and leave us no narrow cranny where we may reign in our own right ? ”

“ Well, write your book on chiefs,” said Harry, “ for I must read it. I feel ambition working in me. How long will it take you, ten years ? ”

“ Ten days are all I can spare for it,” said Crab. “ The years must go to my greater work, a book which, if rightly done, which is unlikely, and rightly read, which is impossible, might re-make the world. That is a book on——”

“ What ? ”

“ Viziers, ministers, secretaries.”

CHAPTER VIII

"Look," said Father, and pointed down to where the Chief passed now and then, walking along a strip of path at the bottom of the valley, first with George, then with Walter, then with Will.

"That's all right," said Crab. "He's only preaching to his friends."

"But we had better go down and do a little talking ourselves," said Father. "First, though, you are quite settled in your mind as to the raid, Harry?"

"I wish to make it," said Harry, "and I damned well will."

"No reasoning could be better," said Father cheerfully.

"He won't stand out against it," said Crab. "He only made a fuss because we startled him by coming back. And then, you see, we said what had to be done: his objection was a purely mechanical protest. The youngsters would never stand being refused. He'll agree quite certainly. Still, go down; we'll all go down, eh, Father? We might tell everybody that the Chief has disagreed, and will now agree."

They went down. Some children, whom old Aldebert let go from a lesson at that moment, burst out like birds from under the broad tree where they had been murmuring through the sleepy afternoon. They ran across the turf, naked and half-naked, their little chests, like thin boxes, stained a bloomy brown by the sun, their hair clipped raggedly, so that it hung like a dog's fringe or trailed out when they ran like a flame, and they came running up to hang by twos and threes on Harry's wrists so that he might swing them as he walked. Father looked at them and wondered if it was his fancy only that they seemed more animal, more roved away from time, more given over to cries instead of words, to the nameless truths of purely physical stimuli and satisfaction, than had even the first young they had reared, when they had lived more wildly and miserably than savages. Perhaps, he thought, it was because he was on the opposite path, and was departing from the smell of the grass and the groups in their shadows on the grass, the faces ragged yellow with sunlight, and the faces shadowed looking down into cool shadow; departing from talk even, into fine words, an algebra. Such moments had been common with him recently. As they tightened to crisis he saw the valley and his people as things of glass or air, insubstantial as a flame in bright sunlight. It seemed that in a minute all must be gone, devoured by the dark alien world. He saw,

when the Chief moved, or others of that coarse hungry brood that they had reared in the bad years, the fingers of the dark alien world. But for that menace, life here would have expanded a little, and would have had a little more loveliness and order to it, and, above all, it would have had a future in which to find its justification and to take its perfect shape. Now, that must be gambled for, and against odds that were almost hopeless. No wonder all they did and wrought in had the frail illogic of a dream.

Bird-cries sounded, some more children were scudding over the short grass, their shadows floating, their dusty whitey-brown feet thumping the little hot flowers. Harry, shaking them off, treading through a surf of their tossing hair, and bright glances and high tapering voices, made his way to where the young men were working on the new palisade, which was nearly completed. Some women, sitting in the shadow of the house wall, looked after him as he passed, and, when he had turned the corner, still looked, and said nothing.

Crab went to a group of young men who were working near the house. They asked him to tell them. What was it like? What had they seen? Had they fought? Had they found the places? Was it true they had found no women there? Was it true there were plenty of women and plunder but the men were too many for them?

Crab replied with a discretion as vast and as

tantalising as was the wide world beyond the down where the sentinel paced endlessly against the burning blue sky.

They had seen strange things, he said, very strange; he would talk about that later. It was amazing what fine lives were lived by some people outside. The world had altered, he said, and was still altering fast. Oh, yes, there had been a little killing: not of a sort that breathed them very hard, for the men outside were not so strong as they of the gang. Harry had killed four in two minutes or less. As far as the women were concerned, they had seen, it appeared, bebies of the most unimaginably delightful girls. There were certainly plenty of men, but one Widmer man could account for two or three of them. Even he . . . well, that was a detail. There were signs of all sorts of booty, too. It was not easy to explain how they thought the raid could be carried out, neither was it his place to do so, until the Chief had spoken. Yes, the Chief knew all about it; at least, he had been told all about it. Well, perhaps that was a different thing. Of course, he had not a very good sense of anything that wasn't under his eyes, had he? Perhaps of anything that was not on his plate. He didn't seem to grasp the possibilities of this affair very clearly. Still, he was a good fellow, though it was not to be expected that he'd be prepared to take risks on something which was almost entirely the youngsters' affair,

really. He had, in fact, taken a turn against the raid, just whimsically, that was all, and he had said it should not be. But Harry had seen to that. He had dared him to his face to say the youngsters should not have the women. By to-night, Crab thought, the Chief would have changed his mind. Nobody could withstand Harry when he was really roused.

Crab passed on, and the group of young men split up. One went up to relieve the sentinel above, and told him in taking over that the spies had found a marvellous place, and then the Chief had changed his mind about the raid (that was probably because of Rodney's Joan, said the sentry), but that Harry had defied him, and the Chief had changed his mind back again, rather than have an open breach. They agreed that if there had been a breach they'd have stood behind Harry.

Two of the young men took a truck along the valley to where a sandpit was, that they might bring back a load for those who were building the defences. When they got there, they sat down on their truck and told the diggers all that had happened. One of those who were digging, smacking at a wet patch in the sand, said he didn't believe that the Chief would give way to Harry.

"There you may be right," said Crab, who had drifted up, and was now seating himself on the upper rim of the pit, with his crooked leg

dangling from among the crooked roots of a tree that overhung the edge. They looked up at him.

"I only said I thought he would change his mind," said Crab. "He may not. Then you won't have the women. Then you'll go on cowering at the bottom of this hole and working for the Chief's benefit. He'd probably prefer that. It's more comfortable than leading the gang. Really leading it, making things as they might be, that would be different! Still, I think he'll change his mind, for I'll tell you what Harry said to him. . . ."

Harry meanwhile was looking at the new defences. He stood inside the palisade and looked out through a small round hole. Six feet in front was a deep ditch, spiked at the bottom and defended at the near top side by a short over-tilted fence of barbed wire. Beyond that, for this was on the open side of the house, was the valley with its great oaks, bronzy-green, stretching away along the bottom. The whole settlement was held in the lucid trance of afternoon, in gold, or in the lovely hateful spell of its deadly ennui, the ennui of a place where for years the spirit has fallen back from the skyline, where life has not even a pretence of purpose, and where that uncalled-for *why?* which exists like a crack or flaw in human life, existed without hope or illusion to nourish it. Because of this, its beauty was an ache in the heart.

But Harry, though he had felt this for ten years

past, and had only part slaked it by taking on the exalted and philosophical notions of Father and Crab, now felt it not at all, for this pure and abstract longing of his youth, this nostalgia for justification to make life a true design, was in one bite glutted with the prospect of holding in heavy hands the girl he had seen, and finding in the deep of her eye, the sweet of her tongue, and the salt of her womb, the ultimate glory and the ultimate truth, his truth, of which he knew her to be the effulgent casket. Sometimes he thought that if he could only lay the soft skin of his inner arm under her heart or against the moist coarse hair of her armpit, a circle would be completed, and the whole world ask and ache no more.

He had entered the palisade ring with his mind full of plans, but now, as he looked through the little archer's hole, his thought slipped, and the idea of putting his arm against this girl held him entirely.

He saw, without noticing, figures crawl distantly across the six-inch disk of green that was a mile of valley, tilted into the round hole. On the side of the slope, running along the turfy and interwoven downpaths, three children tangled together, dispread, bunched again, and again burst apart, for all the world like butterflies that tangle as they fly. Crab came back from the sandpit, recognisable by his gait. He caught up the men who were pushing the loaded truck, walked beside them a while, then took the place

of one who was pushing, leaving him free to go up and talk to a little group who were coming out of the wood with their hoes on their shoulders. These and the man who had joined them walked easily together for a minute, then, at something Crab's late companion had said, one of the company swung round and halted in front of him as if to lend point to an urgent question. The rest stood round in a ring.

A little girl came hurrying by. She was about fourteen, with a face like a little tartar's, straight smutty hair, heavy flat lips and grey eyes (if you take me) so completely free from blue that they looked as a river fish tastes. She hesitated, then came slowly towards the palisade. Not to be seen by this forward little girl, who might pester him with questions, Harry lowered his head, and at once the down sank like a green wave seen through a tilting port-hole, and a strip of sky was visible.

As soon as he saw the horizon and the sky he was aware again of what lay beyond the skyline, and as if he had not been thinking of his girl at all up till now, as if his heart, like a gazehound, had been waiting to see where she was before it sprang up, he seemed to see her, crystal and yellow as the day-star, burning above the rim of the down. The illusion was so strong that he straightened himself again, and again brought his face close to the hole, moving towards her. But as he did so the green billow humped

itself once more and swallowed up the sky, and there, a couple of yards away, was little Joan, who had turned towards the palisade in order to look unnoticed at something she drew out from her bosom. Harry's attention was caught by this, and focused sharply on it. It was a round bracelet with some pieces of coloured glass in it, a rough thing of great beauty, which the smith had made for the Chief, who had given it to his real wife. It was a thing well known in the gang, for in it were the only pieces of green glass that they had ever had.

He wondered, as he turned aside, what the devil she was doing with it. He climbed over some baulks of timber and entered the cool of the house.

Voices were raised on the stairs.

"Is that you, Chief? Oh, it's Harry. Have you seen the Chief?"

"I saw him an hour ago, when I was sitting up above."

"God, yes," said George, the first speaker. "We all saw him then. He went off, said he'd be back in five minutes. We haven't seen him since."

"Hullo, Harry!" said Rodney, who was with him, his broken face writhing into a smile.

"We've got a dozen men waiting for him to turn up and decide what he wants done," went on George.

"What's the problem?" said Harry.

"Don't worry yourself," said George inimically.

They looked one another in the eyes.

Heavy footsteps approached along the upper corridor, coming from the end where a little ladder led to one or two empty apple lofts poked up among the ruined thatch.

"Ah, Chief," said Rodney. "We were along there shouting for you a little while ago. Didn't you hear us?"

The Chief turned a shoulder on him.

"Well, do you want us to carry on as we were?" asked George, after a silence.

"I'll come along," said the Chief, and they moved off together, leaving Harry looking after them with half-shut eyes.

"When a man is in an empty loft, and doesn't answer when he's called——!" he thought. "So that's why that child had the jewellery. That's why he's no longer in favour of the raid. Damn him! To hang on such a hog's whims! I'll go up, though, and make sure there's nothing there."

He climbed up the ladder and found the loft empty against the apple harvest. He stayed up there for some time musing on the trouble in which this matter might involve the culprit, for there had been some dangerous ill-feeling on this sort of thing before. He was so extremely fortunate as to descend the ladder under the eyes of the Chief, who had returned and was

going to his room in the better part of the house.

"What the devil are you doing there?" said the Chief.

"I was quite alone there," said Harry imperturbably. "I have no jewels to give away, no private pleasures, Chief, so I am still eager for the raid."

He received a furious and a chiefly look, but encountering it with a steady eye, and with a forced good humour playing on his face, he saw that look lose its quality altogether, and hover between fear and a poor bravado, for all the world like that of a bagman who is detected with the chambermaid.

"I like them young," said the Chief. Anything to win a twinkle!

"You swine!" thought Harry. "You don't even try to throttle me for knowing." He said nothing.

"You don't talk about a little weakness you discover by accident," said the Chief.

"I shall be too busy to say a word on such a subject," said Harry.

"Too busy?"

(Ah! You blockhead!)

"I mean, making preparations for the raid."

"What's that, you rogue, you hold me to ransom? Ah, well, fair's fair. I'll let you have your fancy as long as you don't interfere with mine.

"Is it a bargain?" he added.

"Damn it ! It stinks like one," said Harry.

"But I would not have betrayed the cowardly fool anyway, since the child wears such a damned smug look," he thought. All the same, the very appearance of a bargain sickened him, but he swallowed his disgust, thinking of all that lay at stake. He turned away, leaving the Chief affronted but relieved.

That night it was announced that the raid would take place as soon as the moon and weather allowed it.

CHAPTER IX

It was seventeen days before there was moon enough for the night journey. During this time there was intense activity in the valley, and an even greater excitement. Except for sallies in such times of siege as had occurred in the early history of the settlement, this was the first aggressive move that the gang had ever made. None of the younger men could remember any fighting in which the issue had been at all doubtful. The most sanguinary encounter in their lives had been about ten years before, when a foraging party of a dozen or so, from the band that was then besieging Andover, had strayed into the valley and had been trapped and massacred. None of the boys had taken part in that fight, and since then there had been no fighting at all. For the last five years scarcely a single straggler had strayed into the valley; they had had no contact with people outside except for one or two communications with Newbury, and with the peaceful members of some other gang (from where they never asked) who came down to the Kennet to get feels at the same time as themselves.

Because there was much talk and telling of

tales in the life there, the young men were all agog to go out and see the world to which their grandfathers gave such origins of wonder, and to measure themselves against other men, as even their fathers had done. This eagerness was heightened by the easy monotony of the valley life, where they might not even till to the extent of their man-power, for fear of becoming conspicuous, and where there was no distinction to be achieved, for though there may be authority among so few, there is not that glamour of remote eminence that appeals most to the young. It happened, also, that on this last ground their fitness for fighting suffered a little. None of this great family could be renowned enough in his private life to gain the brazen and indisputable authority of parade grounds. The Chief's strength might have served instead of aloofness, but he was lazy, and besides, the young men had been set against the Chief and his coevals by the grandfathers who had taught them. The grandfathers themselves had authority of a sort, but they were old and weak, so it was the authority of the frocked priest; they were the Druids celebrant of the lost world, revered almost superstitiously, but not to be obeyed with unanimous mechanical haste. Harry was as strong as the Chief, but he was young, and needed something to set a gulf between himself and his companions. His was the authority of a popular sergeant. It was not enough.

Now, however, there was positively an excess of zeal. Every night, even when the July rain streamed on the hillside, or plumped upon the fat and listless leaves, they practised rushes, signals, quick bunching into rings, under Harry's command. He would have them, he said, move as the starlings do, who rise and wheel obedient to one instantaneous common thought, not in ragged following one of another, like the plovers or the crows.

In the rain, they cast off their skin shirts and manœuvred naked in the silver, creeping, hiding and charging about a replica of the shepherds' stronghold, which Harry had measured and staked in the wild part at the end of the valley. With their trench helmets and their home-made leaf-bladed swords they had all the look of wingless Hermes, except for those whose teeth were bad, or whose limbs were not entirely straight.

They had never been so happy in their lives. They were not afraid, but they felt fear enough of the unknown world and their dangerous task to lend the last keen edge of excitement to what they were doing. It lent more than that: it lent an increased emotionalism to every detail of their lives. They could guess what it would be like fifty miles away, as we can guess what Jaffa must be like, but they were not accustomed to meet with anything strange. With us a new thing is only another new thing; to them it was the first contact with the vast world that circled

the valley, where there might be any of the beauties or any of the terrors of which they had read or heard.

When the friends among them talked of what they might meet with or win, sitting perhaps at the top of the down and looking over the green cumulus of woody miles to where the silver chalk hills were, they would be oppressed deliciously by anticipation of all the voluptuousness of their starved dreams, and yet shudder on the brink of it. More: this bashfulness, having stilled their tongues and thoughts, negative in itself, made an expectant void in each heart, which was brimmed and overbrimmed by a new feeling. They saw their rough roof and their unthinking companionship with new eyes, as alive in the stream of seasons, of sun-scorch and frost, of idle phrases and red faces and firelight, and work and vices, and they found such dearness in it as swamped them with the illusion that death might chiefly be an orgasmic relief from the intolerable delight of living so beloved a life. They were ready to fight.

This project was so much what they needed that their development as a trained band was amazing. They were amazed at it themselves and this multiplied their keenness. The older men took notice, laughed, and then became uneasy. George said to the Chief a few days later:

"You'd better be respectful to that bloody

pup, now you've given him a bloody army to play with."

Next day the Chief announced that after all he would lead the expedition, and forthwith he took command of the drill. He told a dozen of the young men that they must stay behind and help guard the camp, and in his next breath announced that as many of the older group would be joining the expedition. Father had advised him to do this, for he saw that the young men's enthusiasm, if it remained solid and complete, might swing over to the Chief's leadership, whereas, this exchange made, it would be split, checked, and obviously for one reason only.

The young men found the best of their pleasure gone after the exchange, and they became still more conscious of their unity, and conscious too that the Chief found it a formidable one.

Crab had to go out during the last week and elaborate the survey of the route across the thick and swampy country. He demanded to take as his companions two of the more influential among the rank and file of the young men. They were away five days. When they returned these two young men bore themselves secretly, and looked broodingly on the Chief. It was nothing.

It was arranged that the expedition should start in the late evening, traverse their own downs by the last two hours of daylight, cross the

Kennet under darkness, and press on through the earliest day to a resting-place Crab had found about ten miles from the valley.

The rain caused them anxiety, mostly because if it continued it would mean moonless nights, and also because if the ground was sodden they ran an infinitely greater risk of being tracked. But on the day before they were due to start there was a great thunderstorm, and sheets of rain, white as milk, hid the uneasy beeches on the slopes, and the horizon showed clear as if the clouds had gathered up to burst above the valley, and they were riven at last with a flash and crash and reek of sulphur, and the stringy remnants of the clouds rose and vanished, and the sky was utterly calm, and the beeches that had rocked now dispread themselves in stillness; the larks steepled up, and the yellow flowers in the grass glittered in the sun. They said to one another, "It'll be fine all right; the chalk will be dry as a bone in two or three days."

They set out, and went down by the second mark and crossed the flat lands at first by the eel route, but soon they branched off to the left and forded higher up the Kennet by the last of daylight, and struck off in the darkness into a country utterly unknown to the younger men. Some of the older men had been there once or twice before, after duck in a winter of famine. Going was painfully slow, for the scouts halted every few minutes to confer as to which was

the next point to be made for. Where the land was dry it was thick with thorn bushes and clumps of briar, and where it was very wet they had to test every step for fear of dangerous bogs. The best stretch was a string of glades, two miles or so long, where the rushes were thick all the way, and the ground too sodden for anything else to grow, yet with a surface strong enough to bear them up.

The moon at zenith silvered all, paling the stars, and showering its arched rays like the wires of a bird-cage. The trees on either side were flat and black against the cobalt fringes of the sky. The white owl floated along the edges of the glades; the summering snipe rose with its nothingy shriek from the shaggy moon-soaked ground at their feet, and the bittern woke and boomed in the untrodden marsh ahead. Against the trees their faces looked white, hollow and hard as bone, under their shallow helmets; against the pale sky they were sharp and dark as bronze.

They went on, and wound their way through the thickening spinneys on some gently rising ground, where the dawn found them, and then, in its red, which stained every pool as if with blood, they crossed the worst bog of all, and came down to their resting-place, just as the day began to glare upon the fen, and the hornets fell into their trail of scent, and there was danger of men being abroad.

CHAPTER X

Two nights later they set out from their last camping-place, which was in the woods four miles below Swindon, and at about the middle hour they were lying in that thick fringe where Harry and Crab had lain. They looked down and saw the tower standing white as a cliff in the shovel shape of its moon-shadow. Behind it, black and white as a photograph or as the ridged sand, were the great walls of the pen, and behind the pen was the screen of trees, which was to be their lurking-place.

A delightful excitement filled every breast. The thrill would have been equally strong anyway, but the keen pleasure that was interwoven with it would not have been present had they first seen the place from the point whence they were to launch their attack, i.e. from the level ground. There is a lovely and aquiline sense of power in looking down from a steep upon the foe.

None felt this as Harry did. To him was added the sense of the bright girl lying there, breathing, glimmering in the velvet darkness of some pocket in the lumpish stone. He looked

down, and felt he could tear the stone off her. And he would tear off, too, the softer, closer, less clean wrapping of her tribesfolk, and of whoever slept beside her. He assumed that someone held her, but he did not dwell on the thought. One is not jealous, at first, of the conditions in which one finds the desired woman, but all the same he did not dwell on the thought. In the dark of his mind it smothered any tendency he might have had, to regret the rending he was to make in the life of these shepherd people with their woollen gowns and their baaing sheep.

To the other men these people did not exist. They had not seen them, and they held them merely as water to be drunk up.

It was now one o'clock, an hour as much colder and thinner than midnight as January is than December. The moon, leaning back a little, in a wasted petal of its own light, cast leaner shadows, and was about to slope down behind the shoulder of the hill. With infinite caution Harry went down the slope to learn the ground in the last of the light.

It became darker, and Crab, with a last word to the Chief, touched James and Rodney on the shoulder and led them away to where the little dried-up pond was. As they slipped out from among their companions, one or two reached out hands to them, and whispers as faint to the sense as was the whiteness of their faces were exchanged. A little rustle was heard after they had dis-

appeared, then the silence was complete again. This was like a farewell, and gave the younger men to think. Their leaders' plan included no hard fighting; their arms were chiefly carried against mischance in the coup, or against some unlooked-for encounter by the way. All the same, because it was their lives' need, they felt that a struggle was imminent, and now, as their close comrades went off, who were so near brothers to them, the whole line sighed a little, not dauntedly, but as one does when recalled from a dream.

The next moment the Chief's word was hissed from man to man, and one by one they slid out from the bramble fringe, along to the woods' end, along under the skyline to the shoulder of the down, and then on their bellies down its warren sides to skirt the pen, which was now lost in darkness, and thus foot by foot to their ambush in the screen of trees.

Once there, they lay flat on the dew-sodden grass, lest, if they stood up, a puff of wind might be the more likely to carry their scent to the watch-dogs that lay among the sheep. Their cold stomachs were shrunken up by the cold of the false dawn, and by the chill within which creeps close to the heart at that hour. The sky turned from blue-black to grey-black, and then time seemed to stand still. Some among them stared upwards and lost their thoughts among the wan constellations: the exhausted stars,

dilated like the eyes of invalids, drew out their souls as if by hypnotism. Others, finding no eyehold in the empty dark about them, suffering too from the dual vertigo of excitement and their contracted bowels, glanced up and saw the dim sky swim askew, and felt that the earth had slipped from its turn and was plunging them to destruction. Others fixed all their minds on some small one among the cramps that wormed among their muscles, or on some single key-image of sensual fulfilment, which they found to have grown as cold and hard and flavourless as the stones that starving men hold in their mouths.

For Harry the darkness constantly unfolded like smoke, and he seemed to see, at the end of twisted avenues of black, the white face terribly asleep of the girl for whom he had all these lying here.

The Chief lay, silent, but with his lips shaping every curse he could think of. He was in agony, for his large belly, which he had been pacifying with handfuls of food during most of the night, was now riven by a keen colicky pain which brought out sweat all over him at every stab. He wished Harry were dead, and that sneaking, sneering crony of his had his guts ripped open, right open, and the whole bloody fool expedition could be sent home smarting.

Suddenly there was white in the air. A little healing freshness lay like a hand on every man's

hot eyelids. A coughing rose in the pen, and almost at once its near wall became just visible. A ripple of revived feeling ran along the line.

At this moment the Chief's pain seemed to increase, and his temper gave away. Pain and constraint were impertinences novel and altogether unbearable to him; he became wild with fury. With a scowl of hatred at the drawn faces beside him, he drew up his knees, raised himself and lumbered to his feet, where he began to bend forward, up and down, in an attempt to find relief.

Harry, four or five feet away, raised head and hand, and, with all the contempt and arrogance that his features could express, he motioned the Chief to lie down. The huge man, doubly desperate now that he had given way to his pain and rage, glared back at Harry and made a choking sound in his throat—a disgusted “Aah!”

Whether this sound was audible so far, or whether it was the scent of his clammy body carried on the dawn wind, in a few seconds, while still Harry glared and knew not what to do, a dog began yelling in the pen, and at once the whole lot gave tongue.

Every face turned to the Chief in consternation. He himself stood amazed, coming to his senses. He bent his knees.

Harry leapt up, put his huge hand on the back of the Chief's neck, and flung him on his face. He slid beside him, on the left, and putting

his elbow between the mighty shoulder-blades, he stiffened his forefinger, cold as steel, and touched the Chief's ear with the nail of it. This was a consummate thought; it debased the Chief to the uttermost, and yet had none of the implications that a drawn knife might have done. The Chief, crushed by his own reaction, and fearing to have his throat cut, lay quite still.

Harry glanced behind him with one arch sneer, and then lifted his face, looked forward, looked and listened, and obviously forgot the Chief in his eagerness to sense what was happening in the fort.

A minute passed and the dogs were still yelling.

Suddenly a distant voice cursed them once or twice. They quietened. The watchers thought they heard a second voice. There was perhaps an argument going on. They lay utterly still. Then they heard a clanging of metal, as if someone had dropped a crowbar, then voices again, and then all was silent.

They lay hoping that the dogs were in the habit of giving false alarms.

The Chief at last moved a hand from under his shoulder and waved Harry away with an exhausted petulant gesture. Harry at once shrank back a few inches, and the Chief, averting his face from the young men, accorded to some of those on the other side a sort of grave and

ponderous working of the face which, meaningless in itself, might be taken to signify that there was some deep and extraordinary justification for his conduct, which would be forthcoming later. They looked back at him blankly, as if unwilling to accept even this mute and truncated communication, lest it might lead to some further madness on his part. He faced forward again and began to consider exactly in what phrases and in what tone he should give his explanation. At any rate, the griping in his bowels had sunk once more to the proportions of a mere pain; it was no longer a revolt of the whole universe against him. He didn't worry.

