

CLASSICS TO GO

THE FOUR FEATHERS



A. E. W. MASON

THE FOUR FEATHERS

A. E. W. MASON

CHAPTER I

A CRIMEAN NIGHT

Lieutenant Sutch was the first of General Feversham's guests to reach Broad Place. He arrived about five o'clock on an afternoon of sunshine in mid June, and the old red-brick house, lodged on a southern slope of the Surrey hills, was glowing from a dark forest depth of pines with the warmth of a rare jewel. Lieutenant Sutch limped across the hall, where the portraits of the Fevershams rose one above the other to the ceiling, and went out on to the stone-flagged terrace at the back. There he found his host sitting erect like a boy, and gazing southward toward the Sussex Downs.

"How's the leg?" asked General Feversham, as he rose briskly from his chair. He was a small wiry man, and, in spite of his white hairs, alert. But the alertness was of the body. A bony face, with a high narrow forehead and steel-blue inexpressive eyes, suggested a barrenness of mind.

"It gave me trouble during the winter," replied Sutch. "But that was to be expected." General Feversham nodded, and for a little while both men were silent. From the terrace the ground fell steeply to a wide level plain of brown earth and emerald fields and dark clumps of trees. From this plain voices rose through the sunshine, small but very clear. Far away toward Horsham a coil of white smoke from a train snaked rapidly in and out amongst the trees; and on the horizon rose the Downs, patched with white chalk.

"I thought that I should find you here," said Sutch.

"It was my wife's favourite corner," answered Feversham in a quite emotionless voice. "She would sit here by the hour. She had a queer liking for wide and empty spaces."

"Yes," said Sutch. "She had imagination. Her thoughts could people them."

General Feversham glanced at his companion as though he hardly understood. But he asked no questions. What he did not understand he habitually let slip from his mind as not worth comprehension. He spoke at once upon a different topic.

"There will be a leaf out of our table to-night."

"Yes. Collins, Barberton, and Vaughan went this winter. Well, we are all permanently shelved upon the world's half-pay list as it is. The obituary column is just the last formality which gazettes us out of the service altogether," and Sutch stretched out and eased his crippled leg, which fourteen years ago that day had been crushed and twisted in the fall of a scaling-ladder.

"I am glad that you came before the others," continued Feversham. "I would like to take your opinion. This day is more to me than the anniversary of our attack upon the Redan. At the very moment when we were standing under arms in the dark—"

"To the west of the quarries; I remember," interrupted Sutch, with a deep breath. "How should one forget?"

"At that very moment Harry was born in this house. I thought, therefore, that if you did not object, he might join us to-night. He happens to be at home. He will, of course, enter the service, and he might learn something, perhaps, which afterward will be of use—one never knows."

"By all means," said Sutch, with alacrity. For since his visits to General Feversham were limited to the occasion of these anniversary dinners, he had never yet seen Harry Feversham.

Sutch had for many years been puzzled as to the qualities in General Feversham which had attracted Muriel Graham, a woman as remarkable for the refinement of her intellect as for the beauty of her person; and he could never find an explanation. He had to be content with his knowledge that for some mysterious reason she had married this man so much older than herself and so unlike to her in character. Personal courage and an indomitable self-confidence were the chief, indeed the only, qualities which sprang to light in General Feversham. Lieutenant Sutch went back in thought over twenty years, as he sat on his garden-chair, to a time before he had taken part, as an officer of the Naval Brigade, in that unsuccessful onslaught on the Redan. He remembered a season in London to which he had come fresh from the China station; and he was curious to see Harry Feversham. He did not admit that it was more than the natural curiosity of a man who, disabled in comparative youth, had made a hobby out of the study of human nature. He was interested to see whether the lad took after his mother or his father—that was all.

So that night Harry Feversham took a place at the dinner-table and listened to the stories which his elders told, while Lieutenant Sutch watched him. The stories were all of that dark winter in the Crimea, and a fresh story was always in the telling before its predecessor was ended. They were stories of death, of hazardous exploits, of the pinch of famine, and the chill of snow. But they were told in clipped words and with a matter-of-fact tone, as though the men who related them were only conscious of them as far-off things; and there was seldom a comment more pronounced

than a mere "That's curious," or an exclamation more significant than a laugh.

But Harry Feversham sat listening as though the incidents thus carelessly narrated were happening actually at that moment and within the walls of that room. His dark eyes—the eyes of his mother—turned with each story from speaker to speaker, and waited, wide open and fixed, until the last word was spoken. He listened fascinated and enthralled. And so vividly did the changes of expression shoot and quiver across his face, that it seemed to Sutch the lad must actually hear the drone of bullets in the air, actually resist the stunning shock of a charge, actually ride down in the thick of a squadron to where guns screeched out a tongue of flame from a fog. Once a major of artillery spoke of the suspense of the hours between the parading of the troops before a battle and the first command to advance; and Harry's shoulders worked under the intolerable strain of those lagging minutes.

