

# “Outside the House”

By Bessie Kyffin-Taylor

If I say I was just engaged to be married, you will forgive my thus intruding my own affairs for a moment because, through being engaged, I was led into the most curious happening of my life.

I had been in France some two and a half years before the bit of shell met me, which landed me back in Blighty, with a leg that was not going to be of much more service to me. I had had many and varied experiences in France—horrors, of course—but of these we do not often speak, much of deep interest, and much which goes to the furthering of knowledge of many kinds—knowledge which has led thousands of men to get down to realities—and to shun for evermore the superficial shams which made up their existences before 1914—but this is not a war story, except in so far that it transformed me, an officer in a well-known regiment, into a very ordinary civilian, with a game leg, and fathoms deep in love with the sweet child who nursed me—Elsie Falconer was my nurse—in the stately Home of England in which I and my mangled leg found ourselves after a long, troublesome journey. It was a home—there are many such, especially in the south of England—given up by their owners to needs of “woundeds.” Homes, where, in many cases gallant young heirs have laid down their lives for King and Country, leaving none to inherit the stately borne which for so many generations had belonged to their honoured name—so it comes to pass, that the old house is metamorphosed into a well-equipped hospital, strict routine taking the place of former gay hunting, shooting, and careless living.

It was a wonderfully beautiful old grey stone house, with an old-world garden; no money was spared, no labour was withheld to make it what it was now, a well-worked comfortable happy hospital.

I had been there some 6 weeks in the hands of an austere but clever elderly nurse, before Elsie was given charge of me. She was a joy to look at, to talk to, to joke with—but, she was *not* a nurse—Some women are born nurses—some have nursing thrust upon them—and some achieve nursing—Elsie was none of these, but she was very sweet, very sympathetic, and it was a delight to watch her little fingers bandage my poor leg, though I would not for worlds have let her guess the agonies I endured until, in her time off, I could capture the Sister, and beg a little relief, saying my bandages were not quite tight enough. Sister would smile, and being a sport, keep her own counsel.

It was an easy matter to step from sympathetic companionship into love-making—lots of us men have done it—perhaps some will find, to their sorrow, though each man says “That will not be me.” Not the least pleasurable part of it was a friendship I formed in hospital with a man whom chance placed in the bed next to mine.

It was one of those friendships which come into some lives at the first meeting of the eyes, without a word spoken—something that makes one’s inner-most mind think the words, “At last!”—as if one knew that into one’s life had come something hitherto wholly lacking. In this way came my friendship with Percy Hesketh, and as the weeks of our hospital life passed on, we drew even closer, making a compact that, if either should fall on the battlefield, he would endeavour to communicate with the other. The end of my third month in that stately home found me, with my discharge papers, a stiff leg, and a dear little girl, my promised wife.

Elsie did not wish to give up her nursing, so I agreed to wait patiently a while, and when she met me one morning armed with an invitation from her people to spend a month with them to

convalesce—adding that she would take her holidays at home during the month—I felt that my lines had fallen in pleasant places.

It was the morning of my departure from the hospital that I noticed the first shadow I had ever seen on my little girl's face. I asked her what was the trouble, and her reply was somewhat vague. "I was wondering," she said, "how you will feel at my home."

"How I will feel?" I queried. "Why, how should I feel, except happy to be there."

"I hope so," was her somewhat vague response, as she walked away almost as if she didn't wish to say any more.

Later in the day, just before I started, she came to me, saying:

"John, you will try and like it all, won't you, for my sake, don't let anything worry you will you. Nothing can really do you any harm."

In the rush of getting away, her few words had not much effect—indeed it was not until some hours later, when my train slowed down at a little wayside station, and an elderly man in livery met me, that I remembered them, and driving along between high hedges of wild roses, honeysuckle and sweetness of many kinds, I failed to attach the least importance to those little words "nothing can *really* do you any harm." Did the little girl mean the jolting of rough roads for my poor leg, or what, I wondered. Then a sudden thought struck me. Perhaps her people were not well off and she feared a little roughing it for my shattered health, but this thought was speedily banished, as we pulled up at a charming little black and white lodge, where a smiling woman opened a massive iron gate bearing a coat of arms in blue and gold. Elsie had not told me much of her home, or people, beyond that they were an old family and owned all the coalfields round about them. I had paid little or no attention at the time, for the girl—and not her people or position—was before all in my mind.

A long sheltered drive, between giant trees, presently brought us to a broad gravel sweep in front of a beautiful half-timbered house. I had scarcely time to see it, however, before I was hailed by a regular chorus of voices from a deep sunk lawn on the right of the house—it was curiously deep sunken. One is accustomed I suppose, to see a lawn stretching away level with the house or almost, but this one, which I later learnt was always spoken of as the low lawn, was at least five or six feet below the drive; it almost gave one a feeling that if it had been a lake—it would have looked prettier that way—one seemed to have to look too far below for it—the walks and flower-beds surrounding it were so high above it.

At one end of the lawn was a glorious copper beech, beneath which were grouped some seven or eight people near a tea-table, lavishly spread—for war days.

Two people detached themselves from the group and came to meet me—an elderly man with iron grey hair and slightly bent back, and a slim dark-haired girl, perhaps three or four years older than my Elsie. My welcome was warm, as warm as man could desire from the father of the girl he loved, though, man-like, few words were spoken, a firm hand-grip, a keen look, and then—

"I am very glad John to welcome the man our little girl has given her heart to. This is Maude, Elsie's sister."

Maude favoured me with a quick scrutinizing glance, shook hands and turned away to a school-boy brother, who had followed close on her heels.

My ears, keenly sensitive through long nights on O.P. duties, caught the few words she murmured to him, as she met him.

"*He'll* never stand it, Bob, he isn't the sort, but mum's the word."

Bob glanced back at me, and then shook off the sisterly hand on his shoulder, and came up to me with a boyish grin.

“Game leg, Sir? Sorry, lean on me, and come down the steps to Mater and some tea.”

“Right! many thanks,” was my reply in the same spirit. “I’ll be glad of some tea; it’s been my first journey since the horrible one back to Blighty.”

“Rotten luck, Sir,” went on the young voice, “you’ll tell me about it sometime, won’t you?”

“Not much honour and glory about it, Bob,” I replied.

“But you’ve got a ribbon, Sir, a purple and white ribbon; I know that wasn’t got with sitting still in a funk-hole!”

“No, not exactly,” I replied laughing, “but lots of chaps who will never get it, have earned that bit of ribbon better than I did. I’ll tell you some other time, if you like.”

He nodded his head and said—

“Mater, this is Elsie’s John, dying for some tea.”

“Mater” made the usual little fuss mothers do make, when something in khaki steals into her flock, and wants one of her lambs, and I was soon in a comfortable chair, my game leg on another, while I was refreshed with tea, war scones, honey, and strawberries as I surveyed the rest of the group—Mr. and Mrs. Falconer, Maude, Bob, a Captain McKlean and his sister Nora, staying in the house, a fair-haired girl in a dark severe-looking frock, whom I subsequently learned had charge of the three boisterous younger members of the family; the Rev. L Roberts, a middle-aged man, who had evidently dropped in for a cup of tea, and the three young members, who lay sprawled on the grass beside their mother—Lottie a cherub, aged six, with red-gold hair, and impish blue eyes, Alec and Ken, twins, just at the knickerbocker stage and brimming over with every conceivable mischief—composed the group, of which, for the moment, I found myself the centre.

Talk drifted along from War to Rations, and back again; from battles to the keeping of pigs, and the price of eggs; from the scarcity of jam; to my purple and white ribbon; and so on, from grave to gay, until the sun, hitherto blazing in glory on lawn and flower beds, gradually began to sink behind the trees, in a pink glow, that lit up the house as if a pink limelight were thrown upon it. I was intently watching it, enjoying the beauty of it, when my attention was arrested by a sudden move among the group of people, as if with one accord they were seized with the same idea at the same moment.

Mrs. Falconer got up, and trailed away with her knitting in her hand, her ball of wool dragging behind her, I made a move to retrieve it, but was stopped by Bob saying—

“Don’t worry, Sir, if you begin, you’ll never stop. Mother’s things always trail after her, they arrive at the house in time; we never bother.” He softly kicked the ball of wool on its way, with a sly wink at me, adding—

“That’s how they get there, unless the Twins walk off with them in another direction, among the trees; it’s a wonder they didn’t spot it; oh! they’ve cleared, I might have known; it’s getting late.”