Now the light was gaining, the time passed more quickly. They could see the receding walls of the pen, and then the tower itself. Harry stretched out his hand and they all sank back a few inches, so that a little bank concealed them wholly. From there they could look up and see where the path would show, and the point on the skyline where the pond ambush was. At present all the upper slopes were concealed in mist, which crawled up slowly, and might, they suddenly feared, hang about when the action began and prevent them seeing what happened above.

An hour passed, and voices began to sound in the tower. Harry strained every nerve to hear and to judge if all was going as it did when he watched before. Though they were within a

quarter the distance, he could not hear as well as when he lay above and the sounds floated out of the hollow tower. He found he could not remember as well as he should ; he could not be sure whether it was his impatience, or whether it was really so, that there was more talk and clattering inside than there had been before.

He raised his head very slowly into a thick fan of leafy twigs, which left an inch only for his eye to peep through. He could see two or three men on the top of the tower scanning the slopes very carefully. He guessed, and rightly, that they did not consider the tiny shelter, in which the gang were waiting, to be sufficient concealment to hide a force strong enough to attack them. This indeed was so, for five times their number would have been inadequate for any direct attack on the tower.

The men ceased looking about, and went down. Soon the iron gate screeched on its hinges, and the barking and baaing began in full force. Harry sank down again. He heard next the clanking and groaning of the raised gate. The drive out had begun.

Still the mist hung about the upper slopes.

Harry raised his head again. As he looked through his spy-hole every nerve in his body tightened. On the very edge of the parapet of the tower, standing like a statue, shining, her yellow garment lapped to her, and fluttering behind in the gay wind, stood the girl he had

seen. There was no shadow of doubt in his mind as to her identity. He was her imprint, and this figure, standing like a skyey being descended, fitted with metal exactness every deep mark she had made in him before. She would have done the same were the distance thrice as great. He knew her. His desire to confront her, to see her see him, to extract any word by any means, and thus set a first foot on the Canaan of her life, was so keen that he had to close his eyes for fear of starting up to rush to her. As soon as his lids had interposed their half effectual dark between them, she called out in a voice like a heavy bell, which, in its two or three notes, was to him a music perfectly expressive of all he had ever thought life should be. To keep sane, he told himself he was mad, and, desperately bold, opened his eyes and looked full at her.

Behind her the path ran up, and as if her hard ringing call had done it, though actually it was the strengthening sun, or perhaps the thousand warm bodies, the million warm breaths, of the mounting sheep, the mist there rose and split a little, and showed the top of the down, and where the ambush must be.

The first sheep were over the top; the men and dogs were walking beside the endless column which branched out at the very top and was rooted about the tower at the bottom, like an Ygdrasil, and the girl began to walk round the parapet of the tower, her plaited hair shining

like golden wire in the sun, and when she was half-way round, she cried out again and a man on the slope turned about and waved his staff. Harry trembled.

He wondered how soon Crab would get to work, after the last sheep had gone over. At last the last was gone. The sky stood empty above the bare green down. The girl had gone from the parapet. The sun climbed up and up. Another hour passed under the empty sky.

Suddenly a dot appeared on the skyline. It was the sentry's head. He was crossing the path to see if it was a hurt sheep that was baaing so faintly in the empty water-hole. His whole body came into view and crossed to their side of the skyline. Crab had evidently begun to attract him at a moment when the sentinel in the tower was nearest the path side of his circular saunter. The man above approached the pond just as the sentry came to their side of the tower, whence, as he naturally glanced outward all the time, he looked in the direction of the main body of raiders.

The man above stopped, as if suddenly suspicious. Three figures, two of them sharply white, rose up like clockwork from the edge of the pond. The man toppled over, and after a space in which one might have counted six, a tiny faint half-shriek reached the ears of the watchers. The sentry in the tower spun round and stared above, but in the time the sound

had taken to travel, the two white figures had sunk back out of sight, and the other, about whom there was lapped something indistinguishable from the loose cloaks the shepherds wore, was walking, staff in hand, away from the pond. The fallen man was not visible from below.

Harry guessed, with a rapture of appreciation, that Crab had joined their three shirts together, so one of them might walk out garbed, as far as silhouette went, like the shepherd sentinel. This figure, sauntering in obvious ease, was careful to give no glance below, where the sentinel was waving an inquiring arm. The whole effect was reassuring, and after a little while the man below turned away again.

The man above prodded with his staff at something in the pond, not violently enough to be killing a snake—perhaps it was a mole, and then he bent over as if to examine whatever it was, dropped his cloak, picked it up again after a moment, and sauntered on, crossing the skyline once more.

A little while later he reappeared, still walking with ostentatious ease, but this time his comfortable gait was not to reassure the sentry below, but the raiders in their lurking-place, to let them know all was well over the far side. As the sentry came round to his side, he began to jump about in the most extraordinary fashion and hit the ground with his staff, as if he had stepped upon a whole nest of adders. The sentry

naturally halted and looked up in curiosity and amazement.

"Now," said Harry.

"Now," said the Chief a half-second later.

They slid over the little bank, out from the screening hazels, and, bent double, ran across and gained the shelter of the hinder wall of the pen. Good! They rested a moment, flattened against the wall, and then began to creep round till they reached that point where they could no longer conceal themselves but must rush for the open gate. There they bunched up, ready for the rush.

Harry peeped out. The sentinel was not on their side; maybe he was still looking at the antics of the impostor above. Anyway, it scarcely mattered.

The bowmen had their arrows ready, the swordsmen quietly drew out their blades.

"Now."

They were running forward over the littered turf. Shrieks and screams rose inside. They were seen. As they came round the corner of the pen, and dashed across the gritty terrain outside the gate, two or three men in the gateway flung themselves down behind the great sheets of iron. They had about forty yards to go to the gate.

They had not gone more than ten when there was a tremendous report, a flood of dust and small stones rose up in the air in front of the

gateway, a pale flash shot up under and through it. Two or three largish stones sailed late through the air, there was a wave of sickening gas, and silence. Then stones fell plump, plump plump. That second was over.

It was a pathetic, futile mine: a chamber of coal gas fired; a poor weak devil unrobed; but the gang halted, set aback, and for two reasons. The young men had never seen explosives; the older men, when they were children, had.

There was a pillar of dust drifting off in front of the great gates. Suddenly these began to close; the men behind them had risen and were shoving. One of them clanged to.

Harry woke up. Already he was half shut out from the girl he must have. This and the danger brought out all his ferocity; he ran forward with an animal yell. The second gate was held up by a wedge-shaped stone that had been cast in by the explosion. A man sprang out of the opening to remove the stone, but it was stuck under the gate.

Harry ran three more paces, lowered his point and jumped sixteen feet. The last six inches took his sword into the man's ear, and through. He pulled it out, as if tearing it out of some excalibine rock-grip, swung round and turned to the gate. A man appeared on the parapet and shot an arrow into the main bunch of the raiders. Walter made a sound like a bark and fell. Then the archer, with two arrows through his stomach,

bent slowly forward and pitched head first to the ground at the foot of the wall. In the same moment, the gang, as if they were runners suddenly let start in a race, moved as one man and dashed across to join Harry. By this time he was through the gate, had taken a blow on his trench helmet, cut down the man who gave it him, and engaged with another. Three or four more ran up. At that moment his own party burst in. Harry flickered his eye to see who was beside him, deflected his adversary's point on to that man's guard, shot past his adversary, dodged another, and was away across the courtyard, leaving the fight to continue for a minute or two in his wake.

He stopped in the middle and ranged his eyes terribly around him. Inside the high round wall the original stone huts were still separate. He began to run to look in through the window holes. Some cries rose from within the huts as his armed and ferocious head appeared at the windows. He entered none, for though they were obscure within, and those who were there were huddled together, crouching down, behind tables, in corners, he had a superstition that the girl he wanted would not hide and could not be hid from him.

Time had almost come to a standstill. He was running round on the sunny side of the circular yard, which was like a little arena, and at the entrance there was still the knot of

struggling figures, the trench helmets bunched close in the open slit of doorway, and the men in wool thrusting at them to keep them back. No one seemed to pay any attention to him. The scream that had risen from the hut on which he had just turned his shoulder had now lost its piercing quality, and though it still sounded it was only its own deflation, spreading out over the dust and the little stones. He saw a little disc of bone, a button, lying in the dreary dust. The figures in the gateway were silent, intent, infinitely slower than his thought. Three or four youngsters were at the head of the invaders; they had outdistanced the older men in the rush for the gate. They fought with hard bright eyes; their blades moved slowly, slowly, like an exercise, guarding and thrusting. The shepherds, with their backs to Harry, fought with the same pedantic seriousness. The button was still there. She was not there.

A hoarse and impatient growl, the noise of angry people who shove, unjustly delayed ("Come on"), rose from the old men at the back of the wedged figures in the gate. It swept away Harry's moment of arrest. He was turning to run across the wide yard. He was running. The others had taken the gate and were scattering across the courtyard.

The girl came out on the parapet on the farther side, evidently from some inside trap or stair. He flew across the yard, leapt at a closed

door, seemed to float through it, found himself in a hut with a ceiling and a stairway. There was an old woman there. He left her for the others to deal with and pushed up the stairs and entered a chamber with an open trap-door in the roof. He pulled himself through into hot stone and blue sky. The wide stretch of stone flags seemed empty. Then he saw the door of a little kennel-shaped structure swing out, and the shining head of his quarry bent on the other side. A white streak lurched past her, a pigeon; five of them shot out. The sixth she was holding; its snowy wings beat in her brown face. As Harry reached her, she held it still, a scarlet thread dangling an inch or two from one leg, and threw it up behind her. It staggered, opened its wings, and shot across the sky to join its circling fellows.

Then, as if she had only now become afraid, the girl stared about her, and back at Harry; bent her knee as if to run and could not; put her hands up to her face and opened her mouth to scream, but stopped herself from screaming, and she looked at Harry with an agonised attention.

He put his hand on her shoulder. She gave a single appalling start, and began to tremble visibly.

"Don't be afraid," he said, his rough and heavy voice husky. "Nothing shall hurt you. I know you. You are mine now."

He dropped his sword, put out his other hand and touched her on the brow, ran his hand over cheek, jaw, neck, down her side as far as her knee. He took up his sword again, and pulled at her arm. "Come along," he said. In bewilderment, she went a few paces with him. But that brought them to the inner side of the parapet, whence they could look down into the court, and from that a horrid shouting and screaming now arose: the invaders were pulling people out of the huts, and killing some, and shackling others, the younger women.

When she heard the screams and saw what was happening, the girl screamed herself, and tore her arm away from Harry and would have run. He pulled her back and half carried, half dragged her towards the trap-door. Before descending, he looked above to see how things went there. Even as he looked, he saw the false sentinel come running across the skyline, and the other two jump up out of their hollow, and come leaping down the path.

He guessed at once the explosion must have been heard a mile away, and was bringing the whole company down on them. He changed his mind about going down. Still holding his captive, he went to the inner edge and roared above the shrieking that still prevailed below. His friends looked up and saw him standing there. He pointed uphill with his sword to let them know there was need for haste. Then he began

to shout orders, though only to the young men.

Two he sent to guard the gate lest any concealed witness should break out. The others he ordered to this or that hut, till in the space of two minutes every one had been hurriedly investigated, and those survivors who would or could move quickly and unresistingly had been herded into a great stone barn or store-house whose door had an outside bar.

"Fire everything you can on the other side," cried Harry, seeing this would delay the returned shepherds from their pursuit.

He went down, still carrying his girl across his shoulder. She had ceased to struggle when first she felt the strength of his hand.

As he came out of the doorway below, the Chief emerged from one near by, carrying a young girl scarcely in her teens. Her little face was idiotic with fear. "Here's mine," said the Chief, laughing like a schoolboy and sweating like a pig.

"And here's mine," said Harry.

They hurried into the middle of the yard together, where most of the men were gathered by this time, busy shackling their captives, tying them by the wrists to a long rope of plaited leather. Others, having found the wood store, were hurrying to and fro like ants, carrying faggots to pitch upon the scattered embers from the hearths. The Chief threw down his burden. She was pulled to her feet and tied to the rope.

"Now yours, Harry," said one of the men.

"I'll see to her. Let's get going. Shall we call them together, Chief?"

The Chief began to roar like a bull; the last men emerged from the huts. Some of them bore bundles of woollen garments, precious plunder. Half a dozen went to take up the end of the rope, others set themselves on either side of each captive, and the remainder bunched up behind. They had only got six women after all; these were all the reasonably good-looking ones of the right age. They had hoped for more.

Now, however, their problem was to get away. The men forward pulled on the line, the women staggered forward; one, who flung herself down, was picked up by the man beside her and her arms bent back to prevent her flinging herself down again. The whole phalanx moved as one, and quickly. The gate was pulled wide open and they trotted through it. Crab and the others from above were with them in a moment. Crab ran up to Harry.

"Hurry," said he. "Their next man began flapping his arms at James, and James flapped back, but apparently he wasn't taken in. He waved to two or three others. They're converging on where we were, there'll be half a dozen there soon; it'll take a half-hour before the whole gang of them can get together, but if once we're seen, they'll dog us."

Harry lumbered on under his load without

answering. In a minute he had made up his mind.

"This way," he yelled, "like hell." The phalanx swung to the left and made for the shoulder of the down, hoping to get out of sight before the shepherds arrived on the skyline.

Harry was thinking furiously as he ran. The wood would offer them continued concealment for a mile or two, and give them a chance to slip over to the spinneys around Monks Lye. From there, they might strike back into the downs at any point, in the hope of being lost in their openness until they gained the long arms of woodland that stretched out like a maternal sanctuary from the tangled slopes above the swamps. He was bothered, though, about the staring track which their passage must leave in the wood, and he feared what hornets that carrier pigeon might bring about their ears.

He ran up the little slope, ahead of the phalanx, now carrying his girl over his shoulder. He had to bend under her in order to take the slope, and she took the chance to twist a little and stiffen her body, so she rode with her now scarlet face lifted, and could look about her. In order to keep this position she had to fling a hand across to Harry's other shoulder, where it clung. Harry shifted his hold a little, sliding her down that she might ride more easily. He could not see her face.

The other women stumbled miserably forward,

jerked forwards on the rope, jerked backwards by one or another of their number, who collapsed, or could not go. The men had no mercy on them; the urgency, the taste they had had of blood, and, in the case of the younger men, their long half-starvation in sex, all combined to inflame them, and they wrenched and cuffed at the poor dazed captives and experienced an ugly shiver of delight. The women were not heroic; they understood that they would get no quarter if they made any concerted resistance, or screamed, so they were silent except for gasps or sobs, and each of them tottered forward quickly most of the time. It seemed almost as if they took it by turns to fling themselves down in a formal and hopeless attempt to delay.

Harry's girl looked back at her wretched sisters and over their heads to the distant skyline. She thought that if the men appeared, her brother would be among them, and she would risk attracting their attention if necessary by a scream. She did not believe she would be killed for it.

It happened, though, that the opportunity did not arrive. Probably the men above, seeing a stranger where their sentry had stood, thought there might be a greater number just over the crest, and waited till others of their own scattered group had joined them. The raiders were out of sight by this time.

They entered the wood and the going became more difficult. The string of women, even had they gone willingly, would have found it hard to tear their way through the undergrowth. The men ahead found one or two long glades in which only the tall bracken grew, and here they made better progress, but they left behind them a broad and trampled swathe, such as could not cost their pursuers a minute to find, so before they had gone half a mile, Harry cried a halt, and asked the Chief if Crab had not better go to the edge of the wood, and see if it was possible to take at once to the downs. He was sent, and returning, said he had found a long valley running out away from him, and beyond that the ridges ran crossways, which was favourable. As the wood was narrow, six men were sent to smash a false trail through to the northern side of it, and then they were to worm back and follow the others southward across the downs. Scouts were sent before the main body to creep to the skylines, and wave them on or back. As it happened, the shepherds, delayed first by the fire, moved slowly, for they heard the raiders were numerous, and they were anxious rather to follow them than to come to grips before their strength was augmented by help from Swindon. Nevertheless, they were ambivalent and badly led, and, longing to revenge themselves, they eventually advanced *en masse*, as if to persuade themselves they would attack, instead of spreading

at once to points whence they could view the whole country; they entered the wood on their side of the ridge long after the raiders had left it. Before evening the gang had slipped away between the downs, and on the next night they were lying hid in a dell in the great belt of woodland that lay between the chalk country and the wide marshes.

They were exhausted, having come thus far without rest, save when they halted to wait for their scouts to wave them on. They ate, and offered food to the women. Sentries were posted and the rest of the gang took their ease.

Half-way through the night the first weariness was past, and they began to stir and talk again. The Chief, particularly, was in high spirits, in reaction from the mood which had followed on his disgrace. He was impatient to let the others feel his personality; he knew them, and felt it was time to re-establish himself in the rough and jolly way to which they always responded.

"Come," said he, "they'd not be working their way through this tangle in the dark. We're in a good deep dell, too; let's make a covered fire and have something hot to drink."

"How do we know how close they may be?" said Harry. "They've probably sent scouts out in every direction, to find where we lie up."

"Hold your tongue," said the Chief. "Do you think we're in front of the tower now, where the lives of the whole party depend on my letting

your insolence pass? I'm not twisted up with cramp, either, as I was then."

"You seem to have about the same amount of caution," said Harry.

At this the Chief seemed to lose his temper; he began to abuse Harry so roundly, and being answered with spirit, he lashed himself into a genuine fury, cried mutiny, and called on George and Will. But the moment his fury became real, Crab, who was sitting by his friend, realised that at first it had been assumed, or at least exaggerated, and he saw the Chief had some intention deeper than a temporary fit of bad temper. Accordingly he cried, "Shut up, Harry. Let it pass," and as he did so, gripped Harry's arm unseen with such violence as to convince him that he had good reason for his words. Harry mastered his resentment, saying, "Do as you please, then," and turned a deaf ear to all further provocation. After a good deal of groping about in the dark, enough sods were cut to hood in a little fire, and enough dead sticks scrabbled up to make it. The tinder was set ablaze, the sticks crackled, a brace of pots were filled with jelly and broken meat biscuits, and the smell of the lumpy soup began to fill the dell. A little red light leaked out between the sods and fell on the faces nearest the fire.

The Chief ceased fuming, sniffed the good smell, and became jovial again. Crab observed,

and with as much dismay as if he had never noticed it before, how extraordinarily potent the heavy fellow's charm could be, in its effects on everyone there. When he was in a good mood, they all reacted with the sort of ecstasy that some women show, at the rare pleasantness of a surly husband. "It was that made him Chief, and has kept him Chief so long," thought Crab, "and it looks like keeping him in our way for ever." "The devil," he thought. "If he can manage them like this, he can do as he pleases with Harry, sooner or later. And he'll not rest till he revenges himself for his shaming."

He drank up his cup of soup and groped his way off to take the sentry's place outside the dell, releasing the man who stood there, so that he could get a cupful himself before resting. It now was about two in the morning. From his post Crab could see down into the dell; he could even distinguish the Chief's face on the opposite side of the fire, lit up by the dim glow. He could hear the murmur of the subdued voices too. He leant against a tree, swamped by a reaction quite the antithesis of the Chief's. He was eaten up by neuralgia after the long tension of hiding perilously in the pond; every nerve in his body crawled. The whole future seemed a cowering under menace; he felt that the Chief was too strong for them.

Suddenly a bitter scream woke him from his reverie, twisting his nerves like an electric shock.

He gripped his sword convulsively, his fingers and forearm still straining in the grip long after he had realised what it was. He heard voices raised, apparently threatening someone to silence; other voices continued expostulating, and to these he heard the Chief mumble a reply.

"He's been tampering with that wretched little girl," thought Crab. "Ah!"

He saw the Chief's huge face loom into the fire's glow again. It was too dimly lit for any expression to be discernible, but Crab's fancy lent it expression enough. He stared at it, hypnotised, unconscious of all else. After an indefinite time, he was aware of that tugging in the mind that an insistent awakening touch makes in one who is in the deepest sleep. He realised, almost abstractedly at first, that there was a faint sliding sound somewhere in the dark. Someone was crawling near over the smooth wet leaves.

Crab opened his mouth to yell the alarm, but stopped himself on the brink of giving tongue. It was essential the stranger should not get away. Crab waited till he should work a little nearer. The tracker moved with infinite caution, slowly. He seemed to be attempting to get a view of the folk in the dell, to make sure they were the raiders. Belly to ground, as he evidently was, he could not see over the lip, but only the very faint glimmer, green pale on the overhanging leaves. His path, judging by the

little rustling sound, would strike in just in front of Crab, between him and the declivity. Crab waited until, ten feet before him, he saw a silhouette appear against the glow. This was the low humped line of the man's shoulders. Crab still waited, breathing little breaths with the top inch of his lungs.

He saw the man was armed. Something, which he took at first to be a spear, stuck up a little into the light. Then he saw dimly, and heard faintly but distinctly, the man pull an arrow over his shoulder from his back. It was a bow he had. Was he going to shoot if anyone saw him, or was he going to send a revenging shot anyway before plunging back into the darkness? "No," thought Crab. "He'll only shoot if he's seen. Otherwise he'd hope to dog us farther in the morning. And yet he might be someone in a fury of bereavement . . . I wish he'd shoot and kill the Chief."

The phrase echoed on in Crab's mind. Other thoughts must have run their course under the echo. He saw the man lift himself a little to look over, he bounded behind him, and, before the man could change his helpless half-lifted position, he had cut him between head and shoulder, hard enough to send him flat again, kicking in the last spasm. Sure of his blow, Crab ignored the floundering body, bent down and snatched the bow and arrow. As he gripped it the Chief's face drew his eye like a magnet.

He drew, shifted his aim rather lower lest he should hit anyone behind the Chief, smiled, and, all in a couple of seconds, let fly and dropped the bow. The man died at that moment. Crab kicked, shouted, struck the corpse two more blows, making superficial wounds, and listened to the noise that rose in the dell. Then he ran down.

"I've killed him," he said. "Who did he hit?"

"He's hit the Chief," said someone. "In the guts, I think."

"Good God!" said Crab. Had he aimed too low?

"I heard him before," he said. "I waited to trap him, sprang on him, and even as I hit him he shot. He didn't try to defend himself. Is the Chief hurt dangerously?"

"Stuck him in the groin," said Will, turning away from where the Chief lay groaning in the middle of a close circle. Crab described again the conduct of the madman he had cut down. "I'd have got him before," he said, "but who'd have thought he'd have shot after I cut him."

"Yes, we heard you cut once before the shot came," said someone.

"He didn't turn on me at all," said Crab.

"Some devil who'd lost his dearest, I suppose," said Will, "out for revenge."

"Will the Chief be all right?"

"Oh! it's nasty, but nothing dangerous.

Was there any sound of another clearing off?"

"No, nothing."

"Ah, well. We'd better get the wool off this one, if you haven't cut it to pieces."

The Chief's wound was dressed. Crab told him in detail what had happened, and was heartily cursed for a cripple for not killing at the first blow. All this took time, and the dawn came, and they were eager to go, but the Chief's wound would not stop bleeding, and a litter had to be made for him, and the morning was dangerously advanced before at last they set forth.

CHAPTER XI

THEY continued their way, and, coming out of the wood, they saw the green and black of the marshland, with fluttering rush and silver leaf like light on it, and beyond that, like the ramparts of a heaven, the humped and khaki downs with the trees they knew burning on their crests.

Once more through the dry and dusty knots of rushes with the dried scum between them, and the heath butterflies staggering and the small coppers flittering over in the increasing heat haze; then through the lower levels where the water of the last week's rains had collected in every scoop, in little grassy shallows where it lay colourless and chill-less, like nothing, where the water snail crawled along the grass stem and the great dragon-fly hovered, and then on over the large and quaking bog, which oozed and stunk and sucked its soft mouth at their feet, where the flies rose up in a cloud and blackened the helpless heads of the captives. This was only a mile or two across, but in traversing it they went five; they had to double back so often when they had missed the path and followed some snaky promontory which at last sunk its head into the hateful ooze.

They had left watchers in the woods, and they left others lying in the tall reeds, till a chain of them was strung out behind, who could signal to one another that there was no sign of pursuit. Thus reassured, they wound their way among the self-sown hawthorn scrub at the foot of their own down, till they came to one of the great groves of beeches that ribbed the ridge from top to bottom, and under its shelter they went up and over, and breathed in security, and took their rest.

Before them spread the wide saucers of dry grass, where the harebells bloomed and the shadows of clouds swept like the movement of a breathing breast. The air was sweet. Their helmets were slung at their sides; their hair was dry of sweat, sweet to the sun, and on the tawny grass their shadows were blue.

"Let the women loose," said Harry. "They can't possibly escape here."

When they were loose the women huddled together, rubbing their discoloured wrists, passing their hands across their faces, which were not only patched with grime, tears, sweat, stray hairs gummed down on them, scratched and bruised, but of which the very expressions seemed shattered, like glass, by their bewilderment and fatigue and fear.