But he did more than work his shoulders. He threw a single furtive, wavering glance backwards; and Lieutenant Sutch was startled, and indeed more than startled,—he was pained. For this after all was Muriel Graham's boy.

The look was too familiar a one to Sutch. He had seen it on the faces of recruits during their first experience of a battle too often for him to misunderstand it. And one picture in particular rose before his mind,—an advancing square at Inkermann, and a tall big soldier rushing forward from the line in the eagerness of his attack, and then stopping suddenly as though he suddenly understood that he was alone, and had to meet alone the charge of a mounted Cossack. Sutch remembered very clearly the fatal wavering glance which the big soldier had thrown backward toward his companions,—a glance accompanied by a queer sickly smile. He remembered too, with equal vividness, its

consequence. For though the soldier carried a loaded musket and a bayonet locked to the muzzle, he had without an effort of self-defence received the Cossack's lance-thrust in his throat.

Sutch glanced hurriedly about the table, afraid that General Feversham, or that some one of his guests, should have remarked the same look and the same smile upon Harry's face. But no one had eyes for the lad; each visitor was waiting too eagerly for an opportunity to tell a story of his own. Sutch drew a breath of relief and turned to Harry. But the boy was sitting with his elbows on the cloth and his head propped between his hands, lost to the glare of the room and its glitter of silver, constructing again out of the swift succession of anecdotes a world of cries and wounds, and maddened riderless chargers and men writhing in a fog of cannon-smoke. The curtest, least graphic description of the biting days and nights in the trenches set the lad shivering. Even his face grew pinched, as though the iron frost of that winter was actually eating into his bones. Sutch touched him lightly on the elbow.

"You renew those days for me," said he. "Though the heat is dripping down the windows, I feel the chill of the Crimea."

Harry roused himself from his absorption.

"The stories renew them," said he.

"No. It is you listening to the stories."

And before Harry could reply, General Feversham's voice broke sharply in from the head of the table:—

"Harry, look at the clock!"

At once all eyes were turned upon the lad. The hands of the clock made the acutest of angles. It was close upon midnight; and from eight, without so much as a word or a

question, he had sat at the dinner-table listening. Yet even now he rose with reluctance.

"Must I go, father?" he asked, and the general's guests intervened in a chorus. The conversation was clear gain to the lad, a first taste of powder which might stand him in good stead afterwards.

"Besides, it's the boy's birthday," added the major of artillery. "He wants to stay; that's plain. You wouldn't find a youngster of fourteen sit all these hours without a kick of the foot against the table-leg unless the conversation entertained him. Let him stay, Feversham!"

For once General Feversham relaxed the iron discipline under which the boy lived.

"Very well," said he. "Harry shall have an hour's furlough from his bed. A single hour won't make much difference."

Harry's eyes turned toward his father, and just for a moment rested upon his face with a curious steady gaze. It seemed to Sutch that they uttered a question, and, rightly or wrongly, he interpreted the question into words:—

"Are you blind?"

But General Feversham was already talking to his neighbours, and Harry quietly sat down, and again propping his chin upon his hands, listened with all his soul. Yet he was not entertained; rather he was enthralled; he sat quiet under the compulsion of a spell. His face became unnaturally white, his eyes unnaturally large, while the flames of the candles shone ever redder and more blurred through a blue haze of tobacco smoke, and the level of the wine grew steadily lower in the decanters.

Thus half of that one hour's furlough was passed; and then General Feversham, himself jogged by the unlucky mention

of a name, suddenly blurted out in his jerky fashion:—

"Lord Wilmington. One of the best names in England, if you please. Did you ever see his house in Warwickshire? Every inch of the ground you would think would have a voice to bid him play the man, if only in remembrance of his fathers.... It seemed incredible and mere camp rumour, but the rumour grew. If it was whispered at the Alma, it was spoken aloud at Inkermann, it was shouted at Balaclava. Before Sebastopol the hideous thing was proved. Wilmington was acting as galloper to his general. I believe upon my soul the general chose him for the duty, so that the fellow might set himself right. There were three hundred yards of bullet-swept flat ground, and a message to be carried across them. Had Wilmington toppled off his horse on the way, why, there were the whispers silenced for ever. Had he ridden through alive he earned distinction besides. But he didn't dare; he refused! Imagine it if you can! He sat shaking on his horse and declined. You should have seen the general. His face turned the colour of that Burgundy. 'No doubt you have a previous engagement,' he said, in the politest voice you ever heard—just that, not a word of abuse. A previous engagement on the battlefield! For the life of me, I could hardly help laughing. But it was a tragic business for Wilmington. He was broken, of course, and slunk back to London. Every house was closed to him; he dropped out of his circle like a lead bullet you let slip out of your hand into the sea. The very women in Piccadilly spat if he spoke to them; and he blew his brains out in a back bedroom off the Haymarket. Curious that, eh? He hadn't the pluck to face the bullets when his name was at stake, yet he could blow his own brains out afterwards."