“Late!” I said. “Why it’s only just after five!”

“I mean late for the garden,” he said.

“Late for the garden?” I asked. “Why, it’s the loveliest time in a garden now, when the heat dies down, and the air is all perfume.”

“Maybe in most gardens,” he replied, “but this isn’t one of them.”

“Why it’s perfect,” I said.

“That’s all right, Sir, but I wouldn’t stay too long, it gets—er—damp and—er—well damp,” he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets, as he strolled away whistling.

“It seems an interesting place, Mr. Roberts,” I said, turning to face the parson. “I do not know this part of the country at all, perhaps you’ll light a pipe, and tell me about my surroundings.”

The parson got to his feet—hurriedly, awkwardly—blew his nose violently, and said—

“Yes, yes, my dear Major, I shall be most delighted, any time—er—that is, any *other* time, but now I must hurry away, my parish, you see, my work, er—my duties—you’ll come and see my library, yes, yes, a fine collection. Good-bye, come very soon,—er—good4ye.” And his long lean figure was scuttling over the lawn ere I had managed to gasp a reply.

A circle of empty chairs, a tableful of empty plates, myself, and little Miss Dorcas, the governess, only remained. She was sewing “Comforts bags” for wounded men—the joy of the Tommys’ hearts. If *only* more people who can sew, would get on and make thousands more!

I lit a cigarette and then said—

“Are you vanishing also, Miss Dorcas?”

“I suppose so,” she answered.

“Won’t you stay and talk a bit?” I asked. “You see I have to sit still most of my time.”

“You will be more comfortable in the smoke-room, or billiard-room,” she said, still intent upon her sewing.

“I couldn’t be,” I said. “A garden like this, a comfy chair, my pipe, and a warm July evening; it doesn’t appeal to me to leave it for a billiard-room.”

“No,” she said, “not yet, but it will.”

“Oh! I must go,” rising as she spoke, and hurried away folding her work. “You will come in when you’ve had enough, I suppose.”

“Enough what?” I asked, smiling.

“Enough garden,” she answered, as she hurried away, leaving me the now sole survivor of the cheery group I had come into, not two hours ago.

Idily I lay back in my chair, puffing away at my war-worn pipe, the drowsy hum of insects lulled me, the scent of flowers soothed, the silence rested my tired nerves and body. I didn’t particularly want to think, but my mind kept wondering what was the need of all these good folks to hurry away to other occupations, one and all leaving their rather crippled guest, without apparently a thought as to how I should get my lame leg up the deep grass steps and into the house later. I wished Elsie had been here, but she had decided to come in a few days, leaving me to get to know her family without her helpful influence.

Well! I must make the best of it; at least, I could rest and enjoy the peace of it all. I did my best to go to sleep, but signally failed, though nothing could be more perfect than my surroundings for such a mode of passing a little of the time I seemed destined to spend alone. It was gloriously, warm, and I was pleased to find no trace of damp, such as I had feared, and which would certainly necessitate my moving. No, it certainly was *not* damp, of that I was sure, *then what was it?* For it *was* something, though what I meant by *it*, I haven’t the remotest idea. I felt confused, surely I must be sleepy, for my mind, usually alert, seemed dulled, almost as if I were once again under the noxious influence of morphia, as I lay in my chair endeavouring to collect wits that appeared to have a tendency to become scattered, I saw coming across the lawn an elderly man-servant. He approached the tea-table, and with one eye on me, stolidly began to clear away the tea-things. Then he coughed, and hesitatingly said to me—

“Are you thinking of going in, Sir? Can I help you?”

“Well, I wasn’t,” I replied, “but perhaps I will, if you will give me an arm, when you have cleared away. I am not in any hurry.”

“Very good, Sir, but I’ll help you first if you wish, though it is getting a bit late.”

“Late!” The same word, and again I asked—

“Late—for what?”

“Late—er—for the teacups, Sir,” he replied.

“For the teacups!” I said, astonished.

“Yes, Sir, I mustn’t be late.” Saying which, he gathered them up on his large tray, and set off with his load. He hadn’t gone more than five or six yards when he appeared to stumble or slip, staggered to recover himself, and the tray and china crashed to the ground.

“There,” he gasped, amidst the wreckage, “I knew it was late.”

I regret to say my first feeling was one of idiotic merriment, something about the old man, amidst the debris of china and odds and ends of food, struck a latent sense of ‘humour in me, and I laughed unrestrainedly. Not so the worthy butler,—he, with an expression, that baffles description, slowly rose and stood staring at the broken china for the space of a full minute, before turning to me, as if to reprove my merriment. I frustrated him, by saying—

“I am sorry to laugh at you, but ‘over there’ we somehow learnt to laugh at calamities, and it seemed to help.”

“Very good, Sir,” he answered stiffly, “I understand, but it isn’t *funny*, Sir, not leastways what I call funny.”

“No,” I said, “I can see your point of view. I suppose it means censure for breaking good china.”

“No, Sir, it isn’t that, for it isn’t good china, it’s cheap—because any delay means a smash, and we’re late to-day, as I said.”

“I fail to understand you, my good man,” I answered, “I’ve seen many queer incidents lately, but I can’t see why the clearing of a few tea-things from a garden table should mean they will be smashed if left late, though it is but 5.30 now.”

“Quite true, Sir. May I help you in now?” he said.

“Won’t you remove the smash first?” I asked. “No, Sir,” was his emphatic reply. “I will not, *they* wait till morning, they do.”

I shrugged my shoulders, feeling the hopelessness of it—the old man must surely have a slate off. I would perhaps hear further of the smash later. Meantime, I was conscious of a wish for a more cheery spot, so turning to the old butler, remarked—

“I will try the steps now if you will give me an arm, but I cannot go quickly.”

“No, Sir,” he replied, “you certainly cannot, leastways not here, and we’ll maybe get there sooner by going slower.”

As an Irishman, that speech appealed to me, and I chuckled as we started our crawl towards the steps. True, I was compelled to move slowly, but I certainly had every intention of moving at least as quickly as I had been able to do during the last few weeks. This, however, was far from the case, some inexplicable “Something” retarded my every step! I found myself trying to put into words my inability to get along, in a joking way. I said to the worthy butler—

“I must have grown stiff sitting still so long, I feel as if my feet were unable to carry me.”

“Quite so, Sir,” he answered, imperturbably, “lean on me, Sir.”

I did, but speedily found I was trusting to a broken reed, for the man stumbled at every other step. To an onlooker we must have had every appearance of a couple of very drunken reprobates struggling home after a wildly dissipated night, and not, as we were, a worn soldier with a game

leg, leaning for support on the shoulder of a worthy grey-haired family retainer, crossing a little space of smooth green turf, leaving behind us a heap of smashed china! If I had been asked to describe that march, I should have said—

“Oh yes! I am aware that I was said to be walking across a smooth expanse of velvety lawn, without so much as a croquet hoop to trip me up, but seemingly I was struggling through a close tangle of strong briars, which entwined themselves round me as if they were endowed with sense, and each successive one was struggling to twist and pull harder than the other. That was my impression; yet, on that expanse of smooth green, there was not a single item to suggest such a state of affairs. Slowly, slowly, inch by inch, with the perspiration streaming from us, we reached at last the steps, mounted the first, and were confronted by a heavy pressure, as if to force us back.

“Stick to it, Sir,” whispered the old man. And we did, but it took all my limited strength and his combined, to press through that invisible barrier, and finally reach the top. The presence relaxed then suddenly, and I breathed more freely, nor did it need the butler’s muttered “Hurry in, now, Sir,” to urge me to the greatest speed my exhausted frame was capable of.

I entered the hall, with a word of thanks to my worthy friend, who disappeared in haste through a baize door, mopping his face.

I dropped into the nearest chair, feeling far more done than I ever remembered feeling after long hours in the trenches, and war content to lie back with my eyes shut, until I heard a mocking voice say—

“Drink this, John, you’ll be all square in a minute.”

I wearily drank what was offered to me, opening my eyes to see the slightly quizzical face of Maude looking at me.

“Thanks!” I murmured, “it’s a trying day.”