The girl who was tied to Harry's wrist was in better case, for his strength was such that she had never been able to resist; she had

floated on his arm, buried her face on his shoulder as he crashed through the wood tangles, been lifted over the acres of stinking bogs, drunk from his flask, and had been aware of his shoulder interposed between her and the rest of the gang. She felt that he was a leader; she saw in the stumbling, foundering chain of her fellow-captives what might have been her lot; and she heard, at intervals in the blind hurry, broken phrases, uttered in a sweet tone, of which not only the sweetness was alien to this growling retreat, but the brokenness also, for it was that, not of haste or strain, but of a fierce shyness, and of feeling violent enough to shake the tongue that uttered them. All these signs she would have recognised clearly in a mood less distraught than that which possessed her; as it was, she had snatched at each new reassurance in her terror, clasped it, and forgot it in new terror, but it had sunk beneath the surface, and long before her thoughts became ordered again she was keeping pace with Harry, and raised herself when he lifted her, held on when she was carried, as if their wild progress was that of a crazy dance. Only when she gathered her thoughts a moment, and realised, did she drag back on the cord that bound her to him, or hang inert in his arms.

Now she spoke to him again, as they sat a few yards from the main group. "What are you going to do to us?"

As soon as she had uttered the words, this little question like a dead leaf scuffling in the first thunder wind, her fear took hold of her, and her face took on the glassy, rigid look of fear, and her mouth opened dryly and dumbly, and her stomach crawled and knotted itself, so that her heart gave the curt and agonised leap of fear, which he saw. Her stress and terror during their rushed retreat had been acceptable to him, fore-ordained, part of the business; her wild pleas and warnings had been like echoes only, in ears which still sang with the noise of murder; her writhings to free herself had been like time which twisted away faster than they could force their way out of danger; her blows and scratches had been like bough-swing and bramble-scratch as he beat his way through. But now they were within the lip of their own land, safe, and time slowed up, and everything was over, he and she should be themselves again, and he grieved to see her fear. He had never touched anyone whom he had not known from birth, and his dream had outgrown all bounds of common sense, so it was a cruel mystery to him that the longing that was such a force in his heart was not recognised by her, and responded to. Thinking for her, he disdained the comfort of such unworthy reassurances as he could put into words, yet, as he could not say the fine thing, that she should be queen of a lovely life (for that would be to say all that he had thought and felt for years,

and all that he hoped to make and do); as he could not say that, he had to offer the poor comfort that humans crave, to a goddess. Brought down to this, he was shy.

"What are you going to do?" she repeated. "What are you going to do?"

There was nothing to say but "Don't be afraid. You'll be all right. Everyone will be kind to you. You will live with us. You'll find it good."

"Oh," she said, in a tearless sob. "Good! good! To live with filthy woodmen! Who've murdered my own folk! To live with you, who killed them under my eyes! To live your vile lives, like wild dogs! We know about you. You eat rats, dogs, filth, dead people."

"No," cried Harry. "We are not woodmen. You've heard tales about the people in the forest. They are beasts. I've seen them and killed them. We live good lives. We have books, so that we know all about the old times, and talk about them. Soon we shall live better than they do at Marlborough or anywhere else."

"Marlborough," said she. "Savages and sheep thieves. They dress in dirty skins like you!"

"Wait," said he. "You will see how pleasant it is, and how we smile and are happy. We have games and singing, and the children are beautiful. We are going to strengthen ourselves till we fear

no one, and then we shall have sheep and salt and gardens, and fine clothes, and know more than anyone else, and we shall have all this country and be happy."

She heard all this, which was only not grotesque because it was meaningless, as any words must be, but she found, as she had found before, that Harry's so pleasant voice took the raw edge from her fear, and, without lessening her recoil, abated the physical pain of it. She pulled at the string which bound her to him.

"Let me go," she said. "They are let go. Let me go over to them."

"No," he said. "You must be apart. I will look after you. I know you. Listen. I have——"

"Hi! look at Harry," cried out a younger brother of his. "He's getting to terms with his share." The men began to laugh. Fortunately they were tired, and lying on their backs, or the situation would have been impossible to cope with. As it was, Harry called the youngster over, just as he was about to launch another sally.

"Here, Peter. Come here. Quickly. I want you." The cub, who adored his brother, was not long in obeying.

"Sit down."

"Listen," he said to the girl. "This is Peter, my brother. What is your name?"

"Rose," said the girl after a long staring silence.

"This is Rose then," said Harry. "Who shall be your sister as I am your brother. Sit with us a minute. This is Rose."

He was pleased to find how potent the simple magic of names could sound.

"Peter, Harry and Rose," he said after a little interval. "It is like brothers and sisters." He was concerned only to use the words, to drop them into her mind, there to unfold their gentle influence like the dissolving of some soft dye.

"Look," he said, "each of those have names, and the sooner you learn theirs, and tell them your name, the better. Do you see the point of that?"

The boy smiled and nodded, and had started off towards the group of women before he realised what he was doing. When he got to them, however, the nearness of the other men, and his own shyness, was too much for him, and all he could do was to offer his water bottle and say, "Don't be afraid."

Rose sat with an altered look; that of caught breath and of painful inner alertness, which comes when some sharp memory strikes and wakes the numbed heart. The word brother, uttered to calm her fears, had succeeded in doing so, but only by dwarfing them in comparison with the sense of desolate separation it awakened in her.

She loved nothing but this younger brother

of hers, in all but age her twin, her other self. Her heart's life had been the thrills and terrors of their Hansel and Gretel childhood amid the brutishness around them. Such a love can spread its bower only in the midst of savagery. It was fierce as a mother's love, and as lovely as a bride's. At the thought that she was torn from him now, she came all to life, and could have burst into tears, but a worse thought, that she would never see him again, froze up her starting blood, and locked her mind in the same paralysed agony as before.

While this scene was in progress the rear-guard had been coming in, and they said that as far as they could tell there was no one on their heels.

The Chief, who was now rested, cried out that the march must continue, and they all got up and shepherded the women towards their own valley.

Harry still had the girl bound to him.

She said, "My wrist hurts."

He heard the words as if with a newborn ear. It was like this: she had in his dreams been like a picture only, to which the large hunger of his blood had lent a corporeal existence entirely on its own conditions. Since he had first seized her, up till this moment, he had been like a machine; his clasp and her cry had been the movement and sound of one remorselessly functioning unit in the general retreat. He had

received no impressions of her. The intimate, breathing life with which his fancy had endowed her, differing in differing phrases of his dream, had vanished like changing mist in the first shock of action. Now that the paralysing necessity had gone, his mind was awake, but like one who wakes from a dream so violent that he does not know who and where he is. The multiple response that furnishes every normal moment was still blank, waiting for each new reminder to flood a new plane of it with light. She had said, "My wrist hurts."

He saw with a heavy choking rapture that her arm was a woman's arm, not a goddess's, not cast in the material of a fate so austere high and so grimly urgent as to lack all accessible weakness, but a woman's, that was hurt and that he could relieve.

"It had to be tied tightly," he said, loosening the bond. "I want you to stay by me, closely as if we were tied together. If you will not, I shall have to tie you again because you will not have understood. Ah! if only you knew me as well as I know you——"

"What do you mean when you say that?"

"I know you," he said. "I saw you. It was nearly a month ago. You came out of that wood above that place, in the noonday. I was there. You've been with me ever since. It has seemed as if you were always with me."

The girl was silent. There was no basis in

her mind for any talk between them. She tried to think of something that there was reason to say, or hope in asking. There was nothing. It seemed tiny and fruitless, equally, to curse the day he had seen her, or to ask about the fate that lay in store. She knew, and in silence her shocked mind tried fumblingly and unavailingly to associate huge fragments of the world that was broken and of the world in which they walked. These things had no relation to one another. She was living at once on the edge of the tower, looking down on the rushing and the ugly prone figures, and in her constantly re-forming image of whatever stronghold it was that they were taking her to, and in this voice which was speaking to her, which was the voice of terror, but sweet, and which was appealing to her, it seemed, because of some knowledge . . . because he had seen her . . . knew her, he said . . . she had been with him . . . it did not seem more untrue than the shouting and the rushing down the slopes . . . and the unreal ground over which she seemed sometimes to be floating now, without pacing, as one does in a dream, and sometimes walking, walking, and never moving forward.

Harry put down his hand and took hers to help her along. When she felt his grasp, all her sense, all her curiosity, thought, life itself, flowed into her hand, leaving her body empty, like a ghost, to be trailed in their wake. She felt,

with all the relief of hopelessness, that she need try to scheme no more, it was too strong. She felt this, less from its size and hardness than from the fact that it held hers with that care that goes to the holding of a butterfly, and she felt it also in that intense life which hands can have.

Some of the young men laughed and tried to make up a song.

We went out walking
And found some women.
Here is our place—

“No, no, boys . . .”

Here is our valley
Where we shall be happy—

“That’s it . . .”

Only the pigs are sorry
To see us return.

Some twined up the ends of forked beech or hazel twigs to make wreaths to shadow their heads from the sun. Their lean brown faces flickered in the dancing shade. Peter made one and put it on the hot hair of one of the women.

“Don’t be afraid.”

A man rose up from the grass and came running towards them, shouting over his shoulder to someone on the inner slope.

They saw the hill-locked valley, their own woods, and their shattered roofs asleep among the bosomy trees. The lookout reached them, hugged one and another and another. Shouts rose up all over the valley. They could see some men a mile off, running, waving, running on.

They went down through the wood. People came leaping through on either side; others came up the path from the house to meet them. They thumped one another, laughed before they spoke, broke off in the middle of speaking to greet someone else, shouted to those higher up on the path, begged to be told all at once about the raid, about how things had gone at home, then were suddenly dumb and could do nothing but smile, stared at the wounded Chief, asked how, and how many had Harry killed, said the rabbits had played hell with the crops, the children were all well, old Alicia was dead, lay down and died because of old Tom, Father said. Everything was said at once. They stared at the women. Father had said they were not to be touched, laughed at, or frightened. He was hobbling on two sticks with his rheumatism. He was waiting below to greet them.

They entered the yard, and Father stood in the doorway of the house with Aldebert by his side, and the older women came out to welcome their sons and husbands, and Father stepped forward to meet the Chief, and, having spoken, held out his hand to Harry.

"This is my girl," said Harry.

"We shall try to make you happy here," said Father.

Then the children, who had been told to remain inside, could be held back no longer, and burst out, and added their shrill voices to the babel. It took ten minutes before they were all inside and sitting on the benches and the tables. During this time the two sets of women mingled their glances. They searched one another's faces for signs. Then Bella, who was Harry's mother, a huge woman, who had been the handsomest in her time, went up to the little knot of captives, and said:

"We must try to make you forgive us. We want to be your friends."

One of the captives gave a little idiotic laugh, and the others stared at the big serious matron, and their eyes glistened and brimmed over. Bella touched one of them on the shoulder and went across to where the Chief was propped in his chair.

"I want to take these women out of this noise, and give them water to wash in, and somewhere to rest."

The Chief looked at her stupidly; his temperature had been rising since early morning, and now he was in a nightmare, in which distant miniature sights and sounds crawled maddeningly among his responses, without ever touching the right one.

Father, standing by him, said :

"The Chief is ill, Bella. Do what you think best."

Bella called two of her fellow-matrons, and they went out to the cool brick barn and put pails of water in it, and a heap of their smelly fur rugs, and she came back and took one of the captives by the hand and said, "Come with me."

"I'll take that girl too, Harry," she said.

Harry hesitated, and then led Rose towards the others. "She is kind."

He stared across the yard at the retreating group, feeling pain at the thought of letting Rose out of his sight even for an hour. Then, turning back into the doorway, he said to four who stood drinking inside :

"One to each corner of the barn."

They drank up and were gone.

"You'd better get upstairs," said Father to the Chief. "That wound must be going wrong. Let me come up and put you to rights if I can."

The Chief rolled his sick head on his shoulders. He desperately wanted to stay for the night's feast and the distribution of the women. He wanted also to be alone and lying down, and each of these desires was so strong that it was agony to subordinate either to t'other in his mind. He felt he was being pushed away from life. He had to blame something or somebody for the pain of deciding which desire was to be

denied. He stared at Father with a mad panicky eye.

"Not you," he said. "You'll . . . you'll . . ." He didn't know what to say. "You'll kill me," he groaned. Father started back.

"George," said the Chief. "George. Where's George? Oh, here. Get me to bed. I'll be better this evening. Where's your hand?"

CHAPTER XII

THE Chief was not better by the evening, however. While the tables were being set for the feast he lay swearing and whimpering in half a delirium. It was induced as much by his intolerance of being crossed and his intolerance of pain, as by the inflamed wound, and heightened by a raging impatience to be in his place, asserting himself. Since his humiliation on the morning of the raid, he had been in a state of unwonted sensitiveness, and had been galled by noticing what perhaps no one else had thought much about, how as soon as he was incapacitated by his wound, his authority was disregarded, and the gang looked to Harry for their orders. Unaccustomed to pain and weakness, he felt that pain and weakness were now his fate ; accustomed to dominate physically, he felt his power was gone. He feared to get up, and hated to lie still, and the fever gained on him.

He asked George what he should do. George, who bitterly and inscrutably hated both the old men and the young, felt the Chief's authority would hardly benefit from an appearance to-night. Moreover, his distrust, wolf-nosed, had

scented trouble; the young men were growing insubordinate, and, worse still, were beginning to know their strength. Walter was dead, Will was no use, he himself could do nothing without the Chief. If this wound got worse, things would be in a pretty state.

"Lie still," he said, "and get well damned soon. Then we'll put things straight quietly enough."

Shouts and laughter came up. Someone called out, "Bravo, Harry boy, bravo!"

"Lie still, Chief," said George. "I'd better go down and see how things are going. I'll come up and report to you."

At the door he turned and came back to the bed.

"What's the last word about these women?" he asked. "We'll have trouble there if we're not careful."

"Tell 'em to wait till I'm down," said the Chief.

"They'll take a bit of persuading," said George. "You were a bit free with your promises, you know. It's the sort of thing they might kick at. Hadn't we better let things go off quietly?"

"That little one of mine, I won't let her go," said the Chief. "Don't let any of 'em lay claim to her."

"They won't," said George. "A bit young, isn't she? I heard two or three of them saying

something about children. I heard Bella talking about it."

"So much the better if they think so. I'll see to that soon enough. Well, that's all then."

"Rodney's to have one?"

"Yes."

"Will doesn't want one, he says. His wife wouldn't stand for it."

"I suppose not. Well?"

"I don't think any of our lot who weren't in the raid could carry a claim with you being laid up."

"Let 'em wait till next time."

"What about me?"

"What about Mary?"

"Oh, I'm sick of her, Chief, I hate the sight of her miserable jowl. You said I could pick after you."

"Did I? Well, I shouldn't take it for granted if I were you."

"Can I say you say I can have the pick, apart from yours?"

The Chief turned and groaned under the pain of making a decision which his very muscles would have made for him had he been on his feet.

"You won't get that one young Harry's got hold of, if you're thinking of her."

"She ought to have been put in with the rest right at the beginning."

"Well, why didn't you say so?"

That brought both their minds to the Chief's humiliation. He began to curse.

"Blast you, George. I'm sick. What do you want to bother me for? One's as good as another. Have one of the others. Have more sense. You pester me about trouble with the youngsters all the time, and now you want to make it."

"Well, I'll have my pick of the others, anyway, and I'll see who'll stop me."

George went downstairs, consumed with fury at the thought that Harry had strength to keep the girl he had chosen, and, still worse, at the thought that because the Chief was absent there might be more trouble over his claim to one of the others, even.

The big room was quiet when he went in. Father was speaking out of a group near the fireplace. Bella stood by him, so did Harry and Rodney. Several of the younger men stood near, and he was primarily addressing these, but it seemed all the room had hushed and listened. Some one said "Hush!" to George as he came in.

"... quite an elaborate kindness, in fact," said Father. "Their position is a most painful one. We are accustomed to pain, perhaps, but no longer on this side of our skyline. Moreover, our position is not so secure, but that any day a necessity may arise that will try our temper to the uttermost. We want no ill-wishers among

us, no dead patches in our metal, then. Though the troubles of earlier years have tended to undermine it, we have preserved marriage among us, and for good reason. Soon that reason will show more clearly. Not only this room is now too small for us, but so is our constitution as a gang. Half of you have carried a stone tower, a place altogether stronger than this. That makes me feel all the more eager to see a development towards some system more elastic, of a more dispread vitality, than four walls, however thick, can guard. For fifty or sixty, nothing is better than the fort; for twice the number, perhaps still the fort, but also a wider spreading of what may be called the nucleus of our race. That is, the family. And that brings me back to my point. The family will be more important in the near future, not only to the gang, but to its own members. Six of you are going to take, as the foundation of your future families, one of these strangers. I know, and I insist that here you take care, how deep an aversion you may inspire, or, on the contrary, what a tough bond establish, each of you with his own woman. It is not your private affair, this—we cannot afford one hatred, one avoidable hatred, among us. That is why I insist on an elaborate and a ritual kindness.”

“What’s he talking about?” said George.

“Hush!”

“Remember that, however you may soften it,

there is still the obvious constraint, and the obvious rape. Neither can be avoided. I wish it were possible for us to let these women live unattached in our midst, until each had made her own choice, but that is obviously impracticable. Consequently they have to be assigned to those whose claims come first. It is a pity we haven't as many as we hoped for, though perhaps we have as many as we can comfortably hold."

George walked up to where Father stood.

"Who's going to do the assigning?" he asked.

"That falls almost automatically," said Father.

"There's only one single man among the older men who went out."

"What about me?"

"You are not single."

"The Chief says I'm to have second pick after him. And he wants the little one."

"That little child?" cried Bella. "No."

Father made a little silencing mouth at her. He was anxious to separate any quarrel from the Chief's own interests. "The Chief's ill, anyway, Bella. Let's deal with the immediate question. You, George, have a wife already."

"You've said that."

"No one can have two wives."

"Let one of the boys have Mary, then."

"You swine!" said Bella, looking round to see if Mary was in the room.

The young men looked at one another in a rage. They turned their eyes on Harry.

"Nonsense!" cried Father.

"Who are you, you old hen, anyway? D'you think you're going to play boss again, now the Chief's laid up. He says I can have first choice, do you hear? If anyone's boss when he's not here, it's me."

"Nonsense," said Harry.

This, in the patriarchal gang, was revolution. George began to curse Harry like a madman.

"You bloody pup! Do you open your blasted mouth at me? Keep your place, damn you."

"Why?" said Harry.

"Because I'm your bloody senior, that's why, and don't forget it, my pup, or you'll find yourself in the wrong box."

"Father is *your* senior," said Harry very quietly. "And what he says goes."

"Not with me. I could eat him."

"And I could bloody well eat you, George. George, if you start trouble——" Harry gave him a lion's look, palpable almost, like a heavy hand.

"Are you going to stand for this?" cried George, appealing to the older men.

They looked at one another. George was too outrageously in the wrong. Only Will spoke.

"What's the bloody gang coming to?" said

he. "Are we going to knuckle under to a crowd of boys, eh?"

"No," shouted Harry. "But if the Chief's laid by, Father rules as senior, that's all. All I said was that if George was going to break our rules of life just because he's stronger than Father, well, I'm stronger than George, and I'll see he doesn't."

"The Chief says I'm to have first pick," shouted George. "Will you disobey that?"

"I'm afraid the Chief's half delirious," said Father suavely. "We've all seen that. He scarcely knows what he's saying."

"He told me before he was ill."

"I don't believe it. The Chief would never countenance that you, a man with a wife, should take a young girl, and either abandon your old wife or expect a young man to take her. Why, the vilest rabble could hardly do worse. It would be the end of our life here, if such things happened."

George was utterly baffled. His spleen, which had kept him silent so long, had welled up as soon as he began to speak, and had made him take the worst possible line. The terms by which he grasped life were in essence identical with the Chief's, except that they were darkened by the bitterness of his nature; his was a world of "damned sermonising old men," "damned swollen-headed pups," and "women." These objects had often enough proved refractory in

a small way, of their cross-grained nature only, not of their will, and the very words in which he conceived them had precluded the idea of any serious opposition to the Chief, or to the way of life which he and his set had fallen into. It was fantastic, a nightmare, that such furniture should openly rebel, and more so that it should invoke a principle more complex and logical than was the set of coarse expressions of instinct that made up his own. He saw how the Chief might have overborne the opposition; he had seen, at every stage of his own outbreak, how and why he was failing to do so. He saw, too, how, if the Chief had failed, he would have passed off his failure, so that no one, neither his adversaries nor he himself, would have remembered it, and in seeing this George tasted the worst of his bitterness, for he was aware of the raw and broken edge of defeat, and had no pleasant bluster for the blurring of it, but felt it standing livid in his face and in his silence, before them all. Not their principle alone, but his own wolfish anger, had made the issue one of first importance. He found himself dumb. He tried to speak, said "The Chief . . . the Chief . . ." and stopped.

"I will be responsible to the Chief," said Father.

George worked his lantern jaws in a last effort at speech; turned about and said to his sole

supporter, "Here, Will, let's get out of this," and led the way from the room.

They went up at once to tell the Chief, but he was so bitterly resentful at being troubled by anything whatever, that even their description of the way in which his own claim was received could not move him. He asked, "Who's to have her then?" furiously enough, but Will answered that no one was to have her, whereon he growled, "Let it wait, then, till I'm about again, and if my affairs can wait, so can yours." They sat down in silence by the window.

Down below, the noise rose up again. The captives had been sent for, and had been received by cries, of which the words were kindly, but whose strange accent and combined noise terrified them. Similarly, the smiles and glances they received, and the pleasant cut of most of the faces there, had an encouraging effect, which was undone by the strong smell of the crowded room, so different from the room smells they had known before. Their eyes roved unhappily among the crowd of men.

Father came over and began to talk to them quietly. He used the old formulæ of good manners: apologising, showing solicitude for their present misery, hoping for their future happiness. He knew that every phrase he uttered was ridiculous. He had to use every inflection with the utmost care, lest the absurdity should appear fiendish. His charming

smile prevented this, however, and the obsolete counters of his speech were accepted, as far as they were grasped at all, for the true metal that lay behind them. The captives thought he was the Chief. His noble old head had a dignity greater than anything they had known, and that wistful air which his long eclipse had given him fused in their eyes with the gentleness he consciously but not insincerely displayed.

"You shall be my own children," he said, "and your happiness shall be my care as well as that of your husbands. I know that you will not find it easy to forgive what necessity has forced on us. Realise, if you can, that we too find it hard to forgive that necessity. The necessity was one thing, we are another. Our young men are good, kind, gentle. I know them; I am an old man. They will want your love, and bitterly they will feel the shadow that lies between you and them. In bringing you here, they have brought something of the evil of the world outside, from which we have lived secure, and must live secure again. You are part of us now; that is a fact like day or night, which nothing can alter. Help us to the happy life which is possible. Then if we survive, you may see your children the best of mankind."

"Oh! My baby!" cried one of the women, and collapsing, began those tearing cries that desolate the heart.

Father put his hand up over his eyes, as if

to hood them from the pain that grief of one's own making, pitiable, animal, obstinate, hateful grief, causes when it throws its obstacle across the path of persuasion.

"Hush her," he said, to her among the women who had the steadiest face. "Nothing can be done. She must be quiet at once."

Fortunately the wails subsided as suddenly as they had begun.

He resumed his speech. "The food is almost ready. Before we eat, those of us who are to be your husbands will choose among you, and you will sit beside them. Make it easy for them to do you honour and kindness, for the months and years ahead *will* come, and what happens now may render happiness possible or impossible."

His speech ended. It had meandered away from the more real but too abstract line of his thought, and now it dwindled to nothing, just before it entered into fatuity. All the while, as he had been speaking, he had been conscious of some drag or hitch which seemed to be tugging at his elbow, as if to mock all his consolations into silence. He turned, almost in obedience to the tug, and saw Rodney with his ravaged face, standing a few feet off, listening and eyeing the girls.

Rodney had caught the implications in what he had heard, and he had caught, too, the glances the captives gave him: the change in their faces as their wandering eyes returned again and again

to his hideousness. Out from the wry hair and the red, seamed flesh, his brown eyes looked sadly as those of a dog. He was as friendly as a dog, and as stupid in many ways. There was a gulf between his nature and that of his contemporaries, as wide as the gulf between his mind and that of Father or of Crab. Neither set took him with them. He was born one of nature's peasants, and had remained so. On one point, though, neither Father nor Crab, nor anyone else, could rival him in his rapid and complete grasp of a situation. That was where his disfigurement was the key to it. Mirrors and pools, his constant cruel counsellors, and once the pupil of an anguished eye, had made him know this key, and every hateful ward that it might touch. Condemned to celibacy, and lonely too, this kindly Caliban longed to love and to be loved. While Harry, with his lion's face, had stared longing across the path of the coming raid, Rodney, toiling below, had had his promise from the Chief, and his heart had risen, at once strong and timid, at the thought that some frightened and broken thing would be given him by fate, which he might cherish and win by kindness. For he had retained one illusion about his hideousness, and that was, that kindness might possibly render it tolerable to another. He had never been so happy as during the weeks before the raid. He had so diligently cross-examined the spies, that they had grown

disgusted, and answered him curtly, for ugliness moves us kindly in its admiration, but revolts us with its desire. So he had fallen into silence, and worked on, contented in the belief that fate, since it was to go so far as to give him a creature on which to lavish his affection, would go the last inch and give him the sort he desired ; that is, one who by some weakness or pain, or perhaps by ugliness itself, might so need his love that she would grasp it, and return it, and not hate him for his red mask of scars. Alas, poor simpleton ! dolls should be made for such.