Lieutenant Sutch chanced to look at the clock as the story came to an end. It was now a quarter to one. Harry Feversham had still a quarter of an hour's furlough, and that

quarter of an hour was occupied by a retired surgeon-general with a great wagging beard, who sat nearly opposite to the boy.

"I can tell you an incident still more curious," he said. "The man in this case had never been under fire before, but he was of my own profession. Life and death were part of his business. Nor was he really in any particular danger. The affair happened during a hill campaign in India. We were encamped in a valley, and a few Pathans used to lie out on the hillside at night and take long shots into the camp. A bullet ripped through the canvas of the hospital tent—that was all. The surgeon crept out to his own quarters, and his orderly discovered him half-an-hour afterward lying in his blood stone-dead."

"Hit?" exclaimed the major.

"Not a bit of it," said the surgeon. "He had quietly opened his instrument-case in the dark, taken out a lancet, and severed his femoral artery. Sheer panic, do you see, at the whistle of a bullet."

Even upon these men, case-hardened to horrors, the incident related in its bald simplicity wrought its effect. From some there broke a half-uttered exclamation of disbelief; others moved restlessly in their chairs with a sort of physical discomfort, because a man had sunk so far below humanity. Here an officer gulped his wine, there a second shook his shoulders as though to shake the knowledge off as a dog shakes water. There was only one in all that company who sat perfectly still in the silence which followed upon the story. That one was the boy, Harry Feversham.

He sat with his hands now clenched upon his knees and leaning forward a little across the table toward the surgeon, his cheeks white as paper, his eyes burning, and burning

with ferocity. He had the look of a dangerous animal in the trap. His body was gathered, his muscles taut. Sutch had a fear that the lad meant to leap across the table and strike with all his strength in the savagery of despair. He had indeed reached out a restraining hand when General Feversham's matter-of-fact voice intervened, and the boy's attitude suddenly relaxed.

"Queer incomprehensible things happen. Here are two of them. You can only say they are the truth and pray God you may forget 'em. But you can't explain, for you can't understand."

Sutch was moved to lay his hand upon Harry's shoulder.

"Can you?" he asked, and regretted the question almost before it was spoken. But it was spoken, and Harry's eyes turned swiftly toward Sutch, and rested upon his face, not, however, with any betrayal of guilt, but quietly, inscrutably. Nor did he answer the question, although it was answered in a fashion by General Feversham.

"Harry understand!" exclaimed the general, with a snort of indignation. "How should he? He's a Feversham."

The question, which Harry's glance had mutely put before, Sutch in the same mute way repeated. "Are you blind?" his eyes asked of General Feversham. Never had he heard an untruth so demonstrably untrue. A mere look at the father and the son proved it so. Harry Feversham wore his father's name, but he had his mother's dark and haunted eyes, his mother's breadth of forehead, his mother's delicacy of profile, his mother's imagination. It needed perhaps a stranger to recognise the truth. The father had been so long familiar with his son's aspect that it had no significance to his mind.

"Look at the clock, Harry."

The hour's furlough had run out. Harry rose from his chair, and drew a breath.

"Good night, sir," he said, and walked to the door.

The servants had long since gone to bed; and, as Harry opened the door, the hall gaped black like the mouth of night. For a second or two the boy hesitated upon the threshold, and seemed almost to shrink back into the lighted room as though in that dark void peril awaited him. And peril did—the peril of his thoughts.

He stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him. The decanter was sent again upon its rounds; there was a popping of soda-water bottles; the talk revolved again in its accustomed groove. Harry was in an instant forgotten by all but Sutch. The lieutenant, although he prided himself upon his impartial and disinterested study of human nature, was the kindest of men. He had more kindness than observation by a great deal. Moreover, there were special reasons which caused him to take an interest in Harry Feversham. He sat for a little while with the air of a man profoundly disturbed. Then, acting upon an impulse, he went to the door, opened it noiselessly, as noiselessly passed out, and, without so much as a click of the latch, closed the door behind him.