“Very,” she responded, “in the garden. I watched you coming in. Rest a few minutes, and then I will take you to the others. They are in our *indoor* garden; we prefer it. Then she went away, leaving me to rest. I must have dozed for a few brief moments for again I did not hear her. until she spoke, in a voice that, to my sensitive ears, still had a mocking note—

“Come along, John, you are quite alive, you know, come to the others.”

She helped me up, with a good strong pull,—the kind of pull our young women are beginning to acquire since they metaphorically took their coats off, and gave up fancy work and crochet for making shells, milking cows, and tilling the land—and having got me on to my feet, she calmly tucked my arm through hers, saying, laughing—

“Elsie won’t mind, you know.” And led me down a long stone corridor with a broad crimson carpet running down the centre, a few old coaching scenes on the walls, one or two heavy oak chairs on either side, and in each of the two windows an old-fashioned flower-stand filled with flowering plants.

“What a ripping corridor!” I said.

“Yes,” she answered, “it’s rather nice, but this is nicer,” she added, throwing open a big glass door and drawing me forward into what I can best describe as a gigantic greenhouse, though Maude’s words of “our indoor garden,” more aptly describes it. It was immense, having a dome-shaped roof, painted a clear pale blue. Three sides of the place were of glass, through which lovely views were seen, the fourth side was an exquisitely painted landscape of a hayfield and trees stretching away into the distance. For a moment one scarcely realised whether one was looking at real scenes or painted ones, or where one began and the other ended. Clumps of shrubs here and there made secluded corners, where cosy chairs and couches were placed. A

hammock was slung under another tree—one side of the place was trelliswork, with glorious roses rambling over it, and everywhere were flowers or flowering plants. The ground was dull green, like a solid linoleum; in one corner clock golf was marked out; Badminton occupied another place, and under an orange tree was a large round table, with writing materials and many magazines; the dome top could be worked by pulleys and rolled back, the whole idea giving one the atmosphere of a lovely foreign garden.

All the family were present, though each seemed intent on his or her occupation and no one seemed to have the remotest thought of leaving it for a stroll in the garden *outside*, though a most perfect summer evening was vainly calling.

An hour ago I should unhesitatingly have said they were cranks, or had bees in their bonnets, but now—well—I was not sure what I truly thought.

“Won’t you come and sit down, John?” called Mrs. Falconer.

“Thanks!” I said, “I was feeling rather struck in a heap, this is such an unusual greenhouse.”

“It isn’t a greenhouse,” chimed in a little shrill voice, “it’s a ’ninside garding, come and see ’noranges,” and a moist chubby band was thrust into my hand.

“I’m very tired, Lottie,” I said, “may I come in a minute?”

“That’s just like grown-ups,” lisped the little kiddie, “vey al-ways say, ‘in a minute’—they forgets.”

Mrs. Falconer smiled, and patted the chair at her side saying—

“Run away, Lottie, John’s tired.”

“John is,” I answered, gladly sinking into the cushioned chair. “Why am I tired, Mrs. Falconer?” I asked. “What is the meaning of it all?”

“All what?” she asked blankly.

“The garden,” I said, “the difficulty of coming in.”

“You’ve been asleep,” she said, “and got stiff.”

“And the broken tea-things,” I went on.

“Oh! that’s Jacobs, he’s always having smashes.” And the good lady went on placidly knitting her soldier’s socks.

Nothing to be learnt there, I thought, as I started chatting about the lovely “garden” in which we sat.

“It’s like a wonderful Winter Garden,” I said.

“It is,” she smiled, “only it’s a summer garden as well, after five o’clock.”

“Maude!” she called suddenly, as if remembering, “you haven’t fed the birds. I’ll do it myself.” And she moved away, wool as usual trailing in her wake.

I was left to my own devices once more. What an unconventional crowd they were, or is it, they don’t want to talk, I was wondering idly as I smoked a cigarette when Bob sidled up to the vacant chair and perched himself upon its arm.

“You’ll come in earlier to-morrow, Sir, won’t you?” he asked half-shyly, “it kind of knocks one about to stay late.”

But I was going to play the same game as others, so answered casually—

“Oh! does it? It didn’t knock me about.”

“Didn’t it, Sir? It did Jacobs,” he added slyly, “he’s what he calls ‘all of a dither.’ ”

“I saw nothing to ‘dither’ about,” I said.

“No, Sir, I daresay you didn’t, but it isn’t what you *see* that does it.

“And I most certainly didn’t *hear* anything odd,” I went on.

"I hope you won't, Sir, I did once, and (lowering his voice) I had brain fever afterwards. You won't catch me out after five."

"Bob, come here, I want you," rang out Maude's compelling voice.

"Oh! blow!" muttered the boy, "they are dead scared for fear I tell you, and you cut off and leave Elsie." With which cryptic 'give away' of his relations he strolled off, hands in pockets.

Once more I was alone, and content to be so, to light another cigarette and have a review of the rapid sequence of events—my arrival, tea, the sudden scattering of the group beneath the trees, the broken china and my desperate attempt to cross a few yards of turf. I could not make "head nor tail" of any of it—sufficient for me I was in love and prepared to put up with a good deal to await the coming of the little girl I loved. My musings were interrupted by the sound of a bell in the distance.

"Dressing-bell, John," shouted someone. "I'll you to your room," called Bob.

"Many thanks, I'll be glad," I said, "I—I'm not very good at stairs alone."

"You aren't upstairs, you're on this floor, Pater thought you'd like it, though I'm blessed if I should—too near the garden for this child to—hang on, Sir, I'm pretty tough."

Together we traversed again the long stone corridor, through the hall, along a similar corridor, but of more recent date, being of polished pine, instead of grey stones.

Bob opened a door about half-way down, saying—

"There you are, I hope you'll like it—shout, I mean ring, if you want things. Neither Mum nor Dad ever remember visitors."

"Right," I said, "but I'll manage," turning as I spoke to open the window.

"I wouldn't, Sir," said the lad, "it's beastly—er—damp—"

There were three windows in my spacious bedroom, two on one side, one at a queer angle, in a built-out corner, this latter was heavily shuttered, barred up and padlocked.

"Great guns!" I cried, "Who on earth are you expecting to get in—it's like being walled in—where does it look out? If it's ever opened!"

"It's opened till five p.m.," said the lad, "and it looks on to the low lawn. I'd leave it at that, Sir, if I were you." And he edged himself through the door.

"Alone again!" I thought, lighting the inevitable cigarette. What an extraordinary family they seemed to be, so detached, as it were so self-absorbed, but above all, so skilful at playing into each other's hands—even the smallest of them aiding in the now apparent determination of each one not to remain alone with their wounded guest, and future relative! Why? I wondered. What did they fear? This last thought was a sub-conscious one, for I had not hitherto consciously thought of *fear* in any form. Well, time would reveal perhaps, meantime, it was a fresh interest—an unusual interest to find myself a guest in a unique house, full of unique people, all doing their best to keep me from finding out "Something"—well—"Something" that so far hadn't a name—it would amuse me to circumvent them, and help to pass the days until my girl came. And now to dress for another scene; the scenes were certainly following one another in rather rapid succession—perhaps too rapidly for a "convalescent" and yet, I have a firm and fixed belief that the quickest way for a sick person to become a well one, is to keep the mind occupied, busy, interested, to fill up the days and hours, leaving no time for brooding, or speculation as to the why or wherefore of one's apparent slow healing; thoughts of health bring health, just as quickly as brooding melancholly brings depression, and subsequent ills in its train. It has been truthfully said, that the wounded lads who have recovered best are those whose outlook has been buoyant and cheery, those of whom "even a swamp did not depress them," as Mark Tapley would have said. My days certainly gave promise of being full enough.

I had finished my leisurely dressing to the running accompaniment of this train of thought, just as a silver chime of low notes rang through the house. "Pretty" I thought, "and much better than the boom of the orthodox family gong, which always suggested to me the dullest of meals."

No one seemed to be passing my way, no cheery voice called out to me their offer of escort. Very well, I would find my own way, since it did not appear to have struck anyone that so far I had not been in any room other than the "Indoor Garden"—if it could be called a room, or that I had not any idea of my bearings.

I switched off the light in my room, and started to locate the dining room. I need not have hesitated, for the whole family were gathered in Hall, talking, laughing, and in high spirits.