Now he had heard Father's speech, and he understood clearly how important it was that no extra hindrance should frustrate the difficult love that must be born between these women and the men who were to have them. That thought fitted his mind as other thoughts did not, so it seemed almost the only one in the world. He had seen each woman look from face to face, and he had seen first one and then another look at his own face, and their glances break and wither as they saw it. He had watched for one that did not, but there was none. And now Father had finished speaking and had looked round, straight at him, and his expression, still sweet with the spirit of his words, which had meant more to Rodney than they did to the speaker, had set, and then changed, as if suddenly he had seen what made his words an idle babble, horrible because of the horrible thing that mocked

them. So he stood and plucked at his hairy scars, and put his hand into his shirt to claw unconsciously at his left pap, under which a thought painfully too big for him seemed to be tearing itself to birth.

Father turned, tapped his teeth musingly, shrugged, and called out in his high, conscious voice :

"Take your seats, all of you. Take your seats now."

He had told the men who were to choose women what they were to do. Each kept an empty place on his left hand.

"Stay where you are," said Father to the captives ; and he remained standing near them, in the clearest space in the room.

"Sit down, Rodney," he said.

"Oh ! Ah ! Yes," said Rodney, and blundered to his place.

Everyone was assembled except the sick Chief and his friends above, and two young girls who were tending the pots, and the sentries up on the ridge, who watched and watched the plain.

Father had planned that there should be some little dignity to the taking of the women, as much as could be done without too obvious stage management ; as much form as could be indulged in without risk of stilted absurdity ; as much gaiety as might be hoped to please the women, without the certainty of mocking them. The men who were to choose had been told to

put on the best things that they had; the children had been sent to make posies to stand before each couple's place at the table. Bella and her friend had played handmaid to the captives, as far as they had allowed it. The smith had been set to work to polish up some old iron finger rings they had, and to take the glass with which they had been set, and to grace them with some of dead Alicia's beads, turquoises, of which Father had taken possession when she died. The captives themselves were passive. They had seen too much lust and violence in their proximity to Swindon to react with all the horror that would overcome women more peacefully reared. Some of them were already half resigned; the young men laughed and were beautiful. They hoped to be rescued, but if they were not, they realised they would be fools to destroy the kindness which so unexpectedly greeted them. Those among them who felt more bitterly were still too conscious of the futility of resistance. The woman who had bewailed her child was sunk in apathy. Rose, who had more spirit than the rest, since she had lived freer, longed to make escape, but she knew she must be pliant; she *wanted* to be pliant awhile.

"Come now," said Father. "Here is to be a marrying which comes out of horror and sadness, but which has in it something which can be the light on a new world after a storm. You

are young men and young women, you can be joys to one another. We win our joys out of the shadow of necessities. My daughters, our necessity which has brought you here is a cruel one, and its shadow is dark upon you. The cruelty had to be. As an act, it is past. We have, in part, the choice of whether we look back or forward. Look forward into your new lives; it will be the easier for us to make them happy for you.

"My sons, you are to earn the love of these women. In those things a man should, you are to serve and honour them. In all things you are to respect them, and be kind. Beware of me," he quavered, "if you seek the savage's joy in compulsion, for I shall know it, and become your enemy. Compulsion is to be a burden as heavy upon you as upon them. Yours is the task of removing that burden from both. You understand me?"

"Yes, Father. Yes, yes," most of them cried.

"I have no fear of you, I know your good hearts. Now marry and be men."

As he spoke, a subtle observer might have noticed the minutest change in the group of captives who stood behind him. Standing there, forlorn, with no familiar face to greet their eyes, their glances truncated therefore, they had stood each in a dead isolation, like trunks of shattered trees, whose branches spread out no more. Now leaning to one another, timid and alert, their

outer life was revived, and they had all the appearance of a group of does, that stands and hesitates, looking into a glade.

"Rodney is first," said Father, rather flatly. Rodney stood up, and you would have thought that this doe group had seen the shaggy hound rise at their very feet, they stood so caught up between fear and flight. He saw, but his mind was made up anyway.

"Let them be, as far as I'm concerned," he said in his blurred voice. "Unless there's one among them who doesn't mind a few s-sword cuts on an easygoing man. If there is, let her speak." There was utter silence.

"I'd l-look after such a one," he said. There was still silence, then some whispering began among the crowded tables.

"Ah, well," said Rodney. "It wasn't to be expected. I want no woman against her w-will. Tell you what; let the next youngster take my place. I'll stand down."

"You have every right, you know," said Father uneasily.

"Damn it, man, I shall do very well," said Rodney sturdily. "Why, there's little Eva said a hundred times she'd be my wife when she's grown enough, haven't you, Eva?" He looked over to the door where some of the older children peeped in.

"That I have, Rodney," called out the child. "And I will."

"There you are," said Rodney, with a laugh. "I'm all right. I'd r-rather have Eva any day."

"Bravo, Rodney!" Everybody laughed and nodded to him. "That's right, Eva. The pecked cherry's the sweetest, that we all know," cried Harry.

Rodney sat down, not altogether hopelessly, for his hungry heart had snatched even at the child's words, so that he half believed them. He could not know that she no longer meant what she said, as she had meant it often enough before, when he had taken it as prattle. She no longer spoke as a child, for she was thirteen, and one of the boys had already taken her up into the bracken only that week, so with the same words and with the same accents, she spoke now with conscious, pitying insincerity, like a woman, and he took it for truth.

"Ah," thought he, "who knows what may be? She's always run to me first——"

"Harry," said Father, "it's now for you to choose." He spoke heavily, for he had spent an unsuccessful hour in begging Harry to renounce his claim, and to marry within the tribe for policy's sake.

Harry came forward. His tunic and shorts were of soft skins, well sewn, and too new to have become black and shiny with grease, but duskily glowing with colour. His arms were bare, his feet sandalled with pigskin. An iron bracelet,

four inches wide, thin black iron, cut almost like lace, for his brown skin to show through, fitted tightly on to his left forearm. His skin was red gold, hard and clean as sea sand; his eyes were crystal like the glinting wave. Clear of the press, he lifted up his head, and moved in that strength that was unlike the strength of a man.

Rose, her hand on her heart, looked at him out from the dark and fair heads that clustered about her. For one second she forgot past and future, forgot the full room and the pregnant moment, forgot even that he was a man and she a woman, and she saw that quite exact and abstract beauty, that possible form of life, that one sees through the picture of an archangel, or in the cruel poetry that describes a god. Then, on the noise of voices, the moment broke in upon her, and Harry was near, and he said :

"I choose you . . . Forgive me . . . Be my wife . . . I will honour you . . ." They were the first words of some handsome sentences that had been concocted in preparation for the ceremony.

As he spoke, he held out his hand, and stopped, in obedience to an instinct, a foot or so short of touching Rose, so that, if she would, she might move towards him. She looked, quivered, leaned, and, as if she stumbled, put her foot forward half a pace, and was his. She thought next moment that she had meant to do nothing of

the sort, that it was like a thistledown drawn into the heart of a fire. She had felt no emotion at all.

Her heart seemed to swell up to bursting point; the sensation was agonising, but it was purely a physical one. Her limbs seemed to be made of soft and heavy metal, warm but dull, unlit by that flickering consciousness in which even a mild emotion lives along every vein and plays over the skin. Someone was moving these heavy somnambulist legs of hers; her arm was lifted, bent, and it remained so. She was sitting down, with Harry beside her. The swelling, suffocating feeling in her heart had reached its maximum, and stopped there. There was a look to be understood. Her mind rose up to grasp it. This blazing creature, this hypnotist of her heavy flesh, was looking at her. It must be understood.

Then the swollen sensation burst in her breast, and, as if all her blood had been pent in it, she now felt her own life flowing back along her veins. This creature was smiling at her, just like a silly boy, like her brother, as if it was all fun, all over, all done; as if they were now safe, and might enjoy, as if they had known one another for ever, and it was all a game, and now, in the bower of their long kinship, they might hide from the crowd and bask in one another's eyes, and enjoy. He expected; silly, silly, silly. A tear burst over her eye-rim and ran warm and

helpless down her cheek, a wet track, salt to her lip. Ah, well! she was too tired to think.

Harry said something. She waved her hand, waving tears and the whole business away.

"Drink this," he said. "This is our mead, we only have it on feast days. It will make you feel better."

"Drink this," the other bridegrooms were saying, "this is our mead. It will make you feel better."

The mead was sweet. It was gold in tiredness: a warm gold in the belly, a gold thirst on the tongue. It was a gold haze in the tired brain.

The noise in the room was a tiny thing, a long way away. The weak lights were sometimes far off like stars, seen from a ruddy thicket of shadows. Then they were near, merging, whirling in the eyes, and the noise rose like a crested wave. What did it matter?

The lights were far off. The shadow thicket was blue. The lights were tiny and cold, stars. Close the eyes, and they were warm and gold again. The noise was the foot in tangled grass, tearing through. The smell of bruised grass. The noise was a whispering voice, gold like the mead.

He kicked to the door of the new-made hut, across the yard, and laid her on the skin rug, spread over clean straw.

CHAPTER XIII

HARRY walked with his girl in the cool of the evening. They did not go to the top of the down, for that was out of bounds for the captives, and must remain so till they had children. The sentries paced endlessly above; there was no stretch of the open but was looked over thrice in the time it would take to scuttle across it. Below the bare strip the women were free to wander as they would.

They were unhappy part of the time, excited for the rest, in a proportion according to their natures. At some hours an intense nostalgia seized them, for the home they had never left before, even for its ugliest aspects. Then this would pass off, and they tasted with fluttering hearts the sweet air of courtesy and frankness which pervaded the place. They had never before known open hearts, nor that appearance of unselfishness with which the surviving tradition of good manners endowed all the young men here. The Chief had been laid up all the week; George savoured his bile in silence; Will snarled openly, reminding the girls of what they had left behind, and he was futile, a mere foil for

the general pleasantness. The gang had never before presented such an appearance of Arcadian happiness.

Father walked up and down, his arm on Crab's crooked shoulder, his benign smile meeting Crab's eager one, his fingers held up as if taking some important word, and turning it for its nicest meaning to be seen. Crab would make some statement with a look of confidence as he spoke, and a glance of diffidence as he ended. They were like an old don and a brilliant scholar as they walked up and down, up and down, always in sight, and always out of earshot.

"He is distinctly better to-day," said Father.

"Then *we*," said Crab, "all of us, I mean, are so much the worse."

"Our disease is recovering, you would say," replied the old man, turning the phrase in his careful hand.

"From his point of view," replied Crab, "the poultice is well enough on his leg. If the rest of us are to be cured, it would be better clapped over his mouth and nostrils."

"As far as his mouth is concerned," said Father, "he has a poultice of his own, pork and cider, to which, I assure you, we owe most of our relief this week."

"Was another pig killed this morning?"

"Poor ineffectual scapegoat! — yes," said Father, smiling.

"Scapegoat? What's that exactly?"

"Well, it's . . . it was once——"

"How your heart beats. Your chest is so thin," said Crab. "So is mine. Sometimes, when we talk, I think our hearts must be heard all over the valley. But you were going to tell me what a scapegoat is, though perhaps I know now."

"Many savages," said the old man, "*savages*, I say, used to offer sacrifices, kill their king, that is to say, to promote good, or stay the menaces which they felt surrounded them, just as we feel the menace of all that lies outside. Just like that. But later, perhaps it was at the suggestion of some king, they offered up a goat or other creature instead. A scapegoat to stay evil, that, you see, is the pig that died this morning." There was a silence.

"There's Harry," said Crab at last. "With that——" His voice, broken off, died bitterly on the air. Father withdrew his weight from the arm on Crab's shoulder, so that it lay there as an intimate touch only.

"My good, good fellow," he said, "your blood is so much younger than your thoughts. It makes your heart sore. Well, soreness is one colour, gladness is another. They are equally irrelevant to the man of policy."

"I freely admit this," said Crab, "that I am jealous like an ugly wife. I have too much of the woman in me, where Harry is concerned, and it nags at my heart. That I can ignore.

Two days ago—you were there—that secret came out. ‘How near did I walk,’ said she to him, ‘when you lay in the brush?’ ‘As near as that hot sun, which is out of reach, and yet scorches up my blood.’ I heard and I bit on my tongue. I bit on my tongue, yet I could hear myself shouting, ‘You never told me, you never said a word.’ Just like a woman, you see! Well, damn it, that I can ignore. But, Father, here we are, our chance dwindles from day to day; yet it has been rosy all this week, and it’s good yet. He might win everything now, yet he walks with that girl, and the Chief recovers, and it will be too late.”

“Then you’ve still one thing to learn,” said Father, “one thing to realise, that is, for of course you know it already. The Chief to his pleasure, and the counsellor to his toil. My good root, why do you creep underground? For the flower’s sake, or better struggle up yourself, or rot and be nothing. You cannot ask at once that a Chief should be glorious, as he must be, and watch moments as well, for that we can do for him.”

“But your Cæsar, your Napoleon, or if those are too much of the greater world, that Castracani in the Prince book? And all the others too?”

“Believe me,” said Father, “the great chiefs never watched moments. Now and then they saw them, or made them, and the world cried Oh! Ah! and wrote it down in a book.

Nothing was written of all they let slip. Or, on the other hand, if in some cases they *did* think as we do, that was their weakness, something of ordinary man in Cæsar, the flaw in his armour which the daggers found later on. Castracani was a little ambitious fellow, a trader in lives when lives were cheap, and a cheat at his trade. Such may succeed, but their success beams with no light. You and I would not plot for one of these. Here we have Harry, bold, generous, noble, beautiful. Would you have him possess also that quality, that knowledge, which chills boldness, stays generosity, hollows nobility, and saddens beauty till it moves only the mind and not the heart? Believe me, Crab, a chief is a force of nature. He finds his path, but not by seeking it. Rather than that, he makes it where there is none. We must observe, and follow. He leads, and does so by a force quite other than that which makes and moves us."

"It is true, one cannot harness the lion," said Crab. "Yes, I know it."

"And since his qualities are not one's own," pursued Father, "one is seldom sure what one would demand of him, or for him. I was dismayed when Harry refused to give up his claim to this stranger, and to take the next girl of our own breed. I wrangled all the obvious points: the possibility that these women come to be regarded as an inferior race, the influence of our own women on their men, if they objected

to an outsider being exalted over them, the advantages of marrying George's third, children, all of it. But as I spoke, I knew that I was fulfilling my own nature rather than hoping to alter his. And now, already, I am not sure that his instinct was not righter than my policy; for him, and therefore for all. How he has changed in this short time! since he first saw her, I suppose. We find it hard, because we cannot manage him. But that is because he has grown up. The others notice nothing, yet how they respond! His eye is changed, so is his voice. When he is among them, and a question rises, he withdraws his countenance, and they wait. When he speaks, it is like iron, and they obey, who before, if they were in the mood, consented.

"The opportunity is here, and he is wasteful. But if he was moved by us, as he was in the springtime, he would still be too much the cub to grasp it. As it is, he is a man, and is moved by his own force, and his opportunity will come. It's better so."

"No," said Crab.

"Why not?" said Father, very politely.

"I am sure you are right in your naming of the elements of the matter," replied Crab, "but I am equally sure that your vision of these obliterates some of the ignoble snags of here and now. It is not better that Harry should miss this chance. The Chief, when he's about again, will no longer be inert, unconscious, stupid, a

mere mass in our way. Toppling, he will become an avalanche. George is his brain, and George is angry and afraid. If they were a little subtler, they might act slowly, and give Harry time to consolidate himself. But they will manœuvre crudely and suddenly, and find him still too new to manhood. They know him to be dangerous. The Chief likes him, but what is the Chief's liking, when George hates? I fear some accident will overtake Harry, my dear Father."

"Ah," said Father, "you feel the moment better than I do. Well, what are we to do? I have thought, sometimes, that it would be possible to keep the Chief sick a little longer. A little irritant in his poultice. . . ."

They walked on in silence for a little while.

"It is strange," said Crab at last, "(and I marvel to find myself so scrupulous, but it is on a point of artistry). It is strange that we should be revolted at the thought of keeping a man sick, whereas we would have no scruple at all in killing him outright. I wonder if it is the thought that keeping him sick would be ineffectual . . . or what——"

"You are proposing to murder," said Father. "Don't turn. Come on where our faces—my face, then—can't be seen. Murder! Crab."

"I know what you feel," said Crab soberly. "I know it is no love for the Chief that stays you. You are appalled at the introduction of

murder as a means. Where will it end, you ask, if I have studied you rightly all these years. As your student, I agree. As student of the present affairs, I ask, where shall it begin? At the Chief or Harry? When shall it begin? That's the same question."

"As I grow older," said Father, "I feel an extraordinary——"

"Dear Father, let me interrupt you. When shall it begin?"

"You are sure?"

"If I were a bee, that stings and dies, I would sting to-night," said Crab, with a shudder.

"Come, let us go right up on to the down."

Harry was walking with his girl in the cool of the evening.

"When we were boys," he said, "we used to play in that great hollow tree there. They were digging out the storehouses near it."

"What did you play? I played once."

"Romans, we called it."

"What's that?"

"Father taught us. It's how some people in a wild country built a city, and the tribes all round attacked them; we used to play the fights, and the city rose up and had baths, and palaces and gardens, and people walking up and down dressed beautifully and talking of everything there was in the world. We pretended the tree was the first wooden huts they had, and

when the men had done digging, we pretended we were building the town."

"Do you mean Marlborough?"

"Oh, no. Look, this is how it is." He pointed south. "If you go that way, as far as you have come with us, there is the sea. You've heard of that?"

"Yes, but only over the sunset way."

"This is another part. Here there are white cliffs, white as snow, higher than the downs, and yellow sands, and then water as far as you can see. Not ordinary water, but dark blue and white, or purple or green, raging. It is alive. If it gets on your lips you have always that taste there, till your dying day. Near the sand it is quiet and clear. You look down: shells, live flowers, skeletons of dead men with pearls in their eyes. Outside, in the raging part, there are sharks, whales; they devour men. And there's the great polyp, kraken, squid, sea devil. Do you know what that is?"

"No."

"It has eight arms; it's bigger than anything. It can put its eight arms into a ship and take out eight men and eat them as you would eat a snail."

"There was a woman in Wales who did it with one of those bulls they have there, ten times as big as a sheep. She had a child, half bull and half man; I've seen a picture of it. It sits up on a rocky hill and looks out to eat men

and women: those who've not slept with anyone."

"How do you know that?"

"They told me when I was a little girl."

Harry smiled, tolerant of this savage fancy.

"Listen, you cross the sea. That in itself would be marvellous. We should go in little boats, like the people of the very old days, not flying across, or in boats as big as a town, so big that the monsters of the deep would keep out of sight. Then one could go through France, which is like this, only it gets hotter, and then there is a land shaped like your leg. Let's sit down here. Put out your leg, and I will show you where Rome is."

One more consenting gesture.

"Can you see over those parts from anywhere up there?"

"No, it would be half a year's journey, I expect. All you can see is hills and more hills, and in some parts the flat country stretching away out of sight. Ever so far off, you can see more hills even past the flat. When I'd seen you first I used to sit on top, and look over, and I could see where you were, right away, where the hills looked silver on the skyline, with the clumps of beeches black on the tops of them. It looked like somewhere out of the world. I thought of you there."

"Ah, it *was* out of this world."

"And do you still want to go back to it?"

"Not so much as I want to stay with you." This was so true an answer at the moment that her face lived as she said it, and Harry felt the truth of it, and his breast rose up in gladness. He was too young, and too much Harry, to remember or even to know that there might be an urge more deep than wanting, and in spite of it. Rose knew it, and she handed the lesser truth to him like a toy, and her eyes shone.

"Ah, you want to stay with me. Rose, I will make it worth your staying. My kisses are not worth yours, but when you are grown into us here, before long, and when I am Chief, as I mean to be before long, then you shall sit beside me at the high table, and all the people whose thriving hangs on us, shall look up——"

"Tell me," said Rose, "where did you sit when you looked over to where I was?"

"Oh, up there, just above the house copse. Where the sentry is passing now."

"Do you think he's looking over there now?"

"He will, when he turns round."

"What were you saying?"

"I said, you shall be to them what I am. In ten years we shall be numerous. I have a plan for that. Then we shall be spread into all the valleys about here, in separate homes, living openly and fearing nothing. For I shall strengthen the ridges in that time, so that it would need hundreds to break them down. And if hundreds came and broke through, there would still be

this old house, which I shall rebuild large and strong out of the great stones from the ruins over there, and you and I shall live there, and shelter all. You see how it is? We must increase, or we shall become savage. To increase fast enough we must have new people, men and women, more quickly than we can easily assimilate. It is to rule them as well as to protect them, that my place must be made strong. In it will live the unmarried men; they will learn the books as well as the new ways of fighting. The married men shall dig, and they can raise food enough for all. They will have learned the books, so their lives will be sweet. They shall not go out to fight, but only defend, except in very extraordinary circumstances, so their lives will be steady.

“Rose, there is no better thing than to see people’s faces turn to you as you enter, as the yellow flower turns to the sun. Understand me: this is none of that vain feeling that makes the silly smile bubble on the fool’s lips. It is as deep as the earth’s smell, and as solemn as where the tall trees tower in the wood. It is bound up with every wish. Selfishness, unselfishness: they mean nothing now. When I build myself the stronghold, all shall be sheltered; when I call for sheep, every man shall eat mutton and wear wool; when I seized you, I brought to everyone that loveliness that makes life worth living, light in our darkness, for we had none of it before.

In the books there are poems written about people like you, whose beauty makes labour a joy, and danger like a song, and planning and fighting like the thoughts of the men who wrote those poems."

"Why, you boy, it's only to you I seem so, because you like me."

"Not so, no more than I am a boy. It is bound up with what I was just saying. Father and Crab are wise, and they think. I am what their thoughts tend to; when I am myself, that is. That is why I must be Chief. Other women, yes, and other thoughts too, tend to the beauty that you are. And I can place you where all shall turn to you, and they shall reflect, if not your form, something of your radiance, which can be transmitted in all the sweet arts of life which you, being you, can learn and invent without effort, and which, being mine, you shall naturally teach. More, Father says that people grow physically like their ideal forms. Because you are beside me your beauty will be in all eyes, and celebrated, and you shall see, as if they were your own children, the young girls grow like you, as if wishes could carve their features, and those that are most like shall be first chosen (for we must have plenty of women, else choice cannot make us fine). Then their children——"

"All this is mad," said Rose. "Yet it makes my cheek burn. When you talk like that, I feel

that this valley has not a few people in it, but crowds, all like things in dreams. You tell too many stories here, out of those books. The people are walking about among you. They get inside you and make you mad. It's like when people clear the ruined houses and sleep in them. They say the ghosts crawl inside them, and they become strange, and they tremble, and the ghost looks out of their eyes, and when you speak to them they say nothing, and suddenly the ghost laughs at you."

"How strangely you think," said Harry. "You see things truly, but you name them like a child, and like a child you fear the unknown. I love it. What is it? Crowds of men, stretches of country; a lifetime stretching out in the darkness, which is beginning to lift. That sort of darkness is like that which hangs over a field one goes out early to work upon. Ah! I will plough it with a sharp share, and grow homes, gardens, songs, arts, as other men grow corn. Look, you are the first thing the darkness has given me, earnest of much. You know how, before the dawn, you may come on a briar all ablown, shining like forever, in a pocket of dewy light——"

"Don't talk so wildly, Harry. When you show your teeth and your eyes stare, all the terrible things that have happened, wake up inside me."

"Ah, I only wanted to make you feel as I do.

You are part of me. You shall not feel what is outside, or what is to come. Let the others do so, not us."

"Part of you? I don't know."

"You *shall* know. Here's my arm. Do you see this vein? That's my blood. Open your dress, let me press it against your side. I feel as if our blood was mixing. That would make you part of me. Lean back, where the bracken hides us. Give me your lips."

"Harry!"

"Be still. No one will come here. Don't—this is solemn. It's beyond pleasure, even. Open your eyes. Mix them with mine. Forget everything. You are me, I am you. Ah, no. Be still. Ah! Rose!"

She was stroking his hair. His helpless head was pressing on her shoulder. His eyes were tightly closed.

Father bent over the Chief and carefully lifted a corner of the poultice. The wound was still open, but shallowing. It was moist and still yellowy with pus. Father gave the poultice a jerk, so that the Chief cried out.

"Does it hurt? Let me get round to the other side." He took a goose's quill which he had thrust into his belt, and slipped it into his mouth. He stood level with the Chief's waist and bent over to strip the poultice from the groin, so that his back was to the Chief, and to

George, who stood by the bed's head. He bent and thrust the quill forward between his lips, pulled back a little more of the dressing and puffed soot on to the pus. Then he hurt the Chief again.

"Oh," cried the Chief. Father disposed of the quill.

"It shouldn't hurt like that," he said. "Does that hurt too?" He worked the poultice over the wound a little.

"Damn you. Like hell!" cried the Chief.

"What? That's bad. Let me look at it. Good Lord! George."

"What's up?" said George.

"Look at this. Tell me, Chief, have you a dead feeling round it?"

"I don't know. What if I have? It feels strange."

"That *is* black," said George uneasily.