And this is what he saw: Harry Feversham, holding in the centre of the hall a lighted candle high above his head, and looking up toward the portraits of the Fevershams as they mounted the walls and were lost in the darkness of the roof. A muffled sound of voices came from the other side of the door panels, but the hall itself was silent. Harry stood remarkably still, and the only thing which moved at all was the yellow flame of the candle as it flickered apparently in some faint draught. The light wavered across the portraits, glowing here upon a red coat, glittering there upon a

corselet of steel. For there was not one man's portrait upon the walls which did not glisten with the colours of a uniform, and there were the portraits of many men. Father and son, the Fevershams had been soldiers from the very birth of the family. Father and son, in lace collars and bucket boots, in Ramillies wigs and steel breastplates, in velvet coats, with powder on their hair, in shakos and swallow-tails, in high stocks and frogged coats, they looked down upon this last Feversham, summoning him to the like service. They were men of one stamp; no distinction of uniform could obscure their relationship—lean-faced men, hard as iron, rugged in feature, thin-lipped, with firm chins and straight, level mouths, narrow foreheads, and the steel-blue inexpressive eyes; men of courage and resolution, no doubt, but without subtleties, or nerves, or that burdensome gift of imagination; sturdy men, a little wanting in delicacy, hardly conspicuous for intellect; to put it frankly, men rather stupid—all of them, in a word, first-class fighting men, but not one of them a first-class soldier.

But Harry Feversham plainly saw none of their defects. To him they were one and all portentous and terrible. He stood before them in the attitude of a criminal before his judges, reading his condemnation in their cold unchanging eyes. Lieutenant Sutch understood more clearly why the flame of the candle flickered. There was no draught in the hall, but the boy's hand shook. And finally, as though he heard the mute voices of his judges delivering sentence and admitted its justice, he actually bowed to the portraits on the wall. As he raised his head, he saw Lieutenant Sutch in the embrasure of the doorway.

He did not start, he uttered no word; he let his eyes quietly rest upon Sutch and waited. Of the two it was the man who was embarrassed.

"Harry," he said, and in spite of his embarrassment he had the tact to use the tone and the language of one addressing not a boy, but a comrade equal in years, "we meet for the first time to-night. But I knew your mother a long time ago. I like to think that I have the right to call her by that much misused word 'friend.' Have you anything to tell me?"

"Nothing," said Harry.

"The mere telling sometimes lightens a trouble."

"It is kind of you. There is nothing."

Lieutenant Sutch was rather at a loss. The lad's loneliness made a strong appeal to him. For lonely the boy could not but be, set apart as he was, no less unmistakably in mind as in feature, from his father and his father's fathers. Yet what more could he do? His tact again came to his aid. He took his card-case from his pocket.

"You will find my address upon this card. Perhaps some day you will give me a few days of your company. I can offer you on my side a day or two's hunting."

A spasm of pain shook for a fleeting moment the boy's steady inscrutable face. It passed, however, swiftly as it had come.

"Thank you, sir," Harry monotonously repeated. "You are very kind."

"And if ever you want to talk over a difficult question with an older man, I am at your service."

He spoke purposely in a formal voice, lest Harry with a boy's sensitiveness should think he laughed. Harry took the card and repeated his thanks. Then he went upstairs to bed.

Lieutenant Sutch waited uncomfortably in the hall until the light of the candle had diminished and disappeared. Something was amiss, he was very sure. There were words which he should have spoken to the boy, but he had not known how to set about the task. He returned to the dining room, and with a feeling that he was almost repairing his omissions, he filled his glass and called for silence.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this is June 15th," and there was great applause and much rapping on the table. "It is the anniversary of our attack upon the Redan. It is also Harry Feversham's birthday. For us, our work is done. I ask you to drink the health of one of the youngsters who are ousting us. His work lies before him. The traditions of the Feversham family are very well known to us. May Harry Feversham carry them on! May he add distinction to a distinguished name!"

At once all that company was on its feet.

"Harry Feversham!"

The name was shouted with so hearty a good-will that the glasses on the table rang. "Harry Feversham, Harry Feversham," the cry was repeated and repeated, while old General Feversham sat in his chair with a face aflush with pride. And a boy a minute afterward in a room high up in the house heard the muffled words of a chorus—

For he's a jolly good fellow,
For he's a jolly good fellow,
For he's a jolly good fellow,
And so say all of us,

and believed the guests upon this Crimean night were drinking his father's health. He turned over in his bed and lay shivering. He saw in his mind a broken officer slinking at

night in the shadows of the London streets. He pushed back the flap of a tent and stooped over a man lying stone-dead in his blood, with an open lancet clinched in his right hand. And he saw that the face of the broken officer and the face of the dead surgeon were one—and that one face, the face of Harry Feversham.