There were not any other guests, simply a family party. The Hall was beautifully lighted from above by reflected lights—I mean the actual lights were not visible. The windows—there were three—were heavily draped in a light shade of gold, almost giving the idea of sunlight, as they caught the light from above. I am not a great hand at these things, sufficient to say the place gave one a feeling of brightness and comfort, without glare or striking colour.

I was nodded to as if I were one of them, as with one accord, we moved away to the dining-room.

Probably I was expecting the usual sombre dining-room of an ancient family mansion—oak furniture, sideboard like a silver-smith's window, family portraits in gilt frames—but whatever I expected, it certainly was not the gay room in which I now found myself. There were not any pictures, nor did one miss them, for the walls were painted a shade of deep cream, with exquisite flowers, in groups, and sprays upon them; the chairs were of some highly-polished light wood—in appearance like a bird's eye maple—in place of the usual dado round the room, was a curved-in recess, filled with plants and flowers with tiny electric lights among them here and there, deftly shaded by foliage and flowers. The dinner-table was a blaze of wild flowers, spotless linen, and shining glass.

I was slightly breathless as I took my seat. Mrs. Falconer smiled, and I explained my rather gasping condition, by saying—

"Your rooms do take a man's breath away, Mrs. Falconer, they seem to transport one into a fairyland of flowers."

"Yes," she said, "I hope they do. You see—" and she hesitated a second—"we cannot enjoy them outside the house, as most people can, so we have them and a gardener inside."

"I should miss a garden," I said bluntly.

"You wouldn't, miss *ours*," she said, as she turned away to speak to Bob on her other side.

I enjoyed my dinner, which was perfect in a simple way, and in the glory of that room of flowers, I did not notice, not until when next I found myself in my own room, that, on an August evening, I had dined in a room hermetically sealed, as far as an open window or fresh air was concerned. Later we gathered again in the Indoor Garden for smokes, games and music. There was not any drawing-room which also delighted me, as I have a wholesome horror of those abominable apartments with their set chairs, cushions of silk only to be looked at. Silver table—neither use nor ornament,—and corners filled with framed photographs of friends, so-called, for whom you care nothing at all, do not miss, and whose pictures you often keep in a drawer until a day when they come to call, when you at once put the right set out, trusting to luck that no one will give you away, though occasionally they have been known to do so!

It was about 9.40 when the sudden need of some fresh air seized me with uncontrollable longing. I had lived in the air so long, it was impossible for me I felt to remain shut up indoors, especially as there seemed an unwritten law forbidding the opening of windows anywhere.

I was idly wondering how I could be st escape to smoke a quiet pipe in the fresh air, before turning in, when my worthy father-in-law to be dropped into a chair beside me.

“Getting tired, John?” he asked. “I should turn in early if I were you, we are all early-to-bed folks here.”

“No thanks,” I replied, “I’m not tired, I was admiring that painted view of the far end of this lovely place, though I should have thought glass on all sides would have better carried out your idea. What would the view be if that end were also glass?”

“It all depends upon the time of day,” was his reply. “In the morning it would show you the garden, the Low Lawn,” he said, “but—now for instance—well, it wouldn’t, or if it did, you would rather not see it.”

He left me no chance to comment on his explanation, merely stated the fact, leaving me to make of it what I chose.

I didn’t make much, needless to say, except to make up my mind more firmly to fathom what they were fast leading me to look upon as a “Mystery,” and as I have the healthy Englishman’s dislike of mysteries, I did not intend it to be one for longer than I could manage.

“Very well,” I thought, “independence is my attitude henceforth, for when I came to think of it, I had been led, influenced, ringed about, as it were in an unobtrusive kind of way ever since my arrival a few hours ago. We would see!”

I rose, shook out my pipe, strolling away as I did so, to where the piano stood under a bank of roses. Maude was playing soft snatches of rag-times. Bob was lounging by her side, Mrs. Falconer nodding over her knitting close beside Mr. Falconer who was reading, while Captain McKlean and his sister Nora, with whom I had not so far had any conversation, were idly knocking the clock golf ball about.

“Come along, John, and sing,” said Maude, breaking into the old familiar “Long, long trail.” “All soldiers sing this, so begin.”

“I’m not just in singing form at the moment,” I replied, “and I’m a little tired. I’m just going to smoke a pipe out of doors, before I turn in, was my calm announcement. But, had I dropped a bomb in the midst of them, the effect of my few words could not have been more startling. Mr Falconer dropped his paper, with a muttered “God bless my soul!”; Maude crashed into a jumble of wrong notes; Bob said but one word—“Golly!”; and Captain McKlean and his sister dropped their putters, joining the little circle hurriedly. Mrs. Falconer woke—I don’t mean she merely opened her eyes—she seemed suddenly galvanised, as she rose, saying—

“John, as my future son-in-law, I ask you *not* to leave the house to-night!” There was a tense silence for a brief second, but I was determined.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Falconer, but I see no reason to comply with such a curious request. I am a soldier accustomed to be out and about in all weathers. I am *not* a hot-house plant, and if I do not breathe some fresh air, I shall neither rest nor sleep; my little evening walk is my best sedative, and I must ask your kind indulgence of my whim—Fresh *air* I must have.”

Bob’s was the sole reply—

“If you could get it fresh, Sir, it would be all right.”

Mrs. Falconer seated herself again, without further words. Mr. Falconer had disappeared.

I bowed, wished them all “Good-night,” moving way feeling like anything but an *honoured!* guest. I wended my way back to the hall; it was empty, so, slipping on a coat and my hat, I made for the front door, beneath the golden curtains. I pulled one back and stared idiotically at the solid wall beneath it; there wasn’t the faintest suggestion of a door, yet I had entered by one—that, I knew. I walked all round. An unbroken carved cedar wood panelling ran right round to a

depth of four feet. There wasn't a chink nor an opening, except the way to my sleeping corridor and the stone passage I had just come along. I felt as if I should lose my temper in a minute, but determined as I was, I retraced my steps to the Indoor Garden, meaning to ask where was the door, or any door. I reached the place only to find it dark, silent, empty; one and all must have gone to their rooms by some other way, probably suspecting exactly what *had* happened, *would* happen. Annoyed and irritated at being thus foiled in my desire, I had no choice but to go to my bedroom. The whole house seemed sunk in the silence of sleep, though it was but 10.30, and I shut my door with a rather vicious slam that echoed and re-echoed along the corridor.

"Now for my windows," I murmured, "for a breath of fresh air I must and will have—"

"Futile wish! unattainable longing! my windows were thick plate glass, minus fastening of any description—"Foiled again!" I murmured, as I began a minute inspection of the iron-shuttered window, which was some three or four feet above the floor, with a broad window-sill. A bit of a risk to get on to that I thought, with a lame leg. I'd best leave it for to-night, but it worried me to be beaten—so with a good deal of pain, I dragged myself up on to a chair, from whence I could at least feel and inspect the shutter. My inspection brought forth a prolonged whistle! I had discovered a weak point—true it was padlocked—but the hasp through which the padlock passed was thin, and needed only a good file and a steady hour's work to cut it through, when, so far as I could see, the shutter could be rolled back to its socket.

"Right-o!" I said gaily, "that is for to-morrow. To-morrow, I will buy or steal a file, and then—"

Feeling more settled in my mind now, I got into my bed, determined on two points—tomorrow would see that window open, and that I would to all intents, play the game, nor appear conscious of what was an actual fact, that after 5 p.m., I, an able-bodied—or fairly so—member of H.M. Forces, was a prisoner.

I did not expect to sleep, lacking fresh air, but as I got into bed, the coolest breeze blew round me, and I noticed for the first time, that at either end of the room, high up, were steel electric fans, moving silently and rapidly.

"Then the 'Prisoner' isn't to smother," I thought, as I dropped into a profound sleep.

I awoke feeling rested, refreshed and fit, in spite of a night of closed windows, to which I was quite unaccustomed; tea was brought to me at 7.30 and I rose, feeling ready for whatever the day might bring; it was not going to bring my little girl, alas! though she hoped to be with me within the next day or two. In my heart was a lingering feeling that it was just as well, for she might, probably would have, interfered with my plans.

I joined the family party in the hall a little before nine. All were in the best of form, the hall door stood wide open though I carefully refrained from taking any apparent notice of the fact.