"I'll put the poultice back for a moment. Come outside, George, I must talk to you about this."

"Stop that," cried the Chief. "You say what you want to say in front of me. What is it?"

Father released a little more of the horror that was in him into his face.

"It's ten years since I've seen anything like this," he said.

"You mean the woman Margaret, Rickie's woman?" said George.

"No, no," said the Chief.

"Chief, I'm sorry. Have courage. I've seen a good many wounds, and this black ooze is unmistakable. Is your leg at all drawn up under the thigh?"

"Yes, it is. A crawling feeling."

"That's how it started with her."

"Ah, she yelled and screamed," muttered the Chief.

"If it was six inches lower, we could cut the leg off," said Father. "As it is, it'll go right up into the gut."

"I've had some pains in my guts," said the Chief.

"No, that must be your fancy."

"I tell you I have."

"It's impossible. It'll be several hours before it spreads like that. I know these things, I tell you. When you were small we had three or four die of this—poor devils! Let me think."

He went to the door and called for one of the young men, whom he sent for a book. When it came:

"Let's look at this, George," he said. "Here, this is about mortification and gangrene. Turns black, ah, spreads towards the heart; foetid odour, hm, not yet. Pain . . . ugh! morphia, that saved the worst pain."

"What's morphia?" cried the Chief.

"We've none of it now, Chief, it came across

the sea. Look, George; amputation essential . . . look, good results have followed . . . ah, that's impossible for us."

"I can't make all this out," said George. "Fever. Have you got a fever, Chief?"

"I'm sweating."

"I don't know," said George.

"This book's no damned good," cried Father passionately. "And there's nothing else. Oh, Lord! Except that old Greek work, and that's unreliable; there's plenty of things suggested in it, but those people were wrong as often as they were right."

"Let's hear it, anyway," said the Chief. "Go on, boy, go on. Hurry. Get that Greek book."

"It's a little brown one," said Father, "brown leather. There's no back to it. Oh, I'll find it." He went out.

"I believe it is getting into my guts," said the Chief. "I feel sick. I'm going to be sick."

"It says vomiting," said George, puzzling over the book.

Father came back, bringing the Greek book, and with him came two of the older men. They had heard the news in sentences that made it a foregone conclusion, and their faces were sombre. As Father took the book to the window, they went up to the Chief, eyeing him in friendliness and dreadful curiosity, speaking to him as if,

like a child who must sleep, he required a soothing answer rather than a rational one. How could he doubt such faces?

Outside in the honeysuckle dusk a girl passed with buckets. She spoke, and the Chief heard her voice through the voices in the room, and felt as one must feel who is being buried alive. The paltry mummary that doomed him went on.

"Ah," said Father, "these people were gamblers when it came to medicine." He laid the book down.

"What book's that?" asked one of the newcomers. Samson, it was.

"Oh, two or three old Greek authors, bound up together. Here's an English book on medicine; it tells us nothing. Read what it says. The Chief wanted me to look at these old people on the off-chance."

"Well, have you found anything?" asked the Chief.

"It's hard for me to understand this," said Father. "It's technical. I don't know."

"It must say something," said the Chief. "What does it say?"

"It's obscure."

"Go on, Father! Go on. You might try, at any rate." He began to mutter something about friendship, and his rough way that really meant nothing. Father turned pale, and his eyes hardened.

"Don't worry," he said firmly. "If there's anything here that's reasonably safe, I'll puzzle it out."

"Not," he added in a hard emphatic voice, "because of friendship or your precious '*old times*'—don't think it. I'll do everything I can because I'm doctor now and you're my patient. I'd labour to cure you if you were the worst enemy I'd ever had."

Everyone in the room looked at Father. They were impressed by this chilly manifesto, as they might not have been by a more cordial response, and they were to remember it with conviction.

"There's only one possible thing here," he said, "and I think I've got it clearly, but . . . where's that son of yours? I tried to bang some Greek into his head years ago, in spite of the fuss you made. Maybe he'll remember one or two of the more doubtful words. Get him, Peter, and get his brother too. Get any one of the young fellows who have any sense. Get Crab, he'll know."

Crab could not be found at once; the others came immediately. They looked very blankly at the page. Father had not the least fear that they would spoil his scheme: they knew each only a few words of the language.

"That's 'blood,'" said one, "that's 'grievous pain.'"

"Damn it, I know that," said Father irritably. "But what's that about filling the vein, about

stopping the poisoned blood getting up into the trunk?"

"Yes, that's 'vein,' I suppose," said the other. Crab put his lean face in at the door.

"Do you want me?" he said.

"Not if you're as big a dolt as these are," said Father. "Here, what do you make of this?"

Crab took the book to the window and looked at it for a long time, poking his finger at a word now and then, in pretence of puzzling it out.

"The symptoms are a blackness first," he said, "by which you shall know it beyond mistake, and then in the passing of a few hours——"

"Farther down the page," said Father; "we know that."

"Alkios' cries were heard over Corinth."

"Not that! Not that!" cried Father, glancing at the Chief. "Right at the bottom."

"What is it?" cried the Chief miserably.

"It's nothing."

"What is it?" roared the Chief, pointing at Crab. Crab looked at the little group as if half bewildered.

"It's a description of gangrene in the bowels," he said, "as far as I can tell."

"Read what it says."

"I forbid it," said Father. "Don't be a fool, Chief. Let's get on with finding out how to prevent it getting there."

"What!" said Crab. "Has his wound gone wrong?"

"Read the bloody book," said George. "That's what you're here for."

Crab looked a while longer at the Chief in horror. Then he looked at the book again.

"It says the blood turns thick, then black," he said at last. "Sometimes it thickens in a moment in the heart or brain. Usually the vileness spreads slowly out from the wound along the veins, corrupts the bowels and lungs——"

"What's that about checking the spread?" said Father.

"The vein slit and hot bitumen dropped in——"

"That's damned nonsense, the pain would kill a man. He'd die of shock. Besides, we've no bitumen."

"The bone from the leg of a new-killed fowl thrust in, along which the blood may pass when the marrow dies."

"That sounds queer. It might be possible in the leg artery, not in the groin——"

"The white from the egg of the stork' . . . or . . . some other bird, I suppose. What's the word?"

"It doesn't matter."

"The white from the egg of the stork thrust into the veins all about. The egg of the Egyptian'—same kind, I suppose—is good.' But there are no storks here."

"The white of all eggs is the same," said Father with an effort, he was so intensely wearied by his loathing of this grave, deadly idiocy.

"Shall I go on? There's something about a snake's bones made to glow and applied. 'Clio was saved thus.'"

"I doubt it," said Father, "but we might try that. Burning, if the Chief could stand it."

"What's that about the fowl's bone?" said the Chief.

This was the wrong question. He should have asked for the white of egg.

"Look here, Chief," said Father boldly, "the fact about these remedies is this: any of them *may* save you, any of them may be dangerous. The people who wrote didn't know enough. I think you ought to have the hot snake bones because I don't like tampering with veins. I don't think I, or anyone else, could open the big vein in your crutch wide enough to get a fowl's bone into it without your bleeding to death. Besides, the bone would cause you endless ulcers, even if the rotting marrow didn't give you a new gangrene on its own account. I should choose the red-hot bones. But I don't believe in any of them so surely as to insist on it. You must have one, or die horribly. But you'd better choose for yourself. Peter, go and kill a fowl, a little chicken for the leg artery, and the biggest old cock you can get hold of to jam into the big vein. You'd better tell a half-dozen

of the strongest fellows to come and hold the Chief down."

"Stop," said the Chief, "wait a minute. What was that other about the white of egg?"

"Oh, that's nothing. That's just sticking a quill in you, or the needle of what was called a hypodermic syringe (we've got one, if it's still workable), and squirting a little white of egg in it to choke up the veins for the time being."

"Well, why don't we do that?"

"I think the hot bones would be better."

"Well, I don't. Get out that thing you spoke of, I'll try the egg."

"There is a dead adder," said Crab. "One of the kids scotched one to-day, up by where the beetroots are. I could get it with a lantern."

"We could soon burn the bones," said Father.

"Damn you, I'll have the white of egg," roared the Chief. "Do as I tell you."

"Why not leave it till you feel it starting on your guts," said George.

"I do feel it," said the Chief. "I feel my side getting all dead and heavy. I feel sick too."

"Do you feel any clogged feeling in your heart?" asked Crab.

"I don't know. I think I do."

"Well, we'd better do something then, and damned quickly. If it's getting thick near his heart . . . don't you think?" asked Crab.

"Yes, hurry, Crab. Get me that old box of instruments. You get some warm water, Samson. Get an egg broken, too."

"Get four," cried the Chief.

"Don't worry. One will be enough, really, and more than enough."

Crab brought the instruments, and took out the hypodermic.

"I expect this is worn out," said Father, wiping off the thick grease. "No, look, it works. It's been kept carefully. Who'd have thought we'd have found a use for it now? Where are the eggs?"

"We ought to bolster the Chief under his haunches," said Crab.

"No," said Father, not objecting to this meaningless trick, the more of those the better, but because he felt Crab was too conspicuously against the Chief to have a further hand in the business. He gave him a glance, a flick of the eye, and Crab withdrew to the farthest corner of the room.

"I think his arms should be raised," said Father to those about the Chief. "It's important to get as much blood as possible as far as possible from the point of operation." A chilly disgust moved in his stomach as he spoke; he saw murder, superstition, darkness, all as one.

"I shall stick you six times," he said to the Chief. "Thrice into the wound and thrice into the veins outside. It's only a prick."

"Come, George," he whispered. "Quick! His face is puffing. It looks dangerous."

His object in tampering with the wound was to drive the soot further into it, in case any should detect afterwards that the black was entirely superficial. He drove three times into the wound. The Chief yelped and swore. Then Father waited for several minutes.

"Now," said Father. Here filled the glass container with white of egg and drove it once into the femoral artery, and twice into the big vein between the legs.

"My God, I hope we've not been too late," he said.

"It would be funny," he thought dispassionately, "if white of egg doesn't make a clot after all. Was it on the heart or the brain? To remember it sixty years!"

The seconds passed like drips of water, slowly. He watched the Chief.

"Aah!" said the Chief and his body moved a quarter of an inch, which was yet like an earthquake. His face, without measurable physical alteration, changed, and became that of a demon. His glance, oddly detached from the turmoil behind it, like an arm pointing out of raging water, struck straight at Father, and he was dead.

"Too late!" said Father, in a voice like a sob. The others stared at him.

"He's dead."

"The Chief's dead," said someone by the door.

"The Chief's dead!" said someone outside.

"What's that?" rose up in the house, and as if the walls themselves knew it, there could be heard in the farthest recesses of the building, wordless as an echo, the beat of the syllables, "The Chief's dead."

"The Chief's dead," cried a woman, running like a hen towards the huts on the farther side of the yard.

"Darling," said Rose to Harry under the dewing sky. "Darling, I want to stay. I mean it, Harry."

"Darling!" said Harry.

CHAPTER XIV

HARRY sat in the Chief's great chair. Under his arms, the wood, axe-faceted, had an iron feel. The solid back, disdainful of comfort, rose straight up and towered above his head. Only two or three people were in the room, silent in corners, so it seemed empty. The afternoon sun was yellow in the dusty panes; broken in the leafage outside, it tumbled through, dried the dead flies on the sills, and fell in clumsy irregular patches on the flagged floor. It was hot. A sweet white stench, like that of the privet flower, soaked through the ceiling, penetrating the wood, hanging thick and waxy in the hot air, sickening the heart. The Chief lay in his room above. Up on the down they were digging his grave.

Father sat in the far corner of the room, resting his arms on the bench before him. He was tired. He would close his eyes and sink his head upon his arms, and then after a few minutes raise it again, and look at Harry, who sat dressed in the plundered wool, his gaze pregnantly blank, his yellow mane kingly, heraldic, against the crude red of the wood. With each new glance at him, Father felt the same rush of gladness to

his heart, but his heart was too tired to deal with gladness; it was a confusion, leading nowhere, and it exhausted him. Then he would droop a blind head again, back on to his arms, back into the past, where he would meet, with the same alarming lack of response, first a wild and merry boy of forty years ago, whom he had loved, and then a burly, shame-faced, determined man, with George and the others behind him, saying, "You've been boss long enough; we're going to run the place now." When he met these ghosts, the loved boy and the hated man, he waited for some regret or some fierce pleasure to spring up in his heart, but all that stirred in him was one nagging thought—"Harry can read Greek; supposing that he looks at the book, and compares it with what they say we read out to them?" It wouldn't matter much, but he wished he could sleep. Still, there was Harry in the chair, dominating the empty room, thinking the lion's thoughts.

Little Joan strayed into the room; she had been drifting about all day, out of the yard. The trembling and the hurting was over, and so was the strange feeling of being grown up, more than grown up, more than the great man even, the feeling that had made her chest hurt. It was all over: the dragon secret was dead. The jewels must always be hidden. She smelt the waxy privetty smell, and her little sallow face paled, and she crept out again.

Crab came in, looking like a somnambulist, he so drooped his eyelids to hide his burning eyes. He looked at Father as a young man looks at a woman grown squeamish after the first act of guilty love. He looked on Harry, and his heart grew warm again. He sat down beside him and began to talk in a quick quiet voice of whom to trust, when to act.

"There's no doubt about it, anyway," he said. "The youngsters would vote solid for you if it came to an election. Besides, the old men are divided: a handful for George, and the rest——"

"I'll have no election," said Harry. "It's not the men who can give me this. I can be under no bond to them, to serve their immediate wants. I serve an abstract thing, and I'll be answerable to none in how I do it. If I meet resistance, I'll quell it myself. I know, Crab, that you have made an assured victory for me by the way you've worked them all. But if Father has ever said a true word, he said it when he told us how men's desires have always been their worst enemies. I am friend to their good, and therefore enemy to their desires. I will not be pledged. There shall be no election."

"He is right," said Father, who came silently to stand beside them.

"It means taking the aggressive side," said Crab, "and perhaps having to press it so hard as to alienate many."

"No," said Harry. "They know me. They know what I want, and for what I want it. I need make no speeches, nor answer any questions. Don't be afraid."

Walter came in, smelled at the air uneasily, and said:

"The grave's ready."

"The bell had better be rung at once," said Father.

A chain hung by the entrance, coming down through a hole in the ceiling. Father began to pull at it, and a little rusty alarm bell, taken from a tottering steeple, oscillated among the chimney stacks, its cracked voice cuckooing a broken call to the farthest rim of the valley. Footsteps responded, the people began to crowd in at the doorway. Nothing was said till the last had come in, then Father spoke up.

"We are here to bury the Chief. It is a solemn thing, too solemn even to be mocked by funeral speeches in which we could only put into idle words the things about him which we all know. Until we have returned here, leaving him chambered in the chalk, high above the valley which he has ruled, so long—till we are back here, let there be utter silence. Utter silence."

The words fell on utter silence. He motioned to those who were to carry the Chief, and they glanced at one another and went up the stairs. Father walked through the dividing crowd and

out into the yard, where they followed him. The men came down, erect under the heavy bier. Father walked ahead of them, and Harry behind. The men and women crowded silently behind.

They went slowly up the path through the wood and along the turf track which skirted the inner lip of the down and out to where, on a great chalk buttress, the grave was cut out of the clean white, where the Chief was to lie till the foul flesh was gone and he was hard and clean as the chalk itself, silent under the blowing grass of summer, freezing under the winter stars, a ripple in the turf, the larks' seat, the hare's form, safe in the pure chalk for ever.

They lowered him in, and with no delay struck their broad shovels into the most powdery patches of the outflung mound, which fell about him quietly till he was all covered, and then they cast in the larger lumps, which quickly filled the hole and rose in a little barrow above him, which they covered with the cut sods. It would soon be nearly flat again, and it would never be quite flat. That is the mark a chief leaves.

Father leant on his big stick and stood at the head of the grave, with his gaze bent down upon it. Suddenly, as if he had heard a cry, he raised his head and looked long over the flat lands, a stare of pride and foreboding. Most of the watchers realised that he was looking to where the Chief had been struck down, and they

responded to the purpose of his glance, and felt, as he intended them to feel, so much the more disposed to strike out and seize upon the delinquent lands. When he felt their glances return from following his own, and centre on himself again, he took them on his face as on a buckler, and turning it, flung them all on to Harry, who, unwittingly, still fixed a threatening and exultant eye on the country below. He woke from his reverie under the impact of their questing looks, and smiled.

Then Father, with a valedictory gesture, turned from the grave and led the way to the house again. They went down, as they had come up, in utter silence. They had willingly assented to raise no voice as they carried the Chief to his grave, and now, as they left him there, so strong a general impression had been created that no man dared to be the first to break the quiet, not even by a whisper, though there were some among them who were eager to communicate those plans which are more definite than murmurings, and which, as Father had calculated, are usually left to the last minute.

In the house, in the great room, they hung like a cloud, no man taking his place, nor knowing quite where to turn.

Harry had seen one thing very clearly: the flash of militant spirit that had united everybody in that moment on the top of the down. He

decided to work on this. At the house door he turned aside, and let the rest press on into the room, where, as they still hung doubtfully, he made entrance on them, armed and helmeted, and pressing through, he flung himself with a metal clatter into the Chief's chair.

"We must have all that land," he said.

The young men were delighted. They began to shout. George sprang up to speak, but they shouted louder, and his voice was drowned. The older men looked at one another, not wholly displeased. Most of them would have liked to be Chief, but each was conscious he had no support, and the choice seemed to lie between George and Harry, and all but a few infinitely preferred Harry. George, shouted down, waited for the noise to cease, but as he waited the heart went out of him, for he realised that half the noise was made in his despite, and he, who so bitterly hated all but his own little faction, suddenly saw how he was hated in return, which was something he had never considered, and which now astoundingly left him hopeless and impotent.

"Pull him out of the chair, George," whispered Will.

"Don't talk like a bloody fool," said he.

"What, are we going to be ordered about by that cub?" said Will, and getting no answer from George, he turned to James, who he saw had overheard them, and said louder, "What

do you think, James? Are you going to knuckle under?"

"He's a chief," said James, "and no one else is. Still——"

"Chief!" said Will. "Ah! let him go about in his tin helmet then, as much as he likes, but is he going to run things here?" He began to talk about experience.

"Rodney was saying that he'd be all right if he had some of us as a sort of council behind him," said James.

Will had heard this idea, and turned to it now as a last hope. He thought that if he and George could be on the council, and a couple of easy-going ones, perhaps, Harry might be restrained, set at naught, tripped up; anything was possible.

"Yes, let's have a council," he cried. "A council! A council!"

"What's that?" said Harry, lifting his head to stare at the noise in the corner.

"Speak up, James," said Will, knowing that the steady man's less interested views were more likely to be received with respect than were his own.

"Everyone here likes Harry," said James. "And there's no doubt about it that for some things he's got the gift of taking the lead as no one else has. For some things, I say. Things like the raid, for example. But there's more than that in running a place like this. There's

fixing the crops, for instance; there's judging between man and man if there's a quarrel, there's deciding what preparations to make against trouble from outside, and what to do if such trouble comes to pass. Yes, there's fifty things, and I won't say that he couldn't tackle many of them as well as anybody; but some of them he can't be expected to tackle, being so young. Nor can it be expected that we older men could sit down and be ruled by him on such points. Not that most of us mind him giving the orders—we don't. But what I say is, it'd be better if we could feel he had a few of the seniors behind him, and went by their advice—a sort of Parliament—so we should feel it was them we were obeying, and not the youngster only."

James ceased. A buzz of whispers arose. His words had the appeal of plain common sense, which is a rhetorical appeal, quite apart from its validity as reasoning. Harry, listening with a thoughtful impassivity, saw the effect of this moderate and good-natured plain-speaking, even upon the younger men. Father saw it too, from his seat at Harry's side, and so did Crab, who was leaning against the wall, in the narrow space behind the great chair.

"Speak, Father," he said, speaking without moving his lips. "Let them put it to the vote; the young men'll vote our way after you've spoken. Let them vote on this, Harry. You must let them vote on this." Harry nodded into space.

Father had already seen Crab's point. He must talk until their supporters had lost the ring of James's honest voice out of their ears. He began by agreeing heartily with the speech : he saw the point of view absolutely. On the other hand, he had seen what no one here except Aldebert had seen, and that was the inevitable and baneful reality that soon devoured up all the fair promise of democratic governments.

"Is that not so, Aldebert?" Aldebert nodded. He fully believed he had known a world that had collapsed when he was a boy of twelve.

They two had seen, Father said, the awful end of an epoch of this form of government. Admittedly such a catastrophe could not happen in this case, but his point was, that the debacle was only the death of a policy which had been crippled from birth. He became prolix and inventive in cataloguing varieties of the baseness which Parliaments, county councils, village councils had drawn as it were out of the hearts of their constituents and accreted like cancers in the heart of the general life. Base in prosperity, wretched in collapse, but better in collapse than in prosperity.

"Is that not so, Aldebert?" Aldebert nodded.

He touched on the manly weakness that demanded a share in government, commended it first, and derided it afterwards. He spoke of the nature of specialist functions, the illusory and

the real nature of power, and the rewards of power. He referred to Harry's youth, and to the youth of Alexander and of Charles of Sweden. As to the wisdom of the older men, they were wise, but there were more forms of wisdom than one. He knew the older men could not agree, but—there were the books. It was ancient history now, and the history of a tragic and inevitable wrong, that his sons, and the sons of the others who founded the gang, had been starved of learning. Learning was something which all great men had admitted (and here the younger men who had tasted it would agree), was the best guide to life and the best counsellor of rulers. Harry had that. If he needed guiding at all, it was not by those who had less of it, whose views were limited to the narrow horizons of the valley, whose opinions were formed in a narrow cell of time that was already past—for, in all respect he said it—Alexander of Greece or Maximian of Dacia, dead thousands of years, were nearer and more present to their needs than he who died yesterday—no, it was not guidance from the less learned, but from the more so.

"I," he said frankly, "am old and unfit to rule. Perhaps I never was fit. I'm unfit even to govern the opinions of a chief. That doesn't matter, for I hold most firmly that a governed chief is not a chief at all. But such as I and Aldebert here are in a sense books ourselves, and

we are fit to be guides to other books. We have seen millions of men killed, towns flame up, armies desperate, their leaders in power one day, and the next—condemned to die. We are old and weak now, we have only one claim to be thought wise, and that is, that you are here, alive and well fed. But if advice is needed, it is from us it should be asked. We do not wish to be a council. We are learned, and if learning is not enough, God knows we are experienced." He sighed.

"Well," said he, "what are we to do? Shall we put it to the vote? Let us vote on it. Agreed?"

"Yes," cried many, and no one dared dissent.

"There are two issues," cried Father. "For appointing a council of the older men to govern the Chief, and for trusting the Chief to lead us, and lead us well. Who's for the council?"

A score or so, all of them middle-aged men, put up their hands.

"And now," said Father gladly, "who's for a free Chief?"

Fifty odd arms rose and waved, and cheering began.

"I will rule you," cried Harry in a voice of thunder. The young men were delighted.

CHAPTER XV

THE first of October was as good a day in the morning as any in the year. The early air, a crisp and stinging powder of blue and gold, softened as the dew rose to a russet warmth, in which the tumbled roofs, wretched in December and ugly in June, found a mellow handsomeness that suited them well. The rank elders drooped under their broad black-purple beads of berries. The beeches had here and there a tawny blaze; here and there on oak and ash a single limb thrust out from the green a tuft of hot or languid gold. From the furthest shed the sound of a flail was busy in the cheerful air. A long line of men laden with baskets passed and repassed between the woods and the open fields. They were carrying rotten leaves to dig into the vegetable patches. Others were digging out the senior of the great pits, into which the guts of rabbits and birds, and the clearings of their latrines were buried, and carting them off to be worked into the pockets among the weeds, where next year's corn crop was to be sown. These were the sources of the bulk of their manure; they had also ash heaps for a spring

dressings, and some fowl droppings from the roosts, but these were for the vegetable plots. The crops were well enough as far as feeding went. What made Harry frown was the necessity of scraping these unobtrusive pockets in the tangly fallows. He longed to see a wide stretch broken by the plough.

He sat in the little upper room where the maps were. Every day his spies came in with fresh details of the country for a score of miles round. He noted where hamlets were, their strength, how they lived and what they had. Some, when he knew more about them, were to remain marked in black like all other features of the country, for inclusion; others were to be ringed in red for extermination. Already tentative lines were partly traced on the map, showing what area was to be under their range, and what in their holding. Harry pored over these and groaned at the thought of his puny man-power. He was impatient to make a *coup*, so that the gang should thrill with exaltation and strain, and between one and the other yield him a more despotic power. He wanted new men for this, and he wanted them also for the purpose of splitting up the too family atmosphere in the valley.

He wondered how soon they would be in a position to raid sheep. For that, they must needs be strong enough to keep them openly. Nothing was more unfortunate than the loss of

the mare they had seen. Her capture would have saved an enormous amount of man-power in bringing the stones from the castle ruins, four miles away. That man-power could have been diverted to building up the fort ; it would have been done years earlier, and till he had it he felt he dared venture little. Light wheeled trucks were being made for the portorage, which was to begin as soon as the autumn digging was done, and to go on during hard weather all the winter. He had been tempted to move his headquarters to the ruins themselves, and rebuild there, but there was no doubt that there was infinite advantage to the valley, as a tactical position. He turned to considering the reports he had heard on the decay of Newbury ; it seemed that that little holding must collapse at any time.