CHAPTER II

CAPTAIN TRENCH AND A TELEGRAM

Thirteen years later, and in the same month of June, Harry Feversham's health was drunk again, but after a quieter fashion and in a smaller company. The company was gathered in a room high up in a shapeless block of buildings which frowns like a fortress above Westminster. A stranger crossing St. James's Park southwards, over the suspension bridge, at night, who chanced to lift his eyes and see suddenly the tiers of lighted windows towering above him to so precipitous a height, might be brought to a stop with the fancy that here in the heart of London was a mountain and the gnomes at work. Upon the tenth floor of this building Harry had taken a flat during his year's furlough from his regiment in India; and it was in the dining room of this flat that the simple ceremony took place. The room was furnished in a dark and restful fashion; and since the chill of the weather belied the calendar, a comfortable fire blazed in the hearth. A bay window, over which the blinds had not been lowered, commanded London.

There were four men smoking about the dinner-table. Harry Feversham was unchanged, except for a fair moustache, which contrasted with his dark hair, and the natural consequences of growth. He was now a man of middle height, long-limbed, and well-knit like an athlete, but his features had not altered since that night when they had been so closely scrutinised by Lieutenant Sutch. Of his companions two were brother-officers on leave in England, like himself, whom he had that afternoon picked up at his club,—Captain Trench, a small man, growing bald, with a

small, sharp, resourceful face and black eyes of a remarkable activity, and Lieutenant Willoughby, an officer of quite a different stamp. A round forehead, a thick snub nose, and a pair of vacant and protruding eyes gave to him an aspect of invincible stupidity. He spoke but seldom, and never to the point, but rather to some point long forgotten which he had since been laboriously revolving in his mind; and he continually twisted a moustache, of which the ends curled up toward his eyes with a ridiculous ferocity,—a man whom one would dismiss from mind as of no consequence upon a first thought, and take again into one's consideration upon a second. For he was born stubborn as well as stupid; and the harm which his stupidity might do, his stubbornness would hinder him from admitting. He was not a man to be persuaded; having few ideas, he clung to them. It was no use to argue with him, for he did not hear the argument, but behind his vacant eyes all the while he turned over his crippled thoughts and was satisfied. The fourth at the table was Durrance, a lieutenant of the East Surrey Regiment, and Feversham's friend, who had come in answer to a telegram.

This was June of the year 1882, and the thoughts of civilians turned toward Egypt with anxiety; those of soldiers, with an eager anticipation. Arabi Pasha, in spite of threats, was steadily strengthening the fortifications of Alexandria, and already a long way to the south, the other, the great danger, was swelling like a thunder-cloud. A year had passed since a young, slight, and tall Dongolawi, Mohammed Ahmed, had marched through the villages of the White Nile, preaching with the fire of a Wesley the coming of a Saviour. The passionate victims of the Turkish tax-gatherer had listened, had heard the promise repeated in the whispers of the wind in the withered grass, had found the holy names imprinted even upon the eggs they gathered up. In 1882 Mohammed had declared himself that Saviour, and had won his first battles against the Turks.

"There will be trouble," said Trench, and the sentence was the text on which three of the four men talked. In a rare interval, however, the fourth, Harry Feversham, spoke upon a different subject.

"I am very glad you were all able to dine with me to-night. I telegraphed to Castleton as well, an officer of ours," he explained to Durrance, "but he was dining with a big man in the War Office, and leaves for Scotland afterwards, so that he could not come. I have news of a sort."

The three men leaned forward, their minds still full of the dominant subject. But it was not about the prospect of war that Harry Feversham had news to speak.

"I only reached London this morning from Dublin," he said with a shade of embarrassment. "I have been some weeks in Dublin."

Durrance lifted his eyes from the tablecloth and looked quietly at his friend.

"Yes?" he asked steadily.

"I have come back engaged to be married."

Durrance lifted his glass to his lips.

"Well, here's luck to you, Harry," he said, and that was all. The wish, indeed, was almost curtly expressed, but there was nothing wanting in it to Feversham's ears. The friendship between these two men was not one in which affectionate phrases had any part. There was, in truth, no need of such. Both men were securely conscious of it; they estimated it at its true, strong value; it was a helpful instrument, which would not wear out, put into their hands for a hard, lifelong use; but it was not, and never had been, spoken of between them. Both men were grateful for it, as for a rare and undeserved gift; yet both knew that it might

entail an obligation of sacrifice. But the sacrifices, were they needful, would be made, and they would not be mentioned. It may be, indeed, that the very knowledge of their friendship's strength constrained them to a particular reticence in their words to one another.

"Thank you, Jack!" said Feversham. "I am glad of your good wishes. It was you who introduced me to Ethne; I cannot forget it."

Durrance set his glass down without any haste. There followed a moment of silence, during which he sat with his eyes upon the tablecloth, and his hands resting on the table edge.