Breakfast was served in the dining-room, which had undergone a slight change—there were fewer plants, fewer flowers, and two large windows were thrown wide open to the sun and air. The same detached spirit was plainly seen, as last night, all were intent upon their own devices. It struck me as unusual that the three guests—one of them a cripple—should not be consulted in the smallest degree, as to their tastes, ideas or wishes for the day. Not a single comment was made as to the previous day, its doings, or the evening of it. It gave one a feeling that "sufficient for the day" was a saying ably carried out. I waited for a kindly suggestion, such as—"Would I care to drive? Would I prefer a lounge in the garden?" *Nothing*, however, was forthcoming, so I asked blandly—

"McKlean, are you coming to smoke a pipe in the garden?"

“Captain McKlean is coming with me,” answered Maude. “I have to go to town for some things.”

“Town,” I might mention, was a small market town, called Singletown, consisting of a main Street, a Bank, and in the high Street, varied shops of a small mixed kind, and boasting quite a good ironmonger’s, a lending library and hospital, up to date.

Now this began to look awkward, obviously *I* should be *de trop*, yet reach that ironmongers I must and will.

“I wonder if you would take a passenger to town, as well?” I asked. “I have a little shopping to do, and cannot walk far.”

“We are only going to be an hour,” replied Maude. “Can’t I shop for you?”

“Sorry!” I said, “I am afraid not.”

I knew in her heart Maude was hating me for a spoil sport, but I had to get that file, so at the risk of being voted a nuisance, I smilingly asked again to be taken.

I was taken, but I knew in every fibre of my being I was all that I feared, a spoil sport. I had to put my feelings in my pocket, and when duly dropped at the best stationers, slipped from there into the ironmonger’s without delay, the moment their backs were turned. Joyfully I selected three good files, stowing them away in an inner pocket, while ostentatiously carrying a library book and packet of stationery as well as a box of toffee—of a war kind—as a peace offering for the huffy lady. We reached the house again, well before lunch-time..

As before, I was struck with the total lack of exchange of news, none seemed to know or care what the other had been doing; it was perhaps as well, for I might now spend my time as best suited me, irrespective of anyone else.

I was deep in thought when Mrs. Falconer made the only remark as to any arrangement.

“Tea will be on the Low Lawn, John, at four o’clock. We all come in at five.”

“Oh! do we?” I thought. “Well I for one don’t. I’m not being imprisoned a second time, from five until bedtime, if I can help it.” So I just murmured—

“Thanks, I will have a rest first and join you there for tea.”

Then I sought my room, ostensibly to rest, in reality to study the lie of the land, and the iron shutter. I carefully made a mental study of the position of the house, its windows, their outlook, and so on, as I went to my room. I hated my room, hated its big shut-up windows, hated its ugly iron one, above all hated the imprisoned atmosphere of it. I studied the view from those windows. They overlooked a walled fruit garden, beyond which stretched a belt of trees. I craned my neck, squirming violently in my endeavour to locate the part of the grounds the iron window would overlook; finding by my memorized plan of house and grounds that as it was a jutting out angle of the house, it would, as I more than half expected, command an uninterrupted view of the Low Lawn.

“What a pity I could not begin my work now,” I thought, “and have a view of that lawn about 5.30.” But alas! that could not be. Very well, I would endeavour to possess my soul in patience, meaning to retire early on a plea of tiredness, I spent an hour on the couch in my room, dozing lightly under the pretence of reading, and 3.30 found me wending my steps to the Low Lawn but with a dire thought in my mind—

“Suppose my iron window should be barricaded outside as well!”

I had not long joined the group on the lawn before my misgivings were put to rest. I had spotted the iron windows, also immediately above it a similar one, it was an odd angle in a house, though, if left *as* windows, might have made an attractive corner in the rooms. I would for once, question, but whom? Mrs. Falconer would rise grandiloquently to the occasion flooring me

with a single terse reply, that was a foregone conclusion. Maude, not yet having forgiven my intrusion in the morning, would probably loftily disdain to reply at all. Bob was most accessible, so I rose stiffly from my chair, saying—

“Come and be kind, Bob, my leg is worrying me and needs a little gentle exercise. Will you lend me that strong shoulder of yours, in return for a war yarn?”

“Won’t I just,” he answered, springing to his feet, and placing himself ready for my encircling arm to rest along his shoulders. I kept my promise during three turns slowly up and down the lawn I spun out my yarn a little, making it end about the centre of the lawn as we faced the house.

“Half a second, old man,” I then said. “I must have a breath.” We stood, and I gazed at the house.

“Jolly old place,” I said.

“Yes,” he answered. “Are you ready, sir?”

“In a jiff,” I replied. “I’m trying if I am clever enough to spot my room. I’ll bet you a bob I can.”

“Right!” said the lad, all eagerness now. “Try, sir.”

I made one or two feeble shots, which were received with yells of derision.

“I give it up,” I said at length. “You’ve won your bob, so tell me.”

“Why, there,” he cried, pointing, there with the blank window looking this way, with another window like it higher up.

“Of course,” I said, “how dense of me. I remember now—that dull window spoils the pretty room.”

“Might spoil it more, sir, if it wasn’t dull,” he replied.

“Oh, I don’t think so, Bob,” I went on, “look what a picture the lawn would be from it.”

“A pretty picture—I *don’t* think! I guess you’d jolly quick pack up your traps and quit, if you saw the pretty picture, sir.”

“Look here, Bob,” I began, in wheedling tones, “let’s be chums, and you tell me all about that picture in return for my yarn.”

Scornfully the young voice answered me.

“I didn’t think you were a rotter, sir. I thought you were a sport, but a *real* sport would see this old shop is dad’s nightmare and play the game. I’m a boy scout, sir, and I try to play the game, it isn’t the game for a soldier to try and make a scout fail to be a sport.”

Humbly, I begged his pardon, feeling about three inches high as I did so, and wondering what his opinion would be of me if it transpired that I had broken open the window—though I hoped to defy detection. In silence we retraced our steps, but I had fallen from my high estate in Bob’s eyes, and could feel I was not any longer a hero, even with a purple and white ribbon—so do our youthful judges censure and condemn!

Tea was somewhat more of a rag than previous meals, possibly because little Miss Dorcas, with her three charges, joined us at tea, though their other meals were taken in the seclusion of the schoolroom.

I was keeping a furtive eye on my wristwatch, and wondering which of the party would make the first move, when I saw Mrs. Falconer nod to Miss Dorcas, who promptly rose, calling the children to come as she went. I wondered by what means such obedience had been taught and enforced since nine out of every ten children would have begged for “just ten more minutes.”

“The kiddies trot in early,” I remarked, to no one in particular.

“You bet,” answered Bob, “they always go through the fruit garden to the schoolroom, and if they get there before the sun leaves the apricot wall, they can pick one—you bet they don’t miss!”

I smiled, thinking to myself how apt it all was—seemingly so natural—though every move was planned.

Maude and the McKleans were the next to go—Maude talking volubly about finishing the Badminton set begun last evening.

They had barely gone before old Jacobs hurried up—this time with a trim maid in attendance—the two cleared the tea things, and departed without loss of time. There was not to be any delay this evening, that was plain.

Mr. and Mrs. Falèoner only remained, they were going to sit me out, so to speak!

I would alter that plan. I rose, saying—“Might I, too, venture in search of an apricot.”

Mrs. Falconer—a barely perceptible shade of relief flashing over her face—answered—

“Yes, surely, and go in by the schoolroom door, from there you can join us in the Indoor Garden.”

Mr. Falconer rose, as if to accompany me, but his wife’s glance restrained him, evidently it was a little further than even they could, with courtesy, go—to accompany a guest to the fruit garden, as if fearing wholesale robbing of fruit trees. So I was permitted to go alone.

My idea was, of course, to visit the fruit garden, but *not* to enter the schoolroom door, joining the caged-up company, from then onwards, until bedtime. Oh! no, I was merely going to get an apricot—dawdle a while until the coast was clear and retrace my steps, almost to the Low Lawn, but instead of descending to it, skirt right round the top of it, and so indoors, when I felt disposed.

I reached the fruit garden, took my apricot, waved gaily to little Lottie in the window—disregarded the beckoning hand of little Miss Dorcas, who was gazing at me through the long window, with almost a look of fear in her dark eyes, and retraced my steps to the path which led right round the sunk lawn.