It was noon. He went down to take a bite. There was no spread midday meal at this season of hard digging ; people ate where they were, the women taking out food in baskets.

Rose and Father sat on a bench awaiting him. At the sight of them his excitement stooped and settled in his heart, folding its wings into happiness. How sweet it was to see these, the two halves of his life, joined happily together ! For Father, in the very earliest days, as soon as he saw how high Rose was held by Harry, had set himself to pay court to her, in order that her influence might be less likely to contend with his own, but rather be a vehicle of it. He found

her likeable, which was pleasing, and he found her of the right spirit to be Harry's consort, which was important. As for Rose, she was bewitched by the old man. Harry owed more of her compliance to the greybeard than ever he dreamed. The vehement speeches in which he mingled love and ambition and ideals would have achieved little unsupported ; there was too much passion in them to elicit more than a passionate response, subject to reaction. Father, on the other hand, uninflamed and under no illusions as to her intelligence, led her on from viewpoint to viewpoint ; he told stories, paid compliments, was a little sentimental, till at last she saw something of their objective, which Harry had assumed she would comprehend instantaneously, and then, and only then, Harry's words became coherent to her, and when Father rhapsodised about him, she saw him as splendid, as well as beautiful, or as a boy, and could pretend he was her brother.

She forgot what had been in her mind when she asked Harry which way he looked over to where she had come from, and from regarding her surrender as a necessary subterfuge, sweetened by an almost guilty madness of the blood, she began to think of this place as her home, and to set her thoughts on the position she was to hold there.

She would have succeeded, had it not been for the thought of her brother, for whom, if her love for him was dissolving in her love for Harry, she

had still the unchangeable feeling of a mother, a feeling which had grown up as the succeeding years had still found her childless among women who all had broods of their own. She had been wondering if there was hope in asking that he might be brought here; she thought he would come, but, partly because her own hot and secret resistance was so recent in her, she found it hard to believe her captors would assent. Yet she longed for his presence, and felt that if he were with her she need have no qualms in abandoning herself to the rush of happiness that was tearing her away from all the past.

To-day they were merry at their meal; Father was positively arch in his sallies. She looked at her handsome young bridegroom, and found his eyes always waiting to meet her own. She looked at the jocund old man, the lofty and wise old man, and saw how he delighted in the boy's happiness, and was himself grateful to her as a lover might be because of it. She was so happy that it seemed that nothing could go wrong, and widening her eyes over the brim of her cup, she rejoiced them both, while she turned on her tongue the phrase and note of her request. Lowering the cup, she was about to speak, when the door opened and Crab came in.

As a politician Crab had now two handicaps. One was his love for Harry, which was too great to be managed by judgment, and the other, springing out of it, was his uncon-

trollable jealousy of Rose, which he made but a poor show of dissembling. He suffered abominably. Rose knew that he hated her, and she hated him the more. He treated her with the utmost courtesy, made her speeches that were painfully artificial, praised her to Harry for Harry's pleasure, but he could not bear to see them together, and when he stumbled on them, he racked his brains for an excuse to draw Harry away.

This time, seeing they were done eating, he declared he could not eat himself, had had some already, but he wanted Harry to come with him as soon as possible to decide where the new outposts were to be, on the very farthest of the downs.

"Wait a little, Crab," said Harry. "Sit down," and he turned his eyes again on his charmer.

Crab sat down. Rose became coquettish with Harry. Crab, out of a dry mouth, began a recital of problems concerning the outposts. He had found a new point, he said, on which he thought their whole system might be concentrated. It would mean revolutionising the whole thing. It seemed to him to be a matter of the greatest importance. He wanted Harry to see it at once.

"Where is it? What's the idea?"

Crab became very vague, diplomatic to an almost algebraical degree. Harry realised that he would not speak definitely in front of Rose, a

caution unassailable in theory, but, since he sensed its motive, one which was irritating in practice. He listened on with half an ear. Crab persisted. Rose smiled. At last Harry's attention was caught.

"All right," he said, rising, "I'll come now."

Rose followed their exit with a sombre eye. Crab's victory was Harry's tardy interest; that was little. Her loss, though, was also that of the golden opportunity for speaking of her brother, and that was much. Decidedly she hated Crab.

"I feel twenty years younger in all this bustle," said Father pleasantly. "We had been vegetating too long. Nor, my dear, is it only the warlike stir that moves me." He began to talk about heroes: how war alone may make a captain, but for a hero there must be both war and love.

"Well, Crab," said Harry, as he followed along the track that led to the farther downs, "a lot has happened since we last walked this path alone together."

"The position I am going to show you," said Crab, "is one where a small body might hold up an attack for a valuable hour or two. It would be one of vital importance, if by any chance the Swindon men got on our track, as still they very well may. In fact, any band coming from the west or north-west would be pretty sure to leave the exposed rim of the down, and to strike

inwards, just into Silldown Bottom, and then over. Now just at the top——”

They were nearly four miles from the house, and two small inner ridges lay between. The ground was thick with hawthorn clumps. A cloud that had hung all the morning in the horizon, milky gold like a fleece, and battlemented like a Rhine castle, moved towards them on a change in the wind, and struck the hill, palling everything in a soft and deadening mist. They went on for a little in this, and came to the ridge that overlooked the deep bottom, where Crab thought a fortified outpost would be so useful. They walked always in the centre of a ring of mist, so close that it seemed they were alone in a room together. They fell silent, because they could not see far.

Harry stopped to do up the trailing latchet of his sabot. Crab stopped too. There was utter silence. Then there was a sound. They looked at one another.

Round the hawthorn clump, right upon them, stepped a young man. He held his head thrust forward, as if his life depended on the extra six inches of vision that he thus gained. When he saw them he stopped dead, turned to fly, saw it was hopeless, and faced round again.

They stood looking at him for two or three seconds. It was plain that he was helpless; he might prove a valuable prisoner, or a useful recruit. He was a Swindon man; he was

dressed in wool. He was young. He looked at Harry, then at Crab. He was afraid, and to disguise it he put on a look of scorn. Those features, and that look, hurt something in Crab's breast, and with a cry, drawing no weapon, he made two leaps over the ten feet that separated them and crashed with him into the scrub, where it was only waist-high. They toppled over the first stocks and disappeared into the brake.

"Stop, Crab!" cried Harry, amazed at the animal snarl he had heard.

He rushed forward to separate them, saw them heaving among the twigs, tripped on a twisted stem, recovered himself, and found the stranger was uppermost, and with a knife in his upflung hand. Harry caught at the hand, missed it, and kicked the man under the ear with all the force he could muster. The man's head shot back over his shoulder and he dropped like a sack.

"Ah," said Crab, wrenching himself out, "the bloody swine. I'm glad you killed him, Harry. I'm glad you killed him."

"What, is he . . . yes, he's dead," said Harry. The fellow's head hung like that of a bird's whose neck is wrung.

"Well . . . what the devil did you go at him like that for, Crab? Damn it, you behaved like a madman. I didn't want this fellow killed. He'd have been useful. What did you go like that for?"

"Ah, the bloody spy!" said Crab, turning his face away.

He bent over the body, still with his lips drawn back over his long teeth, still panting, and, twisting the yellow head askew, he shifted his own back to Harry, and looked long at the dead man's face.

"He's better dead," he said at last, over his shoulder. "His cloth's good, though. Can I have it?"

"I suppose so," said Harry shortly.

Crab pulled off the dead man's clothes and then stood up.

"I wonder if there's any others about," he said very calmly.

"If there were, they'd have either run by now, or they'd have attacked us," said Harry.

"No," said Crab, speaking slowly, as if he were analysing a picture in his mind, "I think he was alone. He looked as if he was alone."

"We'd better put him in that hole among the beeches," said Harry. Crab, without speaking, pulled the dead man out by the shoulders, and Harry took his legs, and they carried him through the silent mist to where a clump of beeches towered greyly up, and swung him into a pit that lay between the trunks. He crashed down through the nettles, breaking a litter of dead sticks that lay at the bottom. Two fat wood pigeons clattered out of the tree above, showed up big in the grey, and were gone.

"I'll chuck in a few spadefuls of earth when we start work to-morrow," said Crab.

"He was very young," said Harry, feeling unaccountably sad over the business, quite apart from the man's possible value to them. "I've never seen you go like that before, Crab. Ah, well!"

They walked on. Crab reflected on the superior astuteness of hate, which, it seemed, could discern a likeness where love itself saw none. He cut short his reflections, though, to discourse technically on the outpost they were to examine, lest Harry should dwell on the picture, which seemed to him almost tangibly before them, of the face of the dead man.

Harry looked at the position, as far as was possible in the mist, approved Crab's scheme and then enlarged on it. Why not concealed trenches all along the rim of the deep cleft, so that they could place their whole force there, to ambush any invaders from that side?

They turned back, still discussing the details. As they passed the brake where the spy had been killed, Crab hooked out from under a bush the bundle of clothing which was his loot.

"It's yours by right, Harry," he said, "but if you say I may have it I'll wear it to-night and be as smart as the rest of you."

"I suppose you may," said Harry, still disproportionately oppressed by something about the killing.

Crab did. He knew why he wished to, and as he spread out the clothes he jeered at the piteous extreme to which his jealousy had led him. "I'm like one of those savages," he thought, "who stabbed one thing to kill another. Well, I'll slash well at the oats next harvest-time, for their yellowness' sake." He laughed, but his heart was, if the term can ever be used precisely, broken. Often enough he had played the imbecile for fooling's sake, and with relish; now he was doing so on vile compulsion, and was spared no jot of consciousness, and had not the slightest power to stop himself. He said, as he pulled on the smock, "If I wear these to-night, I am lost, I am dead. No more Crab. What will happen to Harry then?" He pulled on the breeches.

He had sat so long, holding the clothes on his knees, looking out from his shed into the fading sky, that the meal was well begun when he joined the rest.

In the great room a whisper had been passed round that a spy had been killed. Rose had heard it, and put her hand to her heart, then smiled and put the thought aside. It might be a spy from anywhere. Even if it was one of her own folk, what had she to do with the ruffians of that remote place? She had never liked any of them except her brother, and it could not be her brother because—it was impossible. So she smiled, and bent forward to speak to Father,

and sat back to brush with her eye Harry's eye, who was sitting beside her. She inhaled the smell of the room, no longer strange and terrifying, but fat to her senses, a lair smell which she now breathed as an inmate. The clustered heads, dark and fair, shaggy, clipped or curly, the wild faces and the stolid ones, the looks that were keen, or bumpkin, waggish or sensitive, all were now marks of people she knew, and people whose novel happiness she was not only entering but was to control. Her Harry shouted across the room, and a sea of faces swung round to the shout. He spoke to her, and no one heard. She was happy.

Then Crab came in. He was stopped for a second in the doorway, as if he was held up by the wave of general attention, the stares and the shouts. A new sight was well received in that room. He came down between the tables, smiling his crooked smile, held up by arms stretched out, called hero, stranger, dandy; everyone had something to say. Rose watched him. She had known the shape of those clothes even as he stood in the doorway. As he came nearer, she recognised the patchy dye. He was stopped. She wanted to see the buttons, if they were the sheep bone of her brother's carving. He came on a pace or two more. She could see the binding on the sleeves; she would not feel, she would not think, till she had seen the buttons. Crab extricated himself from the

last friendly Scylla of arms, and passed by the high table on his way to his place. There were three buttons of the yellow bone, cut into the shape of men's faces. No one else had ever done that.

Harry, who felt he had been a little surly over the unnecessary killing, leaned out as Crab went by, caught him, and said with his most affectionate smile, "Come on, you must sit up here to-night. All honour to the brave and the fair, and there's no doubt about it, you're both."

Crab was glad to sit down with them. His mood had collapsed, leaving him with a feeling of being weak and broken up inside. He scarcely knew who he was, and wanted only to sit steeping himself in Harry's effulgence till his nerves co-ordinated again. It was as if he had given himself over to some debauch in surrendering himself so utterly to his emotions. He was ill at ease, wearing the plundered clothes, ashamed of his motive in so doing; he felt that Rose would guess his motive and tell Harry. He told himself that she could not guess; it was the ordinary thing to do, no one could read a mad thought; but still he was ashamed. But she had not seen the dead boy. Was he like her enough to have been some relation? Anyway, she couldn't know. And anyway, Harry would have seen it if it hadn't been an illusion, a mirage. But he was ashamed, like one who has been drunk and cannot reassure himself as to what he

may have said or done. Harry saw his disquiet and attributed it to the slight tension there had been between them, so he turned his face to him and talked. Crab looked at Harry, drinking in his gaze, as woman repentant after some hysterical fury drinks in reassurance from her lover. Harry talked of something that had happened when they were boys. Father was tenderly interested, and watched him as he listened.

Rose sat back, bidding her heart be still, wiping the vixenish alertness from her face, biting her lips, whose coldness warned her that they were pale. Between them, Harry and the man she jealously hated, between them they had killed her brother. In one moment every warm feeling had been gorgonized into its hideous opposite.

The room rumbled like a great beast. Its hateful, thinking head lay next to her; three people, one head: brain and face and fangs.

If she got up and walked out now, someone would slip out after her to see where she went.

"You must bear it for a while, my dear one, or it would cause jealousy," the enemy would say.

She must wait, but not for long.

CHAPTER XVI

ALL the maps, save one, were kept in that upper room where Harry spent half his time, and where none of the captives were allowed to enter. The other map was a strange one. It was made on the blank side of a picture torn from one of the books, and kept rolled up and hid in a crevice in the loft where the women did their sewing. At first there had been only two dots on this sheet, one at the top and one at the bottom, with a straight line connecting them. Then little scratchy pictures began to appear on it, joined up by pinpricks. Thus there would be a group of little cones for hills, and another of hairy fuzz for trees, and a chain of dots between them to show how far they were apart. There were no words. Rose, who was making the map, could not write. She had never seen a map, so she drew her route as being quite straight, and bent the landmarks to it, which, since she did not regard the straight line as being a picture of her way, was quite as well.

She had been filling the map in during the last fortnight, by asking questions, one here and one there, never more than one of the same

person at the same time. She knew that the main direction was a little north of west, and she remembered that they had borne her first over her own downs, then over some flatter chalk lands, then through the woods where they had camped, then over the swamp and up through the scrub into these downs. But she was too well aware of how the sun could lie hid in a blanketed October sky, and how mazy the woods could be, and how thousand-faced were the dimpling unchangeable downs, to venture on her journey without collecting every bit of information she could gather. To lose the way was to be lost for ever, and in a cruel land. So she made friends with the most careless of the boys who had been out on the raid, and sat with them while they talked of their adventure, and asked artless questions, and found by chance from one that Cirencester lay beyond Swindon, and told another that there were vast flocks of sheep all over the downs about Cirencester, so that in their longing for action they began to discuss these imaginary flocks, and how they might raid them, and she told them how far a flock might be driven in a day, and many other things about sheep, so that they worked out in her hearing how they might drive their booty across the stretch they knew.

She began an involved and pathetic plea with Rodney to the effect that it was no man of her people who had wounded the Chief, for the arrow

must have been poisoned, and none of her people used such things, but she had heard of a hateful race who lived in woods by a swamp who poisoned their arrows, and it must have been one of them. And Rodney, eager to find out if there were such people in those woods, assisted her in identifying the place; how it lay in relation to Swindon. By the time she had made it clear to him that it was Savernake she had in mind, he had unwittingly made it clear to her how to find her way from the camping-place to the tower. She asked things of the women, of Father, even of the children, and she became so avid in her new science of setting two halves of a split question together, that if her heart had been capable of swerving from its purpose, her invention would have set it on again, for she was as enthralled as if she had invented mathematics.

Yet, with it all, her map was a poor thing, a mere herring-bone of lines joining each landmark right and left to the main route at the point where it first came in sight. One slight deviation on a blind mile, and it would be useless.

During the fortnight that she was compiling it, another part of her brain was awake, like a rat, at work sleeplessly on the insoluble simplicity of a hopeless question. How could she elude her guards, and gain start enough to out-distance her pursuers? All day the sentries walked on the bare lip of the down, which she

must cross. At night she lay by Harry, now in the Chief's room in the house. The creaky house was full of sleepers, and below stairs, and in the yard the quiet mastiffs kept guard. There was no moment in all the day when she might hide herself uncalled for. When the mists were on the slopes, the captives had to stay in the house. She could not disguise herself; if she feigned illness, she would be too closely tended; there was no one to whom she dared make the first hints of a confidence.

She sat turning and turning the problem in her mind on the parapet of an old well which was set among worn-out elders and the foundations of what had been farm cottages, a quarter-mile from the house. The brickwork on which she sat was old, the mortar nearly gone, and a large section of it moved, grating like a rotten tooth in its setting, as she shifted her seat. She moved with instinctive quickness, then turned and looked drearily over, down to the silver and black where the rotten water stood twenty feet below. She grasped the loose block and worked it one way and another; it was very loose. She began to tremble, inexplicably; she thought it must be a delayed fear. Then, in a sort of whimpering of the mind, she realised she had conceived an idea, she scarcely knew what; she had to wait, shivering and panting, till she could bring it to birth as a full-formed thought.

That night she asked Father about the stars.

Was it true, what he had said once, there were great bears, and seven sisters, and the man with sword and dog up there? There were none in the stars at her place, she had looked often enough. She loved to look at the stars. Why did they make one think of things that hadn't happened?

*"Many a time through yonder ivied casement, ere
I went to rest
Did I look on great Orion sloping slowly to the
West."*

"Which casement?" she asked. "But they all look to the east."

"It's a poem," he said, smiling. "Nevertheless, Orion's there. You shall see him."

"Will you take me outside, and show me?"

"My dear, how gladly would I forget my rheumatism at the prospect of doing so. But the uncivil rogue is envious, and at this very minute I feel him wake up in my old bones, 'roaring to make a third,' as the same poet said in another connection. Yet I'd ignore him, my dear, but here's Harry, who might roar also, for it's a privilege that youth is very grudging of, to age: that of showing the stars to starry eyes. We old men are fools, or we'd keep their names a secret, and preserve the pleasure to ourselves. As it is, he knows them all, and I'm sure he'll let no one but himself——"

"I'll show them to you," said Harry.

"Will you? As soon as we've eaten? All of them? Before the moon rises?"

"Yes, you child!"

They went out of the noisy room, into the yard, and tilted back their heads till the blueness seemed to settle about their faces, and the frosty stars swung a little and took on roundness, and near and far, in the vault. The stillness all but absorbed them, but one or two small meteors ran like rabbits into the warren of the milky way.

"There's Orion, there. Where that . . . No, but look first for three in a line. Lean back against me, and you can see where I point."

"Yes. How quiet it is! Harry, we've never done this before. I wish there weren't those yellow windows and the noise inside. I want to be . . . I don't know . . . so that I only think of the stars and you."

"Come through the gate. You'll not hear it there."

As they walked through, she locked her arm tightly in his, so tightly as to make the thought unthinkable that they should ever be apart. She tilted her face up and floated on his arm. As he stopped, she said:

"Oh, that was wonderful. I didn't look where I was going. I seemed to be up there, as if you were carrying me there. It made me feel so strange towards you." She caught her breath. "Isn't it strange, how you think you

love as much as you can, and then you find there's something? I'm glad we came out."

"You dear child!"

"Let's go on a little way like that. I want to feel it again." She pulled his arm about her and leaned back on it, her own arm about his waist. Her eyes were silver in her dark face, in the starshine.

The obvious way for him to bear her was along the smooth track at the bottom, beside which the old well lay. When they got there.

"Let us sit down," she said, "and now you can show me."

"What shall I show you first?"

"Show me the bear, and how he points to the north."

"Look, that's easy. Lean back, and this is the shape, on your face." He marked the points of the constellation with light touches on her cool skin.

"Yes," she said, "I see that. And how does it point to the north?"

"Ah, like this." He showed her. She looked long at it, then leaned back farther, so that her head fitted into his throat. She pressed his hand to her breast.

"It's wonderful here," she said in a breathless whisper. "Oh, Harry!"

He turned her to face him, pale face close to pale face in the darkness: the close hypnotism of faintly shining dilated eyes. Then, as it broke,

he sank his lips into hers. At last she drew her head back to draw a sighing breath, and as she did so she made her body rigid and stared over his shoulder.

"Ssh!" she said in a tiny quick whisper. "Harry, there's someone watching us. Who can it be? Ssh! don't move."

Harry repressed the leap of his muscles.

"Where?" he whispered as quietly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Straight behind you. I saw a head move. You know. In the bushes straight behind you. Who can it be? I'm frightened."

"He won't move while we're here," said Harry, his face set in a heavy, ferocious mask. "I wish I could get a bit nearer him, though."

"Yes, he'll easily get away."

"I'll have to risk that."

"Wait," cried Rose. "Wait. Wait. How can we pretend to stroll nearer?"

"Well, we could just walk on," said Harry.

"No, I don't want to be near. I know, let's pretend to play at dropping things in the well."

"How deep is it, Harry?" she went on at once in a normal voice.

"Oh, pretty deep," he said, equally loudly. "Drop a bit of mortar in."

"I can scarcely hear the splash," she said.

"The mortar's so light. Is there a loose brick?"

"Don't wrench one out of the wall. I'll get

you one from where the old cots were. Wait here."

He strolled across the turf, looking about the ground, edging nearer and nearer to the bush Rose had indicated.

Before he had reached it, she had slipped back six feet from the wall of the well, and slid, with one quiet, worming movement, under where an elder drooped over the ridgy nettly ground, whence she leaned out and thrust at the mass of loose bricks with a stick she had hid there, and as it gave way she uttered a short frenzied shriek, and jerked back her arm and the stick as the splash sounded below. Then she lay utterly still, scarcely breathing.

She heard a cry from Harry, heard him rush back, heard him calling her frantically; she listened for her own reply. Then she heard him panting, and then, with a dreadful sound, running madly off in the direction of the house. She picked up the knife and the little wallet of food she had hidden there, and ran, doubled up, up the side of the hill.

CHAPTER XVII

HARRY ran over the soft black ground. He tore through the soft black night. He was conscious of the yielding of the turf, which robbed his heel of the last jot of its thrust, so that it seemed he was running in sand, and he was conscious of the soft darkness, a clinging curtain that seemed to hold him back. As he ran, his mind, like a circling dog, was now ahead of him in the lighted room, in the hatefully unheeding crowd, now behind in the dark well. Why run? There was no hope; there was no movement in the well. He was running to pretend there was hope. He was running from the silence and the blackness of the well, the core of the night. He was running to where she had sat in the gleam of the yellow dips, in an eternal life, a heaven of her making, where she still must be. He was aware, by flashes, of each strand of his thoughts, and of its value, and he ran on. Why run? He stopped, and the dark water took him, and the dead face, eternal death, and he ran on. An onlooker would have seen only a faltering in his stride.

He burst into the lit room, and faces rose

about him like light and water, and there were men with torches sparking the dark along the valley bottom, and a torch held, twisting smoke and flame over the black mouth of the well, and a reflected light on what might be a face deep below. The ropes came, and he went down, light in hand, twenty feet to the flat and slimy ring of the water, which flung back the light; there was no face. His feet broke the terrible disk into fat ripples like opening lips, and it swallowed him and his gasping torch, and spewed him up again into blackness. He climbed up the rope, which they still slowly paid out till he had slack enough to plunge, and he cast himself into the quicksilver cold as far as he could get down, but it was forty feet deep.

When he came up it was as though they had dragged a monster up, who had been prisoned there time out of mind. It was like speaking to stone. They spoke to one another instead.

“She must have the lump on top of her.”

“Stuck in her skirts, maybe.”

He heard them.

“We must wait till daylight.”

He made a movement, but the ropes were still on him, and they were watching, and they bore him down.

That night they stood about the room in groups, watching him from the corners of their eyes, or sprawled over the tables with their heads between their arms. He sat, not in his chair,

but on a bench in the corner, dripping like a drowned man, his hair streaked down. Now and then he looked out of his eyes, looking about the room as if it were a strange place.

Father sat near him, useless. Crab had stood still when he came, and watched him from a distance, his lean face contracted as if by some inner fire; he had stood so for a little time, and then turned, driven from the room.

The fire sickened, the dips guttered, stank and faded. The room was being swallowed up in cold shadow. Then the shadow turned grey, and the last dip expired, and still it was not dark. Harry lifted himself to his feet.

“Come.”

It was too early, but they went. An hour after dawn, they knew there was nothing in the well. Harry came up for the last time and walked out from among them with a face like an idiot's, walked back to the house and up to his room. She had lain there. Her clothes were there. He looked about him and walked out again, aimlessly, and found himself back at the well.

One thought recurred to him: could there have been others there, who took her at the moment when she screamed, and the bricks fell? He knew it was quite impossible, he knew that he would have heard them stumbling off, but the thought recurred, and each time he grew weaker, more ready to accept it. He wanted

to tell it to someone. Perhaps Crab would be there.

But when he got to the well, some of them were already up on the hill, casting round for tracks, and others stood round a man who was showing something in his hand. He walked into the middle of this group.

"What is it?"

George, who stood near, took the thing from the man who had it and held it out to Harry.

"Only this." It was a gobbet of bacon, their sort of bacon, squeezed out from the tight wallet on which Rose had flung herself down under the elders.