"Yes," he said in a level voice. "I did you a good turn then."

He seemed on the point of saying more, and doubtful how to say it. But Captain Trench's sharp, quick, practical voice, a voice which fitted the man who spoke, saved him his pains.

"Will this make any difference?" asked Trench.

Feversham replaced his cigar between his lips.

"You mean, shall I leave the service?" he asked slowly. "I don't know;" and Durrance seized the opportunity to rise from the table and cross to the window, where he stood with his back to his companions. Feversham took the abrupt movement for a reproach, and spoke to Durrance's back, not to Trench.

"I don't know," he repeated. "It will need thought. There is much to be said. On the one side, of course, there's my father, my career, such as it is. On the other hand, there is her father, Dermot Eustace."

"He wishes you to chuck your commission?" asked Willoughby.

"He has no doubt the Irishman's objection to constituted authority," said Trench, with a laugh. "But need you subscribe to it, Feversham?"

"It is not merely that." It was still to Durrance's back that he addressed his excuses. "Dermot is old, his estates are going to ruin, and there are other things. You know, Jack?" The direct appeal he had to repeat, and even then Durrance answered it absently:—

"Yes, I know," and he added, like one quoting a catch-word. "If you want any whiskey, rap twice on the floor with your foot. The servants understand."

"Precisely," said Feversham. He continued, carefully weighing his words, and still intently looking across the shoulders of his companions to his friend:—

"Besides, there is Ethne herself. Dermot for once did an appropriate thing when he gave her that name. For she is of her country, and more, of her county. She has the love of it in her bones. I do not think that she could be quite happy in India, or indeed in any place which was not within reach of Donegal, the smell of its peat, its streams, and the brown friendliness of its hills. One has to consider that."

He waited for an answer, and getting none went on again. Durrance, however, had no thought of reproach in his mind. He knew that Feversham was speaking,—he wished very much that he would continue to speak for a little while,—but he paid no heed to what was said. He stood looking steadfastly out of the windows. Over against him was the glare from Pall Mall striking upward to the sky, and the chains of light banked one above the other as the town rose northward, and a rumble as of a million carriages was in his

ears. At his feet, very far below, lay St. James's Park, silent and black, a quiet pool of darkness in the midst of glitter and noise. Durrance had a great desire to escape out of this room into its secrecy. But that he could not do without remark. Therefore he kept his back turned to his companion, and leaned his forehead against the window, and hoped his friend would continue to talk. For he was face to face with one of the sacrifices which must not be mentioned, and which no sign must betray.

Feversham did continue, and if Durrance did not listen, on the other hand Captain Trench gave to him his closest attention. But it was evident that Harry Feversham was giving reasons seriously considered. He was not making excuses, and in the end Captain Trench was satisfied.

"Well, I drink to you, Feversham," he said, "with all the proper sentiments."

"I too, old man," said Willoughby, obediently following his senior's lead.

Thus they drank their comrade's health, and as their empty glasses rattled on the table, there came a knock upon the door.

The two officers looked up. Durrance turned about from the window. Feversham said, "Come in;" and his servant brought in to him a telegram.

Feversham tore open the envelope carelessly, as carelessly read through the telegram, and then sat very still, with his eyes upon the slip of pink paper and his face grown at once extremely grave. Thus he sat for an appreciable time, not so much stunned as thoughtful. And in the room there was a complete silence. Feversham's three guests averted their eyes. Durrance turned again to his window; Willoughby twisted his moustache and gazed intently upward at the

ceiling; Captain Trench shifted his chair round and stared into the glowing fire, and each man's attitude expressed a certain suspense. It seemed that sharp upon the heels of Feversham's good news calamity had come knocking at the door.

"There is no answer," said Harry, and fell to silence again. Once he raised his head and looked at Trench as though he had a mind to speak. But he thought the better of it, and so dropped again to the consideration of this message. And in a moment or two the silence was sharply interrupted, but not by any one of the expectant motionless three men seated within the room. The interruption came from without.

From the parade ground of Wellington Barracks the drums and fifes sounding the tattoo shrilled through the open window with a startling clearness like a sharp summons, and diminished as the band marched away across the gravel and again grew loud. Feversham did not change his attitude, but the look upon his face was now that of a man listening, and listening thoughtfully, just as he had read thoughtfully. In the years which followed, that moment was to recur again and again to the recollection of each of Harry's three guests. The lighted room, with the bright homely fire, the open window overlooking the myriad lamps of London, Harry Feversham seated with the telegram spread before him, the drums and fifes calling loudly, and then dwindling to music very small and pretty—music which beckoned where a moment ago it had commanded: all these details made up a picture of which the colours were not to fade by any lapse of time, although its significance was not apprehended now.