I walked along it on the far side from the steps leading down into it, half-way akng past the group of fine trees, where the tea was usually put. I paused—paused because I *had* to—I knew that, but tried not to think it. I wasn’t exactly held up, nor was I conscious of briars tripping me up as last night—I had merely stopped—stopped to breathe. Yes, that was it, only I wasn’t out of breath—there just wasn’t anything *to* breathe; foolishly I found myself saying this idiotic sentence over and over again “not out of breath, but nothing *to* breathe.”

I had been once in a gas-cloud in France, but this wasn’t like that. *This* was like nothing; ‘I struggled a few more yards, and gazed. The house seemed to have receded, the lawn seemed further below me, and appeared veiled in a bluish haze, thicker and thicker it seemed to get, and as I gazed, I fancied I could discern swiftly, hurrying forms moving to and fro. I struggled on again, intent only on reaching the house. As I advanced, the bluish fog dosed round me, shutting me in, in an impenetrable wall. In vain I struggled, in vain I peered; at last, even beating the fog with my hands, as if to force a passage through. Nothing availed me, and ever and anon I could see the hurrying forms below me. Terror struck me! Would that I were safely in the Indoor Garden with its warmth and light and beauty, instead of here, enveloped in fog with other forms of which I dared not think, hurrying below me. Would that I had been guided instead of going my own obstinate way. Vain were such repinings now. The shapes seemed more defined, the atmosphere more dense. Feebly, I struggled to see the time by my luminous watch—Eight

o'clock! Have I been wandering here so long—it seemed incredible! I must, and will, reach the house, but now I seemed to have lost the house, all trace of it had vanished.

Last night I grumbled that I was a prisoner— indoors. To-night I was to be kept “Outside the House.”

Denser and denser grew the appalling thickness of the air. I feared to move a yard in advance “If only it would lift a little, just enough to enable me to go forward in safety.” Even as I spoke, the atmosphere grew perceptibly clearer. I took one step forward, to find myself standing on the edge of a precipice or what seemed like one. I was now facing the sunk lawn—sunk indeed!— for it seemed far, far below me, with a drop from where I was standing of I dare not contemplate what depth, where shapes were ever hurrying to and fro. Cautiously I bent nearer, in a way almost glad to gaze on some movement, rather than into the impenetrable wall before me. As I gazed, a figure seemed to come close up to me out of the void, stretching its arms towards me as if to drag me with in. I saw no face, no definite shape, beyond the shadowy outline, and the arms. I shrank back, and back, to find myself pressing against the shrubs. “Could I keep in that position without losing my bearings?” I wondered, for if I could, I was then backing away from lawn and house. How far the fog extended, I could not guess, but to press back from the lawn seemed the only thing to attempt. I was weak, spent, almost done, but I threw my last ounce of strength into this move. Crash! crash! went branches behind me, my weak leg was failing me, and I found myself feebly trying to pray for help. And now the shadowy forms seemed to follow me, closer, closer, they pressed forward, as I pressed back. Suddenly, I fancied I *heard* a faint shout, then another. I tried to answer, but was powerless, terror had made me dumb. Another shout—

“John, where are you?”

I could not answer, but gave one last push, and fell.

I opened my eyes to find not a search party, not a feverish gang of people, fussing over me, but merely Mrs. Falconer, with a flash of brandy in one hand, a light rug over her arm, leading a magnificent hound by a long chain. His acquaintance I had not made; he was licking my face and hands, when with a long shudder I sat up.

“Mrs. Falconer,” I said.

“Yes, John, Gelert and I. Do you feel able to walk? We have some way to go, before you can rest.”

“Are we far from the house?” I asked.

“The house, as far as we are concerned, has ceased to exist until daylight,” she answered.

“I do not understand,” I said.

“Of course you don’t,” she replied, “and were not content to be guided.”

“No,” I said ruefully, “but how topping of you to come.”

“No one else can,” she said, “only Gelert and I can come. But now you must try to move.”

I took a little of the brandy, and struggled to my feet, to find I was on the extreme edge of the shrubberies, beyond which appeared to be meadows. With my final twist back, I had landed on my back into the meadow, nothing resisting my strength, and, of course, fell.

“How deep is the shrubbery I backed through, Mrs. Falconer?” I asked.

“A matter of perhaps thirty or forty yards,” she said. “Fortunately it occurred to you to back.”

“Why?” I said.

“Never mind why, just now,” she replied, “we must hurry. Look.”

I looked, and saw the fog creeping after us. Gelert growled menacingly, ever and anon turning to face the way we were leaving, once, springing as if to grasp something, his eyes like fire, saliva dripping from his massive jaws. A few moments passed, and Mrs. Falconer breathed—

“Hurry John, you must.”

“I can’t,” I gasped.

“You must,” she said. But even as she spoke, I felt the impress of a hand heavily on my shoulder. The hound growled, prepared for a spring, I thought, at my throat, as with a quick word and sudden jerk, Mrs. Falconer dragged me through a gate, sinking down on the roadside with a whispered “Thank God!”

I suppose I lost consciousness for a few moments, for when next I opened my eyes, I was covered with the rug, my head on Mrs. Falconer’s knee, Gelert beside her, with his great paws close to her.

A faint, grey light, as of coming dawn, was visible, the atmosphere was clear and balmy, and very silent.

Mrs. Falconer rose, and her voice was once again the cold, unemotional tones of my hostess. I vaguely wondered if it had been all part of a horrible nightmare, and had I dreamed that across it I heard her voice, anguished, distressed, calling, calling.

There was nothing now, in either her voice or bearing, other than the lady I had hitherto known.

“If you are rested, John, we will go home,” she said, in slightly ironical tones, “you will no doubt be glad of a bath and sleep.”

“Thank you,” I answered, in the same off-hand way. “I shall.”

I was deadly tired, sick with pain, and now, in the quickly-coming dawn, felt, and I should not hesitate to say, looked, like a truant schoolboy, caught out of bounds, and conveyed home to receive due chastisement. I felt cowed—no other word describes it, yet deep in my heart lay a feeling of annoyance, that I had been found. I was quite conscious of *not* feeling nearly as grateful as I ought, and of being still a long way from discovering the why and wherefore of strange and terrifying happenings.

That I had seen, things, not of this world, in the ordinary meaning of the word, I was well aware. Nor was I unduly fearful of them, the horror lay in the suffocating fog, and in the apparent wish to haul me into some abyss. I was *not* afraid of mere forms. Some of us out in “No-Man’s-Land” were not unknowing of other forms being present as well as our comrades in the flesh. There are those of us, who, in spite of the jeerings of scoffers, still say, that the Angels of Mons were *not* the phantasy of unhinged minds, nor even a mirage due to a tot of rum. Therefore, I, among many others, have learned to be less sceptical and not to take non-understandable things as impossibilities.

The truant school-boy feeling clung to me all the way home. I shouldn’t have felt surprised had Mrs. Falconer taken me by the hand and bidden me trot along. As we neared the house, I observed smoke from one or two chimneys. What time it was I did not know, nor greatly care. In silence we entered the hall, hearing a large clock boom five as we did so.

A small round table was drawn near a blazing freshly kindled fire, a kettle steamed on the hob, toast, and bread and butter were there, but not a sign of any person.

Still in silence, Mrs. Falconer threw off her fur coat and cap, and warming her hands at the blaze, she uttered one of her usual terse remarks—

“When you have had food, John, I advise a bath, bed, and a still tongue. The household are aware you remained outside when you had better have been in. Details of your experience are not desirable, and for Elsie’s sake, I do not advise a repetition of foolhardiness, I also ask you to conform to the house rules, which, are made as little irksome as possible.”

I did not reply beyond a mild bow and she went on—

“I am going to lock Gelert up now. I counsel bed for you, and the Doctor to see your leg in the morning, Good-bye.”

I had prepared an elaborate speech of thanks for her timely help, but she cut me short, saying—  
“Your best thanks, John, will be to conform to rules; no one else has ever tried to kick them over quite so deliberately before.”

She left me then, and I dragged my throbbing limb to bath and bed, too weary to think or conjecture further.