His tired mind took in the meaning of it, and the meaning in George's eyes, and in everyone's eyes, as they riveted themselves on him.

"What do you make of that?" There was no need to answer George.

"She's gone to get Swindon down on us."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Nothing. That was obvious. Nothing. Let her go if she wanted to . . . after that moment under the stars . . . after everything. Let Swindon come down and wipe out everything, so it would all be over.

He heard a dreary stranger's voice saying:

"Ten hours' start. Let everyone who can travel fast go after her." A string of names followed. "Go in twos. Go back and get arms and a ration, and then off like hell."

He heard a dreadful voice say, "Don't bring her back."

Some chatter arose, something about the way she must take; where she'd have got to; where they might overtake her, or get past, if she'd missed the way, and lie up where she'd have to break cover.

Harry went in and sat in the room where the maps were, looking at the maps, wondering where she might stray; remembering she had asked for the north star; remembering what she had said, every word, of which he would never know which was true, or if any were true; wondering into whose hands she would fall of all the gangs whose retreats had been spied out, or if she would get through, or if she would be caught, and who would catch, and who kill her, and he wished she lay in the next room, wet and dead from the well.

The day passed, and the next day passed, and late on the third day some of the pursuers drifted back, and others came back after four or five days, and the last was wounded and had left his companion dead at the hands of strangers they had met. Harry still sat in the upper room, sending down orders now and then.

"Come down," said Father. "They are beginning to whisper against you, some of them, and the others listen."

"Ah, well," he said, and dragged his hand across his forehead, tearing grief away, and went down.

Things below were already in some confusion. A number of men were sitting about idly, some because their tasks were finished or they were uncertain how to go on, but more because they would not work under any of the self-appointed leaders who grasped at temporary command. Idleness and dissension were bad enough, but there was a third and worse element in the general unease. That was fear. Now it was certain that Rose was not caught, it seemed more likely than it had that she might get through. What force she might bring down on them was ceaselessly discussed; one thing was sure, that it would be large enough. Everyone was afraid, and grew irritable in the attempt to conceal it. Harry was blamed, illogically, but with that justice which is deeper than logic in the world of action.

Fortunately, their unconscious need of him was greater than their conscious resentment. They demanded of him two aspects: that of dejection and of submissiveness to the atmosphere of reproach, and that of a gay hardihood, the strength of being himself, invulnerably, the strength of a heavy, reassuring hand. He came in, and looking round at the uneasy little groups, he said:

"What's this? Is it a holiday? No, there's nothing of that about it, judging by your faces. Have you troubles? I don't know what they can be, but I assure you I sympathise. However,

we had better forget our troubles now—you and I—had we not? And we had better get to work. You stand about as if we had no visitors to receive. Well, it's ten to one we've not. All the same, we had better be ready, I think. Yet you stand. I've seen the rabbits stand so, when the stoats were after them. Damn it, you're afraid. Well, be afraid, but work. What I sent word for—has it been carried out? I have not been idle; my orders meant something. Those in charge of the jobs, are they here?"

"It's you and your orders have got us in this fix," said George.

"What? Do *you* speak? You've found a backing then. Ah! This is a time of emergency, and a fool among us is as bad as a Swindon man. Who are in this advance guard of our enemies?"

There was an exchange of glances. No one spoke.

"Come," said Harry, "we have some tremendous preparations to make, and they shall be sufficient ones. But we must have no defaulters. As Chief, I use no threats; there is not that sort of thing between us. But as a man, as one of you, I tell you this: who acts the fool part in these days is Swindon's helper, and for my own sake and for the sake of those I stand by, I'll deal with him as such. I'll kill without as much as one more word to it. Now, are the stores on the light carts, and the light

carts hid on the ox drove ? Is it done, Samson ? ”

“ It was finished this afternoon. ”

“ Have the two who went towards Salisbury come back ? ”

“ Not yet. ”

“ Well, those are matters concerning our retreat. We must perfect them, and forget them. The chances are heavily against . . . the information reaching Swindon at all, and if it does, what does it amount to ? A description of where we are, and how many we are. She knows nothing of the lay of these hills. In that we shall have strength enough to defeat at least twice our number, if they are ignorant of the ground. Will Swindon send more than that for profitless revenge, or for the recovery of half a dozen women from one of their split-offs ? And anyway, a much greater force would be at our mercy if we could trap them in Silldown Bottom, through which, coming from Swindon, they'd be almost sure to pass. We'll bank on that place, fight almost any odds there if they come there, and otherwise retreat or fight according to their strength. As soon as we hear of their approach our women shall go to the carts, taking the captives and children with them and start to whatever retreat our spies have found. The rest of us will lie up above Silldown Bottom, and if we fight, we fight, and if not we slip away behind them when they've passed, and join the women. ”

"Supposing they come when it's dark?" said Will.

"So much the better for our retreat if they don't get into the bottom, or our fight if they do. That is, if the work on the slopes is done. Is it done?"

"The wires are fixed."

"What about loosening the turf? Has the turf been loosened?"

"No."

"Why not. Didn't Crab tell you to loosen the turf? Are the trees trimmed?"

"He gave a lot of orders," spoke up George. "Maybe we didn't think he had any right to."

"So there are nearly a dozen of you idle in this room, and the work not done!" He half closed his eyes, feeling his chest lift and his throat swell with rage. He caught himself back from the vortex just in time, experiencing as he did so that bitter grievance of wrath repressed for policy's sake, as cruel and unjust a denial as that of hindered lust. But this was no moment for extreme measures, the menace from outside was too imminent. He had seen his violent impulse reflected in the watching eyes. He made a show of controlling it.

"Ah, well," he said, in a very gentle voice. "See how well Swindon pays you, you who help her. I forgo my quarrel with you, lest I should help her also. You have aggrieved, not only myself, but the whole gang also; by your

treachery, George; by your cowardly vacillations, the rest of you. Look to it you redeem yourselves from this moment on, for I declare we are now on the battlefield, and if anyone endangers us, I'll treat him as a spy in our midst, whatever the consequences. George, I am eager to discover that spy." He smiled sweetly, as if at a thought in his mind. "There is still daylight; let us get to work. Go up, I'll follow you, or send one of the little girls with my orders."

Before he had done speaking Crab had slipped out of the door and crossed the yard to a shed, whence he could see the faces of the men as they came out. He returned.

"All's well," he said, "as long as all's well. Look out for them if anything goes wrong though, Harry."

"It's because they're afraid," said Harry disgustedly.

"Their vacillation comes from that," said Father. "But your words could have cured that. There's a residuum of hatred though. . ."

"Yes," said Crab.

". . . and that comes because, however absurdly, they connect our present plight with your enjoyment of Rose. Not the fact that you were tricked, observe, but that you enjoyed her. Rut! That's unforgivable in a small chief."

"I find it so," said Harry heavily.

"However, we're under martial law now,"

said Father complacently, "A good stroke that. You'll be wise to find opportunity for emphasizing it, and continuing it indefinitely, whether Swindon attacks us or no."

"We might have another raid," said Crab.

"Go, Crab," said Harry. "Find some excuse for getting together a party of those we can surely rely on. A dozen or a score; the high-hearted ones. Take them off other jobs, march them all up towards the sandpit, and I'll come and talk to them."

Crab went. Harry followed him half an hour later, and found them waiting him. He began to talk about fighting against odds, and the necessity of having a phalanx of the bravest, on whom he could utterly rely, to follow him into impossible situations, or forlorn hopes, and all the rest of it. They received the idea enthusiastically. He went on to describe the dangerous and privileged position of the fighting man, his great importance (if his loyalty was unquenchable) in all matters of policy. The benefit to the general body; disorder outfaced, unity established, security for all, and an ideal of nobility, even, arising from the presence of heroes. The nature of a hero: he was no bandit, either to strangers or his fellows. He was unconcerned both with the admirable but ignoble task of production, and with its pleasant but ignoble rewards. It was immaterial to him whether he slept soft or hard, feasted or fasted.

He might wear some rag or other ; some chief's robe or mangy skin, whichever lay nearest, but his clothing was sword and helmet. He risked his life whenever he could, and thus was noble. He asked reason no more than he asked pay ; it would be unworthy of him. His guerdon was honour only, and it was enough. And so forth.

Harry left the sandpit with something between a standing army and a bodyguard.

"What vile creatures men are," said Crab, "that we should have to descend to such romantic shifts in order to do them good."

"We're rough stuff," said Harry, "but we're the stuff of life after all."

"Yes, stuff that's so compounded that, stir it as you will, it resettles itself sooner or later into the same forms."

"What forms ?"

"Oh, the world that's gone, or you and your heroes, first one and then the other."

"You talk like Father at his worst. You're right. George, or Swindon, or some other thing that's in us all, and will thrust up somewhere certainly, calls for the shoddy stuff I've just given those youngsters ; they in their turn wait to be used by the first fool among my successors for his aggrandisement ; there'll be a court, some tradesmen, all that concerns development."

"Yes, take an ordinary man ; so much greed, so much fear, so much folly, so much sloth—

that's the stuff of life you talk of—that shapes the world in the long run.”

“Yes, Crab, but here's another thing. The ills you name preponderate. But, except for fear, they're not as bad as they sound. Not in the individual, that is. Multiplied and inter-multiplied among great numbers of men they must be horrible—but greed, anger, sloth. I like them. Folly too. Either they're fine in parts, or there's some appetite in us that makes them seem so. As long as you don't name them, but only feel them as you might the grain of a wood. . . . Those names we give. . . .”

“He's trying not to name his grief,” thought Crab, “but to split it up as one might a poison into its harmless elements.”

“Well, Harry,” he said, “if we're not eaten up by Swindon or the next enemy . . . who knows? We may make something out of the better side of these weaknesses; something that'll last as long as the old Greeks did.”

“How often we've thought of that! Well, Crab, you give me heart, and Swindon gives me heart; otherwise I don't know it would be worth the sweat.”

“Nonsense. If you live at all, Chief you *must* be. And, being Chief, what else are you to do? I suppose now you'll go to the bottom while there's yet light. I'll go in and alter the tables so the precious heroes can sit together.”

Harry went on up to the top of the down. He

looked into the reddening west. The distant view was swallowed up by exhalations of the waning day. The sky was an early winter sky, flat, level, impenetrable. The world was, by so much, a smaller place. The silver hills, the country of dancing leaves and new sights, the adventure, the future, Rose herself, all were beyond the fiery-breasted grey. They had all become foreign, treacherous, inexplicable.

"If only I could know what was true in her, and where the false began," he thought, "I could face it better." Actually his bewilderment wrapped up his grief like a bundle, making it one heavy lump in him, saving him much. He walked on quickly through the frosting afternoon to see what had been done on the defences.

It was that same afternoon that Rose, bedraggled and starving, crawled back to the tower. She had overshot her mark, and, turning back, had come on it out of the scrubby land to the north side, which had once been arable. She came on a sentry, husband to one of the stolen women; a pig-eyed man. Seeing him a hundred yards off, all the clamour in her heart sprang to her lips; she felt as if she had only to call out and die. But when she came face to face with him, and saw in his gentle brutish look the very soul of the men among whom she had lived, she knew her task was less simple. The cry died in her mouth, and, having no other words, she suffered herself to be led back to the huts, where

she lay silent all that night and all the next day, in a little bright cell of fever, wherein phrase after phrase formed itself and splintered; she could not find the words that would fire the pig-eyed man, and all the pig-eyed men, to cross the wilds and revenge her brother. On the second morning she got up, weak, but with a mind washed clean, and she saw her course at once and plainly.

Hearing that she was sick and might die, two of the Swindon leaders had come out to question her. To them she spoke of the rape as a matter of fact merely, and betrayed no knowledge of the killing of her brother, lest they should guess her motive, but she answered their questions as to the wealth of the valley gang with detail after detail, which she invented as if she was bidding at an auction, and she exaggerated its smallness also, that they might the more readily attack. She saw from their cross-questionings, especially as to her certainty that there was no alliance between the valley and any larger group, that she had struck the right note. But when they had gone, she found the fury within her was half frustrated, for they had dropped allusions which showed they were thinking of a reprisal at any time, weeks or months ahead, while her nerves, so keyed up against reaction, demanded an immediate "Arm! Arm!" As it was, she must remain keyed up, determinedly unbalanced, resolute against thought, regret, weeping, and

what might be rest or death. She looked out of the hut when they had left her, but had no thought of going out into the courtyard, so little was she pleased to be home. Soon, though, some meaningless faces appeared, dreary to the memory, for they were not of Harry's race; hateful to the eye, for her brother's was not among them. She pretended to be ill again.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN the valley the shortening days passed quickly ; the year curled up like a dead leaf. As the preparations were extended and reinforced, the men recovered their spirit, and from dreading an attack in which they must inevitably be destroyed, the youngsters, at least, began to hope for it, for it now seemed they must inevitably be the victors. The older men were still seriously disaffected, for they wanted a retreat made at once, to which Harry would not agree, but they had neither the strength nor the inclination to make trouble at such a time of stress. What pleased them most was that a promising place had been found, to which it appeared the gang might safely retire in the event of defeat. What pleased Harry most was that in the finding of this place, which was by Wilton, some distressed people had been encountered, who had drifted up from some group on the seaboard. They said their town had been ravaged by cholera in the early summer, and their untended crops had failed, and they themselves had been driven out through quarrels over the scanty remainder. Two couples and a child were the first the spies

had stumbled on, and they were told that there were several more straggling behind. Young Frederick had been among the three who found them, and seeing first that they were of a wholesome countenance, and second that they were eager for safety, and too weak to be formidable, he bid them round up their fellows and attend two days later at a rendezvous, where Crab came with half Harry's bodyguard. He found above twenty of them waiting for him, apart from the children, and having told them what they might expect, and they being willing to come in under Harry, peril or no peril, he marched them back to the valley.

This addition sorted in well with the gang. They proved to be pleasant people, were bid-able, and were not given to whispering in corners. After a few meals, the men appeared to be strong fellows, which made them the more welcome, and the food and the welcome together made them eager to prove themselves worthy of adoption. Their children were five boys and seven girls, and the girls were mostly the elder ones, which was another point in their favour. They sat among the rest in the now insufferably crowded room, and told tales of their precarious holding by the sea, on the borders of Devon and Dorset, and added to the mythology of the gang with accounts of the wild folk on Dartmoor.

By December the preparations were complete. Silldown Bottom lay between two high ridges,

and offered so obviously an opening for penetrating unseen two or three miles nearer the house, that it was inconceivable that any unsuspecting foe should fail to come that way. Wherever they went they must sooner or later negotiate low places between the hills, and this one would appear on first sight to be no worse than others, but rather better, since no high skyline must be crossed before entering it. Besides, it must appear likely that the defenders would stay in or near their stronghold instead of concentrating on one spot, not obviously favourable, five miles away.

The way in was over a sort of low saddle in the outer ridge. A grove ran up to one side of this saddle, terminating in a barrow which overlooked the bare basin. A spy coming out over the flat country, and wishing to enter the hills without being seen, must almost certainly make for that grove. There were two or three others, but they were well guarded, and fires were set to smoulder in them, making a wisp of smoke which only a spy's anxious eyes might see. The spy who got to the barrow would stop there. He would see the deep dip, an unavoidable evil, and the way it led on into the very womb of the hills, an obvious good. He could lie on the outward side of the barrow, peep over, and see how the deep cleft seemed to worm in towards the stronghold, but not how it stopped in a deep glissade just where it twisted out of his

sight. Nor would he see the concealed trench that ran round the top of it, nor the thin wires stretched on its slopes, nor the lifted turfs with the chalk rubbed beneath them, nor the young trees which were stripped and socketed, ready to be bent back and loaded with heavy stones, which they would lob a hundred yards out and more, to fall midway down the slope. Nor would he see the final surprise which Harry had elaborated.

It was important that the spy should go no further than the barrow, lest he should stumble on any of these things. Father, who was delighted by the notion of this huge and simple trap, suggested that a boy be posted in the next spinney, to stop the intruder exactly as pheasants are stopped, by keeping up a gentle continuous tapping. Harry approved the idea, but thought that tapping might sound too much like work going on, and ordered that two young dogs should be tethered in the fringes of the wood, whose noise might scare back the spy, yet make it seem that nothing more permanent than a hunt of some sort was going on there.

Next, all the outlying slopes were posted, and even the two or three little hillocks that stuck out into the marsh. For this purpose Harry had used a number of stripling boys, whose legs had developed ahead of their arms. It was impossible to detect the advance of two or three scouts over such a large and wild tract, but it

would be strange if a numerous band should get across unseen. An elaborate system of signals was worked out, that would ensure that every man could reach his post within two hours of the attackers being sighted.

The halcyon days were late that year, and when they had run their short course, the weather did not break up violently but remained quite calm. The soft and kissing south-easter gave way to a tiny creeping wind from the north, a bone-chiller, and the sky turned grey with cold. The lovely rotten exhalations of autumn were gone in a night, the dead leaves became brittle and colourless, the scratched earth and the bark of trees took on a stony look, and even the tuffets of dry grass lost all their hayey comfort, and were screwed and shrewish to the eye. Though no clouds came, there must have been a haze somewhere high up, for the sun seemed petrified like everything else, and no longer beamed, but stared wan and stony out of the bitter sky. The duck rose up from the Hungerford marshes where they had just settled, and flew, in numbers to gape at, high over the valley on their way to the Solent. This moving on meant a hard winter. The cold tightened like a vice.

"It's too cold for Swindon to make a move," said Father. "They'd never lie out in this."

"If they mean to move they'll move now," said Harry. "The bogs are frozen solid."

He wanted the attack to come. As the longing

lover feels that it needs only the next single embrace to purge him of his hunger, so the miserable one pants for the next crisis in his misery, which he thinks must salve or burst the boil ; it is the sustenance of the galley slave, that sort of hope, to enable him to suffer the longer. Harry, like that same galley slave, forgot the major element of his suffering in the minor one of incessant labour.

It did him good. He needed a cloud on his brow ; chiefs and hills seem the higher for it. Happiness had made him a man ; perhaps bitterness made him more than a man. The icy change in his face was like that in the weather : though it was longer in developing, it seemed the more sudden, happening in a young man. It was like another bodyguard suddenly reared up around him. Only he knew what hollows underlay it, what moments of womanish weakness, when, had he been struck in the mouth, his sick spirit could not have raised its head ; hours when his heart seemed to be crying out inside him like a separate creature ; a dreadful cry, horrible as an idiot's, keen as that of a wounded hare.

Crab's love was balm to his hurt ; not the less so because Harry recoiled from it, feeling it a travesty of his need, before he responded in remorse and gratitude. Such hours of response were full of a crippled happiness, the more exquisite for being painful, and they were frequent.

From them he took off into his spells of furious activity, and one anodyne succeeded the other before the power of the first had passed away. All the same, he knew that he was not killing his grief, but holding it, as one holds a wolf by the ears, and whenever he relaxed he found that he was right, for it sprang up again, fiercer than ever. He schooled himself never to relax. Crab became his shadow, his *alter ego*; they talked by the night fire till the blood stagnated in their veins, and they worked side by side at the roughest tasks by day.

"The devil take it," thought Crab, grown skinny with fatigue. "The pangs of betrayed love are beginning to wear me to a shadow."

He thought, though, that it was a good thing. The Swindon business resolved, there was still the great task before them, the task of working for that distant year when the miles would have shrunk, and the marches contracted to a ditch, across which they would be face to face with the brooding citadel of Marlborough. He remembered it, grey, windowless and impenetrable. It needed such a face as Harry was growing, to outstare that cliffy power. One thing delighted them greatly: under the menace and the toil the young men had matured amazingly, as young men will. Their boyishness was gone, they had hardened like ripening corn. Their discipline was admirable.

In their talk, Crab and Harry struck out

through the wild years ahead, as they had struck out through the unknown country in the scented summer. They had fixed on a progressive scale of increase; the adoption of a quarter their number of outsiders every year. This snow-ball growth would make them two thousand strong in ten years, allowing for the growing up of children. Such a company, in such a position, would be strong enough to resist almost anything, unless there was invasion from abroad, or from the teeming strongholds of Wales. These were fears too doubtful to be calculated, and they were fears of something irresistible, which called for no plan of defence because no plan of defence would avail.

"They're probably still cutting one another's throats, anyway," said Father, "and even if not, they've probably more land than they can manage. It would have to be a strong faction that could spare an army to worry us. Why should they, for many life-times ahead? In any case, good or bad, our chance is Hobson's choice, so we may as well ignore it."

"It's a problem for the future, and God knows what'll be the means to meet it," said Harry. "Our job is to lay the foundation."

That day he and Crab went out before noon to make a circuit of the outer slopes. No warmth came from the dead discèd sun. Their breaths rolled out before them like pillars of smoke, as they went up over the stiff grass which splintered

in the black frost and let their heels strike through and ring on the iron ground. Where there was a cut in the chalk, it was coated with milky ice, hard as adamant. The still air stung their lungs as the slope deepened their breathing. Their cheeks, a purple red, glowed with the bitter intensity of dahlias. It was a day to feel strong on. They were pleased with being alive and strong in the dead, close-hooded scene; they were delighted with one another.

Among other things, they were to inspect the little smouldering fires that had been built in the long groves that ran down the outer slopes, whose faint smoke was intended to keep the scouts from all but the route to the trap. One of these was dead and cold, the turves had fallen in and choked it overnight. It was impossible to cut new turves on the slope, the ground would have turned an axe, so while Harry kindled the fire anew, Crab went down to see if he could drag the mossy tops of one or two of the hummocks that stood in a boggy strip, between where the grove sloped down to the level and the hawthorn scrub began.

When he had lit the fire, Harry decided that Crab must be finding the job a difficult one, and he started off down to help him. In the still air he could hear him whacking at the hummock, he thought, but as he went down over the brittle leaves, he could hear no sound at all. Looking through the branches on the last few

yards of the dip, he could see his friend prone over a hummock as if to tear away the top of it, but he was not tearing; he was as still as the dead afternoon.

Harry's heart quickened. He ran into the open, and as he did so, he saw figures, five or six, slide into the hawthorn tangle on the other side. He rushed to where Crab lay, and saw that he had been pinned down by an arrow. He was nailed through the back, his arms stretched out, his hands fixed in the moss, his long yellow teeth exposed in a grin of agony. He was not yet dead. He tried to pull down his lips to whisper, as Harry bent over him, but as soon as they touched one another, they sprang back, like elastic, and his old man's teeth thrust forward again. Nothing could be more horrible than these frantic efforts to speak, and the nightmare face that succeeded them.

While Harry still stared at him in an agony, he made a last effort, threw back his head with a choked screech, and the bright foamy blood gushed out between those teeth, and he died.

In that moment Harry was rent by such a tumult of woe and rage that he was bereft of action. He crouched over Crab, with his hands still on him, staring at the dense smoke-blue fuzz of hawthorn twigs, which stretched along like a wall a hundred odd yards away. He could hear no sounds of those who had slipped into

the miles of mazy clumps, of which he knew the nature so well that all thought of pursuit was stillborn in his mind. As he looked, a figure stepped out into a gap in the fringe. His heart stopped. It was Rose. They confronted one another across the grey waste, utterly still in the dead air. He was aware of Crab's corpse under his hands; it stopped him from thinking.

She was like a spectre, like someone new raised from the dead. She raised her arm to point at him, opened her mouth to cry out, her arm dropped, her mouth opened and shut voicelessly; she jerked her arm up again with the same galvanic stiffness. It was happening in a frozen, Dantean hell.

Suddenly she made a gasping sound, half cough, half scream, a little sound, which yet broke the tranced air, and set his blood flowing again. And as if it had released her voice, ice-bound in her throat, she now cried out loudly: "Swindon! here's another: their Chief." He heard her companions crashing in the bushes, and braced himself for a run in. But the cry "Swindon" had started a little, old, forgotten memory in his brain, which grew like an avalanche, and as the men burst out of the scrub, he knew he must not die here, but get back to the gang whose lives depended on him.

He gave Crab a little pat on his dead cheek, a sort of playful pat, and left him there. He turned, still out of shot, and rushed back through

the grove, calling at the top of his voice. Two sentries on the crest answered, pursuit stopped.

Harry and the sentries rushed along the ridge to give the alarm. Almost at the same moment, one of the young lads who had been lying out in the swamp ran panting in from outside, and said the main body had crossed the ice and made a halt in the further fringes of the scrub. There were two hundred at least, he said. They dashed over the inner slopes, and met bands of their own men hurrying armed from the settlement. It was then about one o'clock in the afternoon.

In an hour or so almost all except a few special watchers were lining the concealed trench along the lip of the steep basin. The women were on their way to where the stores were dumped, taking the old men and the children with them. The boys were sent to the only other likely point on the ridge where the enemy might cross, there to make a din and show themselves over the skyline, to give the appearance of the defending force being there. A column of smoke was sent up to call in the other outposts, who wormed their way back by devious routes.

The frozen dusk made the hour seem later than it was.

"I hope one thing only," said everyone several times, "and that's that we don't have to spend the night up here, without as much as a fire."