It was remembered that Feversham rose abruptly from his chair, just before the tattoo ceased. He crumpled the telegram loosely in his hands, tossed it into the fire, and then, leaning his back against the chimney-piece and upon one side of the fireplace, said again:—

"I don't know;" as though he had thrust that message, whatever it might be, from his mind, and was summing up in this indefinite way the argument which had gone before. Thus that long silence was broken, and a spell was lifted. But the fire took hold upon the telegram and shook it, so that it moved like a thing alive and in pain. It twisted, and part of it unrolled, and for a second lay open and smooth of creases, lit up by the flame and as yet untouched; so that two or three words sprang, as it were, out of a yellow glare of fire and were legible. Then the flame seized upon that smooth part too, and in a moment shrivelled it into black tatters. But Captain Trench was all this while staring into the fire.

"You return to Dublin, I suppose?" said Durrance. He had moved back again into the room. Like his companions, he was conscious of an unexplained relief.

"To Dublin? No; I go to Donegal in three weeks' time. There is to be a dance. It is hoped you will come."

"I am not sure that I can manage it. There is just a chance, I believe, should trouble come in the East, that I may go out on the staff." The talk thus came round again to the chances of peace and war, and held in that quarter till the boom of the Westminster clock told that the hour was eleven. Captain Trench rose from his seat on the last stroke; Willoughby and Durrance followed his example.

"I shall see you to-morrow," said Durrance to Feversham.

"As usual," replied Harry; and his three guests descended from his rooms and walked across the Park together. At the corner of Pall Mall, however, they parted company, Durrance mounting St. James's Street, while Trench and Willoughby crossed the road into St. James's Square. There Trench

slipped his arm through Willoughby's, to Willoughby's surprise, for Trench was an undemonstrative man.

"You know Castleton's address?" he asked.

"Albemarle Street," Willoughby answered, and added the number.

"He leaves Euston at twelve o'clock. It is now ten minutes past eleven. Are you curious, Willoughby? I confess to curiosity. I am an inquisitive methodical person, and when a man gets a telegram bidding him tell Trench something and he tells Trench nothing, I am curious as a philosopher to know what that something is! Castleton is the only other officer of our regiment in London. It is likely, therefore, that the telegram came from Castleton. Castleton, too, was dining with a big man from the War Office. I think that if we take a hansom to Albemarle Street, we shall just catch Castleton upon his door-step."

Mr. Willoughby, who understood very little of Trench's meaning, nevertheless cordially agreed to the proposal.

"I think it would be prudent," said he, and he hailed a passing cab. A moment later the two men were driving to Albemarle Street.

CHAPTER III

THE LAST RIDE TOGETHER

Durrance, meanwhile, walked to his lodging alone, remembering a day, now two years since, when by a curious whim of old Dermot Eustace he had been fetched against his will to the house by the Lennon River in Donegal, and there, to his surprise, had been made acquainted with Dermot's daughter Ethne. For she surprised all who had first held speech with the father. Durrance had stayed for a night in the house, and through that evening she had played upon her violin, seated with her back toward her audience, as was her custom when she played, lest a look or a gesture should interrupt the concentration of her thoughts. The melodies which she had played rang in his ears now. For the girl possessed the gift of music, and the strings of her violin spoke to the questions of her bow. There was in particular an overture—the Melusine overture—which had the very sob of the waves. Durrance had listened wondering, for the violin had spoken to him of many things of which the girl who played it could know nothing. It had spoken of long perilous journeys and the faces of strange countries; of the silver way across moonlit seas; of the beckoning voices from the under edges of the desert. It had taken a deeper, a more mysterious tone. It had told of great joys, quite unattainable, and of great griefs too, eternal, and with a sort of nobility by reason of their greatness; and of many unformulated longings beyond the reach of words; but with never a single note of mere complaint. So it had seemed to Durrance that night as he had sat listening while Ethne's face was turned away. So it seemed to him now when he knew that her face was still to be turned away for all his

days. He had drawn a thought from her playing which he was at some pains to keep definite in his mind. The true music cannot complain.

Therefore it was that as he rode the next morning into the Row his blue eyes looked out upon the world from his bronzed face with not a jot less of his usual friendliness. He waited at half-past nine by the clump of lilacs and laburnums at the end of the sand, but Harry Feversham did not join him that morning, nor indeed for the next three weeks. Ever since the two men had graduated from Oxford it had been their custom to meet at this spot and hour, when both chanced to be in town, and Durrance was puzzled. It seemed to him that he had lost his friend as well.

Meanwhile, however, the rumours of war grew to a certainty; and when at last Feversham kept the tryst, Durrance had news.