When next I awakened it was 10 a.m. No one apparently had been near me, so I rang my bell. Old Jacob answered it, looking at me reproachfully, as he asked if he might bring breakfast because “ ‘Madam’ has ’phoned the doctor to call.”

“There was no need,” I said—“he may even order me to lie still.”

“Yes, sir,” said Jacobs, his tone implying “that’s it.”

A plentiful breakfast tray speedily arrived, and with it Bob, who perched himself on the foot of my bed, eyeing me as one who wished to know without inquiring. I vouchsafed no information, so he started off.

“Rotten luck, Sir, but only your own fault—quite instructive and very thrilling—Hurt your leg, Sir?”

“A bit,” I answered.

Then lowering his voice he whispered—“Anything touch you? Fog, I suppose, and people.”

“Oh, no,” I said, “at least I don’t think so.”

“Think so!” he ejaculated, “there would not be any *think* about it.

“What’s it all about, Bob?” I asked.

“Better ask the Gov’nor, Sir, not me.”

“P’raps so—clear now, Bob—I’m going to dress.”

“Right-o, Sir,” said he as he lounged away.

Fearing a doctor’s visit to maul me about, I dressed and tubbed quickly, and was just about to put my jacket on, when I noticed a long tear in the shoulder, also the shoulder strap was missing.

“Then someone did touch me,” I said aloud, staring aghast at the ripped shoulder, dismayed to think what a give away it was to the household as it was my only available coat for day. I had better concoct a yarn to account for it, and get a maid to mend it, while I dressed.

I rang the bell and a plain-looking person with glasses and a long nose answered it.

“Did you ring, Sir?” she asked, in rasping tones.

“Eh, yes,” I said “I’ve had an accident and torn my coat, I shall be obliged if someone will mend it.”

She took it without answering, and I continued dressing until she re-appeared saying—

“I’ve done what I could, Sir, it’s a tailor’s job, but it may do until you leave.”

“Until I leave?” I said, somewhat startled.

“Yes, Sir,” she replied. “You’ll be leaving I expect. It’s no use staying, Sir, when things like that begin to happen,” pointing to my coat as she spoke.

I was about to try a question, softened by a half-crown, when there was a sharp knock at the door, and another maid entered with a salver on which lay a wire. With a murmured “Thanks” I ripped it open, reading—

“Coming to-day, why don’t you do as you are told. Elsie.”

Forgotten were the horrors of last night, forgotten torn coats, rules, regulations, everything, in the delight of my little girl’s coming. I thanked the two women, flung on my coat, whistling like a schoolboy, as I tramped to the hall on my way to breakfast.

A curious restraint met me—something indefinable, a kind of lack of genuineness in the “Good-mornings” I received, which gave, me a feeling of being in disgrace, but no amount of that was going to damp my spirits, so I ignored it, though don’t mind admitting the chill rather spoilt the morning, and I was not sorry to escape with a pipe to have a look at a time-table.

Mrs. Falconer did not appear during the morning which did not unduly worry me, but when Mr. Falconer asked me to be good enough to follow him to his study, I had visions of the birch-rod, and my footsteps lagged as befitted my part, when I obeyed his request. He asked me to be seated, but instead of a whipping, he mildly said—

“John, Elsie will arrive at 12.40, will you drive to meet her?”

“Thanks very much, I was hoping to,” I answered.

“She knows,” he went on, “that you—er—that you—had an unpleasant night. I regret that you do not seem able to take us as we are obliged to be, and I admit it is difficult to make one’s guests understand and respect our arrangements for their welfare, without explanations, which we are not permitted to give; for Elsie’s sake, I warn you, less worse befall, to conform to rule.”

This was a whipping without a doubt; and I felt a qualm of conscience as he spoke, knowing, as I did, my pig-headed temperament and determination to know more.

I thanked him, offered him a cigarette, but evaded any promises, though he eyed me questioningly as if he awaited something of the kind.

The next few hours I passed aimlessly, wandering about alone, since one and all of the party seemed bent on avoiding me. I had a stroll to the Low Lawn; though, bathed in sunshine, it looked peaceful and serene, making me wonder vaguely had I dreamed the horrid fantasy. I was glad when the hour came to meet my little girl. I enjoyed swift the run. I was glad beyond measure to see her bright face at the railway carriage window.

“You are looking fit, old boy,” she said; adding, without any hesitancy, “in spite of your silly tricks last night.”

“How did you know?” I asked.

“Mother wired me to come,” she replied, “and take charge of you, as you had been out too late. I knew all *that* meant;” she said, with a shudder.

“Will you tell me about it, Kiddie?” I coaxed, but her little face took a graver look, as she answered:

“No, John, I can’t; you must just trust us and do as we do. Stay with me, dear, this evening; never mind trying to fathom things, others have tried before you. Promise me you will not think of it any more.”

“Dear child, I’m a man with a thinking machine. I can’t promise not to think,” I said.

“Well, promise you won’t stay out after time,” she said.

“Very well,” I assented, “I’ll promise that.”

She nestled to my side in dear content at that, and our drive back was a happy one.

Elsie was greeted with happy comradeship on our arrival, so lunch was a more cheery meal, and the afternoon was passed as usual, in a rest, a stroll, and tea beneath the old trees on the Low Lawn. At five, as usual, a general move was made to the house. Elsie held out her hand to me, merely saying:

“Come, John”; but, man-like, I wanted to remain, and was reluctant to obey that little outstretched hand, but gave in with a good grace, consenting to be imprisoned for the rest of the summer evening within the glassed garden. To a man accustomed to be out of doors, the enforced imprisonment palled, despite the games, music, gay talk, and general attempt to keep things cheery.

Little Miss Dorcas and her charges joined us for a while; and I had an idea, that if I could get her alone, she would perhaps give me some information. I would try; so invited her to a putting match, leaving Elsie to chat to her mother.

“You are playing wildly, Major,” said my partner, in a few moments.

“Yes,” I answered, “I’m afraid my thoughts were ‘outside,’ and not in. I had a strange evening last evening, you know.”

“Yes,” she said. “I hope it is one that will not be repeated.”

“Oh no,” I answered, “I’m not likely to repeat it.”

“I suppose not,” she replied, “at least not in that way.”

“That way?” I asked. “What do you mean, is there any other way?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” she answered, gravely. “Oh! Mrs. Falconer as watching us,” she said, suddenly—“play, oh, do play! I’ll try and say something while we play. I don’t think it is right to keep you in ignorance of your danger; they do, and no one will warn you.”

“Tell me,” I muttered, as I played.

“I can’t,” she whispered. “She is coming across, look in the books on your shelf to-night. There! I’ve won,” she said, in the same breath, as she waved her putter in triumph, just as Mrs. Falconer came up.

“Don’t overdo it, John,” she said. “Elsie is waiting for you, and the children are getting tired, Miss Dorcas.”

So our game and little talk came to an abrupt end. From then on, I was given no chance for talks, except with Elsie; but when we separated to dress for dinner, and I found myself alone, I pondered deeply over a quiet pipe. “Warn me of my danger” Miss Dorcas had said, then there was there danger, whether I ventured outside or not? And the bookshelf, that probably meant a note. Surely I was safe inside, I thought, for I was fully determined to get the iron shutter out of my way. Well, I would leave it now, and, as they say, “wait and see.”

Dinner was cheery, but I was rapidly beginning to detest the Indoor Garden, with its continual constraint, and made up my mind to press for an early wedding and take my little girl to more congenial surroundings.

The evening drew to a close at last! though I was happy with Elsie, and, in a secluded corner, had asked and carried my point of an early wedding.

By 10.30 all had dispersed; indeed, I am certain all hated the enforced seclusion as much in their hearts as I did. I bid them all “Good. night!” and, with a sigh of relief, flung myself into the armchair in my cosy bedroom. My eyes suddenly fell on to a book, slightly awry on the shelf, and I sprang up as quickly as my lame leg permitted, and took it down; a tiny note which lay between the pages read thus:

“You have given a loop-hole and are waited for, take care you are not taken ‘outside the house.’  
Keep from your windows.—J.D.

“Ho! ho!” I said; “‘keep from my windows.’ That little warning gives me a clue, but surely, if I do not open them, all will be well. I only desire to *see* through them, and what’s more, I will.”