No one hoped so more than Harry, except

perhaps Father, who had insisted on being present. Harry gave no thought whatever to the odds, though he had less than a hundred behind him, and of those many were too young. But he felt that the elaborate machine, whose framework was every man there, and whose movement was his plan, might move stiffly after such a night, and some jot of its purpose might remain unfulfilled. He looked at the trees strained back, with their loads of stones upon them, and felt the same tension in his every sinew, the slow minutes held him unbearably back from the shock for which he was ravenous. He thought of Crab only at odd moments, and, strangely enough, it was at those moments, and no others, that the possibility crossed his mind that the enemy might take some other way. The notion took the strength out of his knees, so that he had to crouch down, cold to his sick stomach, and a whimper would escape from his lips. Then he would be himself again, or more than himself, a creature whose nerves ran through a hundred men, and to the tips of their sharp steel, and to the wires on the hillside, and to all the timed organs of his plan.

Thus they waited half an hour, and then a watcher ran in to say the force was on the move, certainly more than two hundred, and they were making for the saddle on the other side of the basin. Everyone looked at his neighbour and breathed deep. The messenger ran off under

the hill to call those of the others who might not have seen.

"That's it," said Father. "I thought they wouldn't wait to give us time to prepare. They wanted to get near in the last of the daylight and raid the house after dark. Well!" He was in a state of great excitement. Everyone was delighted by his spirit, and took the more heart by it.

Silence was ordered. The minutes dragged by. Then, out of the shades on the far side, a man appeared, stared awhile at the slope in front, waved his arm, and came on, followed by an irregular column. Harry was looking out from under a juniper bush which had been left on the edge of the trench. The column dipped into the bottom and came on up the steep. Because it was a column, and must be made a mass, he gave a signal, just as the first of them reached a certain point, and a couple of dozen of his own men sprang up and showed themselves. A shout came up from below, but the advantage of position, even for such a handful, was so great and obvious, that the foremost invaders stopped, to allow more to come up. In a minute they had bunched into a solid mass on the slope, and then, with shouts, began the ascent again. The men who had shown themselves, sent a flight of high arrows to drop among them, wounding two or three, and then turned as if in flight. The invaders came on faster until they got among the

first wires, when some of their leaders stumbled, thus holding up the front line and letting those behind press up still more closely. Seeing this, Harry whistled, and some among those who had fled over the skyline laid axes to the great thongs that held back those of the stone-laden saplings which were trained on this area, and these, resulting, lobbed their loads of stones fifty yards up and a hundred and more out above the slope. The crowd below saw them sail up, and, trying to run all ways at once, remained locked in a mass, into which the stones fell with an indescribable sound. The damage they did exceeded all the defenders' hopes, for those which did not strike and kill directly, rebounded on the iron ground, and smashed limbs wherever they sprang up.

While these stones were still in the air, the bulk of the first party of defenders were executing Harry's second surprise. Some of the store-carts, low four-wheeled trucks, had been emptied and brought back here, where massive logs, hideously spiked, had been chained across them. Camouflaged by screens of bushes, they stood on the edge of the slope. They too, were held back by cables and, these cut, they tore their way through the flimsy screens and rushed down in swift succession into the dense crowd below. Their impact was tremendous. The first struck the thickest part of the crowd, on whom the stones had just fallen, and burst among them,

heaving and plunging, as soon as bodies got under its wheels, like a living thing. Three parts the way through, it seemed to hesitate on its choked path, and then, as its victims writhed this way and that, it tossed its low head again and lurched on, its spikes horribly behung, down into the bottom. Most of those it had struck were maimed only, but this was all to the good, for as the second and third waggon thundered down upon them, these poor wretches clutched at their unharmed neighbours and hindered their escape.

As soon as he saw the effect of the first of these, Harry waited no longer, but leapt out of the trench. He led one half of his company diagonally down one side of the basin, while Rodney led the rest down the opposite side. This took them clear of the wires, and to a position from which their extremest flanks might cut off the enemy's retreat. In the minute or two taken up by this manœuvre, the sixth and last wagon had torn down through the helpless invaders. The spectacle was an appalling one. Many lay prone, dead or nearly dead, but vastly more were wounded but capable of movement. These, in their endeavours to get away, constantly rose or half rose to their feet, and fell again, and they were so many that the whole crowd seemed to move with a hideous undulation. Their cries were terrible. Less than half the number had remained unhurt, and these were a rabble,

desperately trying to extricate themselves from the confusion, and to get together. As they drew nearer the valley men halted a moment, and sent two or three volleys of arrows into the distraught herd.

"Shoot where they're grouping," cried Harry.

The arrows, hissing in from both sides, broke up the two most solid groups the Swindon men had formed, and now, though they were still at least equal in numbers to the defenders, they were a panic-stricken mob, helpless as cattle.

When he saw the groups break up, Harry gave the word to charge, and his fellows, who had not yet lost a man of their number, dashed down the slope, converging into blocks of ten as they ran. They yelled.

The panic among the enemy was so great that, as the valley men rushed down upon them, some of them obeyed the last, miserable impulse, and flung their weapons down out of their hands. Others, though, who were of better stuff, shot desperately into the advancing phalanxes, particularly at those that threatened their retreat, and in those they brought down several men.

The next moment Harry reached the shambling crowd, and plunged into it as if it were water, and the others were on his heels. There was something awful in the lack of resistance they encountered. Smashed upon from both sides, the mass of Swindon men collapsed like a rotten fruit, a small group only being forced out

at the lower end, where the circling movement was imperfect, and where the damaged phalanx was. These scudded downhill, gaining half the slope as a start before they were pursued.

The rest was a cut-throat business. While it was going on Harry stood still and looked in the waning light to the other side of the basin, up which the fugitives were toiling, with the pursuers scattering after them. They all seemed to move slowly; so much slower than the flurry and the panting and the shrieking at his elbow, that they seemed almost still, as if they were in a picture by Brueghel.

One of the hunted ones moved differently from the others. It was a woman.

Harry's mind, which had been slowly ebbing back to him from its dispread outposts in the movements of the whole company, now gathered itself together with one violent contraction, and his memory woke within him.

"Finish it off, Rodney," he shouted, and sprang out from among them, and down the hill, his only thought to come up with the chase before Rose was captured, though to what end he could not have said.

When he had panted up on the other side and gained the top, he saw two or three of his men beating about a clump of bushes as if they were beating for game, and as he laboured up to them, he saw his quarry break cover and stumble, and George, who was on that side, rushed up to her

as she rose, spun her round by the shoulder, and flung her on her back. He had his sword in his hand.

"Stop," cried Harry.

George, raising his sword, looked round.

"Stop."

George shortened his arm and drove down at the girl, driving the broad blade deep into her stomach as she tried to writhe away. She began to scream. Harry was upon them.

George looked at him sardonically. "What were you shouting?"

He saw Harry's eye and quickly bent to tug his blade from the dreadful wound. A dreadful shriek sounded. Harry gasped and sprang, slashing. George dropped forward over the dying girl, his neck cut through from the back almost to the windpipe.

"Ah! Harry," cried Rose. He pulled the dead man off from her legs and knelt beside her, wordless, his eyes fixed in a desperate question on her fading eyes.

"Rose! Why?" Someone was shouting, tugging at his shoulder.

The light flickered up in her gaze. She gave him the same look, exactly, that Crab had, and her face changed, and she was dead.

The tugging and the tugging voice went on. The two other men had come up.

"What did you do that for? You've killed him. Murdered him. We saw it." He heard

the words and found no meaning in them, but grasped that they were some insolence intruding between him and the dead. He looked up and saw the angry, excited faces. It seemed they would not let him alone. His last restraint snapped, and he sprang up, menacing them. They drew off a little, still shouting at him.

"I'll kill you," he screamed.

They eyed him and moved away in the gathering night, calling to their companions who were calling up and down the scrubby slope.

Harry shook his head in bewilderment, and looked over to where Crab must be lying, stiff and pale under the rising moon. Then he knelt down and took the cold hand in his.

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN he came to himself it was full night. The frozen haze had descended, silvering the ground, and a clean naked moon rode high above, the sort of moon that seems to dance, her light quivered so in the frosty air. The trees stood round, leaning slightly, so delicate and so still that they seemed impossible, like frozen fountains. There were patches of shadow so deep that they gave the impression of being black gulfs of nothing, the first holes in a reality that was falling to pieces. The universe had run down; a leaning tree was like a splintered strut; at any moment a great patch, not of the stars only, but of the blue roof that held them, might disappear, and blackness follow; the sun was gone; warmth, time, meaning, all were gone.

He was half frozen; he had sunk himself into the anæsthesia of the blood-slowing cold as the exhausted sink themselves into a snow-sleep. He saw and felt disjointedly, without perspective; his consciousness had returned so haltingly, from such a remoteness. And he was so numbed that still it tottered on the threshold, and would advance no further.

What had roused him was that sound to which, at bitter midnight, some old misery in man's blood responds, the throbbing canine cry that reminds us of an unhealable wound in life. There were wild dogs about. They had been seen often since the cold had come, ravenous and bold.

Harry looked at the marble face beside him, and remembered where poor Crab lay, and the awful defencelessness of his distorted face. He was so stupid, that he could only realise these two lay half a mile apart, and he got up and left Rose, and walked a few paces, and then stopped piteously, not knowing what to do. Then he went back, and picked up the dead girl in his arms and set off with her to where Crab sprawled and grinned upon the hummock under the grove.

The ground was rough, and as he stumbled along he grew warmer, and the dead head dropped between his cheek and shoulder grew warmer also, and released a ghostly hint of its fragrance, and that in its turn softened infinitesimally the icy mask that was his face. Then a soft and horrible event took place. The warmth spread very very faintly to the great wound, which was frozen hard, and it released a tiny trace of the vile smell of stomach wounds, so little that in itself it was only pathetic, coming to Harry's sense through the fragrant wisps of hair. But

the pathos affected him strangely. It was as though Rose was alive and ill. He was past feeling in any ordinary sense of the term, but there occurred in him some grinding and Polar change, as when an iceberg shivers and turns turtle. She became near to him, so near; near as she had never been in life.

She had always been a radiant stranger to him, even when she had teased or played the child. Her radiance had been as potent against familiarity as her strangeness was; it was of that quality. Descending on this son of the narrow valley, she could not but be alien in every fall of hand and voice; moreover, his towering thoughts had caught her and held her high above the homely recesses of the heart. By an irony, it was that sort of closeness that her nature had needed; the closeness that Crab shared and she, to her cruel jealousy, did not. Had the need been met, and had there been no jealousy to weigh down the scale, she might not have writhed, and screamed and died in the bitter dusk that afternoon. She might not have been carried now, in that end-of-the-world moonlight, to where her enemy lay, waiting with his open eyes and his stony, toothy grin. Her own eyes were closed, the lids flat and white like marble in her marble face. Crab's eyes were dead, though they glittered in that demon mask that was so utterly death, it was so utterly not Crab! All the life in the world was in Harry's eyes, like

some dreadful movement in darkness, and the moon made inch-deep caverns of them under his drawn brows.

And so, as they drew near Crab, and as she warmed, and the frozen wound released that tiny jot of its sick stench, that conveyed pathos only, it was as if they had been alive together, and she had fallen ill; she had her closeness.

Harry had it too; it restored him to life out of his deathly anæsthesia. His heart beat, and pumped out warm blood and pain again. It hurt like flesh that has been frozen almost beyond reviving. The still and icy madness melted out of the scene; time broke up like a river and resumed its flow. The trees shivered, and were trees; the moon sailed on like the moon of other nights; the valley was four miles away over the downs. The three figures, which had seemed flung down beyond time and life, beyond their own natures even, were now Rose and Crab, dead, and himself, alive.

He wished, in a whimpering way, that he could have had but one more warm whispering night with Rose, that they might have known that closeness. He wished he could have walked once more with Crab, and seen his face as it was before that inimical mask usurped it, so that he might have studied it. The wish twisted a whine out of him. He listened to it. He was alive.

As if to prove it, he began to say things. He heard himself saying them in that hurried, resonant voice, frighteningly strange, in which people talk in their sleep.

"Ah, well!"

"Oh, Rose! Crab! What....?"

"I don't know. I don't know."

The words degenerated into staccato sounds, between a cough and a laugh, corpse-barks, sobs.

At last he said, in a very flat and level tone:

"I suppose I'd better bury you, you devils."

"You don't want to be eaten by dogs, do you?"

He had forgotten how hard the ground was. Even the point of his sword could not pierce it an inch. It was too hard; it would not take them. They must remain outside, for ever. He picked Rose up, tried to pick up Crab also, but desisted. Where could he take them? Nowhere. The illusion was unbearable.

"All right," he said at last.

"I'll burn you up, then."

He went across to the scrub, under the bright moon, and peered about among the bushes, snapping twigs here and there, in search of dead ones. These he wrenched and slashed at till he had a pile of brushwood as high as himself. He dragged that back to where they lay, and went on

up into the grove, to kick about in the darkness for fallen limbs.

When he had built his pyre, his slow brain was at a loss for means to light it. It seemed, while he was at work, as if he had but to strike his sword upon a stone and the thing would roar up inevitably. He now held himself tight braced against his despair, for now his one necessity was to obliterate these dead things; they held him back from Rose and Crab. If fire refused them, as the earth had, he must be alone with them, in their world, for ever. He wanted to be back in yesterday, with Rose and Crab.

He remembered he had had a tinder-box when they were remaking the fire . . . at that time. He had it no longer; it might have been dropped anywhere. Crab hadn't one. Then he remembered remaking the fire, and piling up the old fallen turves above it. He went up to see if they were still smouldering. He found that they were, and he brought embers down in his helmet and then, his mind quickening, he turned Crab over to find some dead grass that was not crusted with rime, and started a blaze in which the dead bushes hissed and then began to crackle and roar.

He took up one dead thing, which momentarily became Crab again, hugged him, and, raising his arms, heaved him on to the fire. Then he took Rose, and kissed her face, and noticed it was wet with tears, and spoke to her, and had no answer;

she was a dead thing, so he cast her across Crab, and the flames roared up, catching the sagging criss-cross of logs.

He sat down by the fire, for his strength was gone out of him. There was a sputter, and the smoke rolled off in heavier coils. He watched it, his brain turning with it in rolling, dissolving turns. In a little while he was asleep.

CHAPTER XX

THE dawn found him still sleeping by the smouldering ashes. As the warmth died down, the cold gripped him, and woke him up. He shuddered, screwed up his eyes, woke with difficulty; he had to be dragged out of unconsciousness like a thrashed dog out of a kennel.

At last he was broad awake. He looked at the fire. A thick coat of ashes covered what might have been unconsumed stumps of wood. He shoved the whole fire-bed together with his foot. Some little flames broke out, and he got more wood to make a second blaze, so that nothing should be left.

He looked up at the hills, and remembered the fight, and remembered that he had killed George. He remembered the nightmare that had followed, but it could not but seem unreal, so utterly different was the cold daylight from that mad light of the moon. He must go back to the others and see what was in store.

As he went over the ridges the sun came up, and, because the frost had descended overnight, it shone for the first time for days, and the airs were unbound. He experienced that spurious

and temporary exhilaration that follows naturally upon the extreme of grief. It was enough to be alive and to have other men to deal with. Only when he came in sight of the house, and saw the immediate trouble thus physically nearer, so that it seemed he could see to the other side of it—anger outfaced, and then a life to be lived—only when he saw the life on the other side did his grief flood up again, to lay it desert. He stopped and looked at the roofs and at the valley, and thought of the order and increase that the years were to bring. He saw himself sowing without heart, and harvesting without joy in the harvest. He was in that quiet extreme of desperation where one calculates coldly and carefully and hopelessly on every chance of some remote relief. He could imagine no future, however remote, in which Crab would not be utterly gone from him, and with him all the light of a shared consciousness, the light that with its double play confirms the form of life. Nor could he conceive the hour when Rose, who had so suddenly taken this new and complete possession of him, would cease to be poignantly sweet and dreadfully unknowable; so sweet he could never harden himself against her, so unknowable in her treachery that life itself was, in its appearance of order and progress, an unbearable mockery of the tearing struggle within him. His share of the order was gone with Crab, who had represented it to him. He was caught in an abominable circle. At this point he observed

in a sort of stealthy flash (but did not heed much), that though all that hurt him lay inside the circle, what broke his spirit was the disparity between his life, inside, and the rest of life, without. Between his chaos and the order of other lives, there was no bridge; his will could not go out across the gulf, nor any good come in. If all had been bewilderment and pain, he could have built in it; as it was he was cut off, and lost.

He saw this, unnoticingly, and forgot it, but it started a new feeling in him, one of acquiescence in whatever resentment he had now to face. There would be anger, revolt perhaps, over what he had done. The killing of George was a trifle, justified or unjustified it was irrelevant. He was due to be killed, anyway.

Harry shuddered when this thought came coldly at the heels of the others, for among those who lived so close, murder had the additional horror of fratricide, and the unbidden thought proclaimed him the more the outcast. He went on from it to feel more heavily, that under whatever name the cry against him was raised, it had a true cause; he was broken, cut off, incalculable, dangerous. He was no chief.

He glanced a moment at the smoky blue woods far away, soft and cold and silent in the morning sun, and half wished himself alone there, wild and sad, like some wolfish creature that ranges companionless, and lies down in its lair among bones. Then he went down, through the grove

of scabby elders and into the great yard. The house was awake, it had never slept. Several men were about in the yard; he did not turn his head to greet them; they looked, but called out no word to him. He went straight into the house. The great room was crowded. The noise, which he had heard as he passed the windows, died down at his appearance. The utter silence was that of some monster who holds his breath. Harry experienced a peculiar sensation; it seemed that everyone was looking at him, yet, as his glance went round, no eye met his own. He said:

“Well?”

He had entered at a critical moment. He looked into the face nearest him, it was dropped and turned away. Someone muttered to someone else in a corner; he stared in that direction, and the muttering ceased. The moment seemed to last for ever.

Then, like the squally shadow over water, an awakening passed over the packed faces, an inimical life, a separate entity, raised its hundred lowered heads. Soon someone would speak, or all yell. Before this could happen, though, a hand clawed at his arm from behind. He turned.

“Ah, Father!”

The old man motioned with his head—“Come away”—and Harry, weak before his forgotten affection for this forgotten face, shifted, dropped his head, and followed. A sound, not speech,

but the throaty murmur that precedes it in a crowd, broke out and lapped at his heels. His heart rose up a little to meet it; he might have turned, but he had dropped his head, and now he cared for nothing but to be alone.

Father led him upstairs to his own room, the room old Tom had died in, the room where the maps were, on which they had traced the way to Swindon, when Crab was there and the Chief was alive. He had a sudden clear vision of the huge man, with his fiery face and roaring voice; both hated and loved, he seemed to stand for the summer, when life had pressed in. Harry flung himself down like a sack, and sat staring through the wall.

Father sat watching him, eager to speak, not daring to, trying to conceal his watching even, to shrink himself up and become invisible. Two or three times, when the rumble of voices rose louder from below, he gathered himself together, and opened his mouth, but still was dumb. At last Harry raised his eyes, and said, flatly:

"I'm hungry."

The old man rose, trembling, moving as fast as his stiff, tired limbs would allow.

"I'll get you something."

He shuffled to the door, and as he opened it the noise from below rose from a muttering to a hard spatter of distinct and angry voices. Father stopped for a moment and listened. His weary face took on its pinched and anxious look

again. Harry heard nothing; he was listening once more to the grating of the splintered thing within him, as one might listen for the crepitation of a broken bone.

Father came back with a steaming bowl, put it down, and slipped out again. His quavering voice might have been heard struggling in the altercation below. When he returned, Harry was still in the same posture. The bowl, coating with grease, stood untouched at his elbow.

"Come, eat it up."

Harry started, nodded with all the meaningless emphasis of an awakened sleeper, to show he understood, took the bowl, and looked at it helplessly. Father put the spoon into his hand and at once he began to eat like a machine, and stopped as suddenly, and thrust the bowl away. Father made a desperate effort to hold him back from relapsing into his reverie.

"Come, Harry. What are you going to do? They're hot against you. They talk of throwing you out. There's not a minute to be lost."

Harry turned on him a look of deep-sea blankness, his attention so palpably rose vacant-eyed from the depths of some inexpressible abyss in thought.

"Well?"

"The victory counts nothing, except perhaps it prevented them flying at your throat when you came in. 'We did the fighting,' they say,

'and who could not make a plan?' But, over George, they are outraged, and they fear. Also, as I told you, they are jealous. The closer, the more jealous. 'He was one of us,' they say, 'cut down as he stooped, because he had slain the stranger who betrayed us.' They ask who is safe from your next private madness. 'Who will be the next?'"

Harry shuddered.

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing."

"What? They talk of banishing you."

Harry shrugged. The old man began to wail.

"Murder! That's how it began. I knew what it would lead to. Now you've murdered George, and——"

"What?"

"Oh, I don't know what I say. I'm an old man. A sad old man. How old I didn't know till I cracked my heart with joy at seeing your victory; nor how sad till now, when I see you throw it away. To be old—well, that must be. It could be borne——"

"And it can be envied," said Harry.

"Envied? Yes, *I* envy it. For now I'm dead, since you won't save me."

"Best of all," said Harry.

"What? To hang about, like a ghost, and snivel, and be flung a crust, and see everything go down; Crab gone, you banished, every plan crumbled, every memory blackened. To watch

them waiting till my heart ceases to creak and flutter, till they may bury the old sniveller. Harry, I've loved you. I've planned——"

"I burned them," said Harry.

"Eh? Ah! Good God!" As he realised what was meant. Father's speech withered on his tongue. For the moment he could not, nor dared not, speak of claims and tactics. Harry went on at long last:

"You heard what I said. That's enough, is it not? to make one drop one's hand, and let that pack below do what they will. But look here. I know what it means to you; I know about all that." He flung out his hand towards the great map on the wall. "I'd put down my own grief, whatever it was, for your sake and the sake of what's to do. But——" He shook his head.

"What else, then?"

"I'd have you know it, but there are hardly words for such things. It makes me feel they're right, not about George, damn him! but that I'm no man to be Chief. I always meant to kill him, I've realised that. What you told me they said—private madness—that's what I've felt, and know. What can I say? There was Crab, there was that in me that worked with him, understood you, understood—was part of—your way of life. That's gone."

"But——"

"Listen. She was different. Or the part of

me that was bound up with her, if you like. A strong force; it lent wings to all the rest. You know how it ended, that night. I mean, it was the greatest good, then the greatest ill; like that, without connection. Well, I put it away; unknowable, but not a part of me. But now it's back; it *is* a part of me, closer than ever. And Crab's gone."

"These are the feelings of an hour," said Father. "You've grounds enough for feeling anything. But it's not thought, it's not real. It's a pity that in this hour you should be devoured so. But it's natural. They'll be calling for you soon, as soon as they've squabbled out their precedence in judging you, and who's to be your successor. Can you do nothing?"

"Oh, I expect I could bring them to heel. Shout them on to Swindon now the moment is ripe, for the sheep, more women; any cry. But you've not understood me. Words mean nothing anyway. But these are feelings, not of pain, but of a real thing. When I say feel, I mean, as if with your hand. There is a cleft here, d'you see." He touched his breast. "Crab's way of life, your way of life, ordered, just, dependable, understandable, doesn't join up with the rest of me any more. I could stand it *all* being a dark, unknowable thing, but not me alone. Ah!" He stopped, hopeless of expression.

The old man looked at him, went to the door

and listened, came back puckering his lips in a sour and desperate resolution.

"And supposing it were all dark and unknowable?" he said.

"Life would be a wilderness, but one would at least be joined up with it, not 'privately mad,' and outcast."

"Will you hold by that? If I show you that only thoughts and plans have shape, and the rest, Crab, myself, are only things glimpsed in darkness, a writhing in darkness, as unknowable as that girl was, will you hold by that?"

"If you could show me that, my dear Father, I'd cut some shape into things, if it was out of their living flesh. Yours too."

"Well, we have a few minutes before they call for you. What I have to say demands as many hours, so follow me carefully. What did the girl do, after all? She betrayed you, but she was a stranger. You loved her, not knowing her will towards you. You still don't know it; you only know what she did. Now, Crab, or what he stood for, and what I stand for, has gone from you. Something knowable, ha? You could know his ideas, you could *feel*, in your sense of the word, his love. You could feel hers, rightly enough—I saw it—and you can feel mine; but you can know neither him nor me more than you know her. Crab is gone, you say, and your sense of order and dependability has gone with him. Then he has taken only an illusion. He is still

with you, for he has a claim on you. I am here, and I have a claim on you. You always meant to kill George, you have said, and therefore you are no Chief. How our positions are reversed since we talked in the summer! Then you were all for instinct, and we—— But I falter. Our claim is of that order. Our ideas have a claim, then, if our life has not. Our life is of your order, like all life. To save you, and to make you, we killed the Chief. We killed the Chief. You are not to throw that away.”

There were footsteps on the stairs. The door was flung open. Will and another stood there. They looked at Harry.

“You,” they said. “You’re wanted below.”

He looked at Father.

“That fat fellow!” he said. “You’ve plunged one into your wilderness all right.”

“You’ll hold by what you said!” cried Father.

Harry sat silent, his face contorted, trying to begin to think.

Will came across and laid hand on his shoulder. Harry reached up, gripped him by the throat, rose, and shook him and flung him down. He cried out, “Murder!” The other man vanished. Harry stood still for a minute, his face coming to life.

Father watched him desperately. Not the argument, he knew, but the shock might awaken him. A hubbub rose below.

"Come, Harry!" he cried at last. "Shout them down. To Swindon!"

Harry stood still.

"It's a *terrible* life!" cried Father madly.

"Ah!" shouted Harry, and rushed out, and down the stairs.

THE END