"I told you luck might look my way. Well, she has. I go out to Egypt on General Graham's staff. There's talk we may run down the Red Sea to Suakin afterward."

The exhilaration of his voice brought an unmistakable envy into Feversham's eyes. It seemed strange to Durrance, even at that moment of his good luck, that Harry Feversham should envy him—strange and rather pleasant. But he interpreted the envy in the light of his own ambitions.

"It is rough on you," he said sympathetically, "that your regiment has to stay behind."

Feversham rode by his friend's side in silence. Then, as they came to the chairs beneath the trees, he said:—

"That was expected. The day you dined with me I sent in my papers."

"That night?" said Durrance, turning in his saddle. "After we had gone?"

"Yes," said Feversham, accepting the correction. He wondered whether it had been intended. But Durrance rode silently forward. Again Harry Feversham was conscious of a reproach in his friend's silence, and again he was wrong. For Durrance suddenly spoke heartily, and with a laugh.

"I remember. You gave us your reasons that night. But for the life of me I can't help wishing that we had been going out together. When do you leave for Ireland?"

"To-night."

"So soon?"

They turned their horses and rode westward again down the alley of trees. The morning was still fresh. The limes and chestnuts had lost nothing of their early green, and since the May was late that year, its blossoms still hung delicately white like snow upon the branches and shone red against the dark rhododendrons. The park shimmered in a haze of sunlight, and the distant roar of the streets was as the tumbling of river water.

"It is a long time since we bathed in Sandford Lasher," said Durrance.

"Or froze in the Easter vacations in the big snow-gully on Great End," returned Feversham. Both men had the feeling that on this morning a volume in their book of life was ended; and since the volume had been a pleasant one to read, and they did not know whether its successors would sustain its promise, they were looking backward through the leaves before they put it finally away.

"You must stay with us, Jack, when you come back," said Feversham.

Durrance had schooled himself not to wince, and he did not, even at that anticipatory "us." If his left hand tightened upon the thongs of his reins, the sign could not be detected by his friend.

"If I come back," said Durrance. "You know my creed. I could never pity a man who died on active service. I would very much like to come by that end myself."

It was a quite simple creed, consistent with the simplicity of the man who uttered it. It amounted to no more than this: that to die decently was worth a good many years of life. So that he uttered it without melancholy or any sign of foreboding. Even so, however, he had a fear that perhaps his friend might place another interpretation upon the words, and he looked quickly into his face. He only saw again, however, that puzzling look of envy in Feversham's eyes.

"You see there are worse things which can happen," he continued; "disablement, for instance. Clever men could make a shift, perhaps, to put up with it. But what in the world should I do if I had to sit in a chair all my days? It makes me shiver to think of it," and he shook his broad shoulders to unsaddle that fear. "Well, this is the last ride. Let us gallop," and he let out his horse.

Feversham followed his example, and side by side they went racing down the sand. At the bottom of the Row they stopped, shook hands, and with the curtest of nods parted. Feversham rode out of the park, Durrance turned back and walked his horse up toward the seats beneath the trees.

Even as a boy in his home at Southpool in Devonshire, upon a wooded creek of the Salcombe estuary, he had always been conscious of a certain restlessness, a desire to sail down that creek and out over the levels of the sea, a dream

of queer outlandish countries and peoples beyond the dark familiar woods. And the restlessness had grown upon him, so that "Guessens," even when he had inherited it with its farms and lands, had remained always in his thoughts as a place to come home to rather than an estate to occupy a life. He purposely exaggerated that restlessness now, and purposely set against it words which Feversham had spoken and which he knew to be true. Ethne Eustace would hardly be happy outside her county of Donegal. Therefore, even had things fallen out differently, as he phrased it, there might have been a clash. Perhaps it was as well that Harry Feversham was to marry Ethne—and not another than Feversham.

Thus, at all events, he argued as he rode, until the riders vanished from before his eyes, and the ladies in their coloured frocks beneath the cool of the trees. The trees themselves dwindled to ragged mimosas, the brown sand at his feet spread out in a widening circumference and took the bright colour of honey; and upon the empty sand black stones began to heap themselves shapelessly like coal, and to flash in the sun like mirrors. He was deep in his anticipations of the Soudan, when he heard his name called out softly in a woman's voice, and, looking up, found himself close by the rails.

"How do you do, Mrs. Adair?" said he, and he stopped his horse. Mrs. Adair gave him her hand across the rails. She was Durrance's neighbour at Southpool, and by a year or two his elder—a tall woman, remarkable for the many shades of her thick brown hair and the peculiar pallor on her face. But at this moment the face had brightened, there was a hint of colour in the cheeks.

"I have news for you," said Durrance. "Two special items. One, Harry Feversham is to be married."