I took my coat off, mounted a chair with difficulty, managing to seat myself sideways on the broad window-ledge, armed with my files, and a soft cloth, to dull the sound as much as possible. Luckily the file was sharp, and the metal soft, and in a short time I had made a deep dent. It was now 11.30, all was silent, presumably the whole house was wrapt in slumber. Steadily I worked for another half-hour; the hasp was almost through. I paused for a brief rest. As I paused, there sprang into being, probably from my subconsciousness, the thought: “Suppose

real danger did lie in wait for me, suppose some horror undreamed of should cost me my life, or, worse, my reason, and none knew of this attempt of mine to lay bare a secret so carefully guarded." I prolonged my rest sufficiently to climb from my window-sill, add a few lines to my carefully kept notes of events since I came here, put the bundle of papers in a long envelope, sealed it, and addressed it to Captain Percy Hesketh. Having done which, I remounted the window-sill and endeavoured to complete my task. There seemed some slight hesitancy in my movements, probably because I was now nearing the goal I had set out to win. I braced myself and started again.

How still it was, though the wind seemed to have risen a little. I could hear it moaning round the corner of the house, fitfully, as if a sudden summer storm was coming up. The hasp bent, gave way, and came in two in my fingers. Gently I moved the heavy shutter, an inch—it creaked—creaked, it seemed to me, loudly enough to wake the "seven sleepers." Did I imagine it, or did I hear a step overhead. I must hurry. I scrambled down, switched off all lights, climbed up again, and waited breathlessly. All was silent. Carefully I slid down on to the chair below me, and cautiously drew the shutter back a couple of inches more, then waited,—still all quiet—swung it wide—CRACK!

I dimly remember calling Percy, calling with my soul more than with my voice.

\* \* \*

When next I remembered anything, it was to become conscious that I was in a bed in a bright, lofty room, a white-capped nurse was by my bed, holding a glass. Percy Hesketh was sitting by my side—a fact which gave me joy without an atom of surprise. It was as if I had expected him to be there.

"If you swallow this, you may say a few words," said the nurse.

I swallowed it, and gave my hand into the warm grasp of my friend.

"John," he said, "I have your papers. Try to tell me what followed the cracking of the pane of glass."

Feebly, haltingly, I tried, as I stumblingly, shudderingly, told him:

"Following the crack, the window splintered before my eyes, from top to bottom. I bent back, expecting to be covered with falling glass. It did not fall, but a pale, unearthly light illuminated it, lighting up to my horrified-gaze, faces pressed against the window peering in upon me, but faces such as I never in life beheld. They were dark, almost black, with sunken, fiercely gleaming eyes, the cheekbones protruding, flesh sunken, looking almost like living skeletons, save for the skin which stretched tightly over the bones; anger, despair, ferocity, hunger, terror—all were depicted upon those awful faces. Through the cracked glass, deadly fumes began to steal, my room seemed cloudy, I was as if transfixed, unable to move, to call, to reach the lights, to do aught but stand staring, tremblingly. The faces pressed closer and yet closer; they reached the glass, it cracked again, and more fumes poured in; long arms (there seemed hundreds of them) reached wildly up, skinny hands, like those of skeletons, were held out as if to grasp. I tried to step back to get away from the window, as with a terrific crash, the glass fell in. Arms and hands stretched through, faces came nearer, nearer—I felt myself seized, held, lifted, drawn upwards.

I was on the window-sill again, held in an inexorable grip. I felt myself lifted through, felt the cold air on my face, was just able to discern the hurrying figures in the thick mist, and to know, beyond all doubt, that I was being borne swiftly, by claw-like hands, towards the Low Lawn."

(Continued by Captain Percy Hesketh):

As my poor friend uttered his final words, he sank back into my arms in a state of unconsciousness, from which he never fully recovered, though in the many hours of watching over him, which were permitted by the Hospital Staff, I witnessed again and again the agony of mind and horror he passed through.

My painful task it was to bring the girl he loved to his bedside, to witness her grief, as he failed to remember her name, or face, all my life I shall remember that afternoon.

The sun was shining on the floor of the Ward—lighting up stray corners and patches, as I gently led Elsie Falconer to my friend's bedside. He was sitting up, laughingly pointing to the sunny patches, babbling about the funny light. He took no notice of the girl, beyond asking me: "Why does that girl cry?"

"Do you know her, John?" I asked.

"No," he replied, "but she is pretty, tell her look to at the funny patches, then she will laugh. Take her away," he added, "she cries."

Nurse led the weeping girl away, and I was thankful she had gone. One or another came to see him, it was always the same, no glimmer of memory seemed to return, though at times he would make a little more sensible remark.

One day he spoke to me, saying:

"Who was the old man who called me 'John'? I'm not 'John.' I wish my brains wouldn't keep running round and round like a glass ball full of colours. I could listen to people if the glass ball would keep still," he rambled on, and, uneasy and fearful, I called the Nurse. I saw by her face, it was the end, as, with sudden strength, he flung himself against the pillows, shouting as loudly as he could:

"Hark! there are the guns, at it again, are they—give me my rifle, I'll show them. Now boys, come on—over the top, and at 'em." They were his last words, and the day after the following notice appeared in the papers:—

"On September 30th, at the Hospital,  
"Singleton, Major John Longworth, M.C.,  
"after four years' service, from shock, following  
"an accident, aged 39."

\* \* \*

Some years later, I ventured to read through my late friend's notes of the experience which cost him his life, and to re-write them to the best of my ability, for this, I believe, was what he wished done.

It cost me an effort to re-visit the scenes of such horror; even after a lapse of years, but I desired also to learn, if I could, what really was the story of the place which my friend—bravely, though foolishly—gave his life to discover.

The landlord of the Village Inn gave me the story, as told to him by his grandfather, who knew the former tenants of the house. It seems the family had owned all the coal mines round, for generations, growing more and more wealthy as the years passed. The former owner, grandfather of my friend Francis, was an avaricious man, hard and grasping.

There was warning given, one day, of danger in the mine nearest to the house, warning that it was unsafe to permit the men to descend. Old Falconer, with his greed for money, preferred to risk men's lives rather than lose by delay, and ignored the warning—in fact had it contradicted—and the men went down—to their death—some four hundred of them. Old Falconer added to his crime, by refusing to spend money for rescue work, saying it was useless, that the earth had closed the mine completely. Apparently it had, though there were those who told of groans and shrieks coming from the bowels of the earth.

Falconer went on his way, disregarding all that was said, and in time the ground above the buried mine was cultivated, and turned into a lawn, below the level of the house.

When the old man died, he passed on the dire legacy to his sons, leaving them the whole of his fortune on condition that they lived in the house, making them promise that none on the premises would be out of the house after five in the evening, stating that the entombed men haunted the place.

None ever knew what the old man had seen or heard, but it is said that the miners had slowly starved to death, and could have been rescued at the time, but now haunted the place, intent upon finding victims to drag below with them. There had, said the landlord, been one or two sad happenings, but the worst trouble was the most recent, when a Major Longworth, M.C., who was engaged to Miss Falconer, and who had been severely wounded in France, came to stay with the family, and did not rest until he had witnessed the whole of the awful happenings.

Mr. Falconer was awakened in the night, it is said, by the sound of shattering glass, and rushed into Major Longworth's room in time to see him borne away towards the ill-fated lawn.

The big hound, kept on the place, was loosed, and dashed across the lawn, in which a vast crack had appeared. Mr. Falconer described a furious fight for the body of Major Longworth, between the hound and something unseen, but that the hound succeeded in hauling the body out of the crack in the ground, into which it appeared to be slipping, dragging it, mauled and bleeding, back to the house.

"Major Longworth died in the hospital, here, sir," went on my garrulous host, "and Miss Falconer entered a nursing sisterhood.

"People say the house will collapse some day—have a look at it, sir, if you've time, before it gets late."

I thanked him, and went my way. I found the house, desolate and dilapidated. The vast glass-house on one side of it, full of dead plants and broken chairs—dirty beyond description.

The gardens were a tangle of briars and weeds, the paths had become mere grass tracks. The Low Lawn, grown rank and rough, its greenness marred by a vast blackened crack right across it, as if a subsidence had taken place.

A brooding sense of mystery and disaster hangs over the place; nor do I hesitate to believe when I hear on all sides how the place is shunned, still less can I doubt my friend's written words of all that befell him in spite of all warnings to conform to orders, and not venture

"Outside the House."