Mr. Standfast

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PART I

CHAPTER I
The Wicket-Gate

I spent one-third of my journey looking out of the window of a first-class carriage, the next in a local motor-car following the course of a trout stream in a shallow valley, and the last tramping over a ridge of downland through great beech-woods to my quarters for the night. In the first part I was in an infamous temper; in the second I was worried and mystified; but the cool twilight of the third stage calmed and heartened me, and I reached the gates of Fosse Manor with a mighty appetite and a quiet mind.

As we slipped up the Thames valley on the smooth Great Western line I had reflected ruefully on the thorns in the path of duty. For more than a year I had never been out of khaki, except the months I spent in hospital. They gave me my battalion before the Somme, and I came out of that weary battle after the first big September fighting with a crack in my head and a D.S.O. I had received a C.B. for the Erzerum business, so what with these and my Matabele and South African medals and the Legion of Honour, I had a chest like the High Priest's breastplate. I rejoined in January, and got a brigade on the eve of Arras. There we had a star turn, and took about as many prisoners as we put infantry over the top. After that we were hauled out for a month, and subsequently planted in a bad bit on the Scarpe with a hint that we would soon be used for a big push. Then suddenly I was ordered home to report to the War Office, and passed on by them to Bullivant and his merry men. So here I was sitting in a railway carriage in a grey tweed suit, with a neat new suitcase on the rack labelled C.B. The initials stood for Cornelius Brand, for that was my name now. And an old boy in the corner was asking me questions and wondering audibly why I wasn't fighting, while a young blood of a second lieutenant with a wound stripe was eyeing me with scorn.

The old chap was one of the cross-examining type, and after he had borrowed my matches he set to work to find out all about me. He was a tremendous fire-eater, and a bit of a pessimist about our slow progress in the west. I told him I came from South Africa and was a mining engineer.

"Been fighting with Botha?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I'm not the fighting kind."

The second lieutenant screwed up his nose.

"Is there no conscription in South Africa?"

"Thank God there isn't," I said, and the old fellow begged permission to tell me a lot of unpalatable things. I knew his kind and didn't give

much for it. He was the sort who, if he had been under fifty, would have crawled on his belly to his tribunal to get exempted, but being over age was able to pose as a patriot. But I didn't like the second lieutenant's grin, for he seemed a good class of lad. I looked steadily out of the window for the rest of the way, and wasn't sorry when I got to my station.

I had had the queerest interview with Bullivant and Macgillivray. They asked me first if I was willing to serve again in the old game, and I said I was. I felt as bitter as sin, for I had got fixed in the military groove, and had made good there. Here was I—a brigadier and still under forty, and with another year of the war there was no saying where I might end. I had started out without any ambition, only a great wish to see the business finished. But now I had acquired a professional interest in the thing, I had a nailing good brigade, and I had got the hang of our new kind of war as well as any fellow from Sandhurst and Camberley. They were asking me to scrap all I had learned and start again in a new job. I had to agree, for discipline's discipline, but I could have knocked their heads together in my vexation.

What was worse they wouldn't, or couldn't, tell me anything about what they wanted me for. It was the old game of running me in blinkers. They asked me to take it on trust and put myself unreservedly in their hands. I would get my instructions later, they said.

I asked if it was important.

Bullivant narrowed his eyes. "If it weren't, do you suppose we could have wrung an active brigadier out of the War Office? As it was, it was like drawing teeth."

"Is it risky?" was my next question.

"In the long run—damnably," was the answer.

"And you can't tell me anything more?"

"Nothing as yet. You'll get your instructions soon enough. You know both of us, Hannay, and you know we wouldn't waste the time of a good man on folly. We are going to ask you for something which will make a big call on your patriotism. It will be a difficult and arduous task, and it may be a very grim one before you get to the end of it, but we believe you can do it, and that no one else can.... You know us pretty well. Will you let us judge for you?"

I looked at Bullivant's shrewd, kind old face and Macgillivray's steady eyes. These men were my friends and wouldn't play with me.

"All right," I said. "I'm willing. What's the first step?"

"Get out of uniform and forget you ever were a soldier. Change your name. Your old one, Cornelis Brandt, will do, but you'd better spell it 'Brand' this time. Remember that you are an engineer just back from South Africa, and that you don't care a rush about the war. You can't understand what all the fools are fighting about, and you think we might have peace at once by a little friendly business talk. You needn't

be pro-German—if you like you can be rather severe on the Hun. But you must be in deadly earnest about a speedy peace."

I expect the corners of my mouth fell, for Bullivant burst out laughing.

"Hang it all, man, it's not so difficult. I feel sometimes inclined to argue that way myself, when my dinner doesn't agree with me. It's not so hard as to wander round the Fatherland abusing Britain, which was your last job."

"I'm ready," I said. "But I want to do one errand on my own first. I must see a fellow in my brigade who is in a shell-shock hospital in the Cotswolds. Isham's the name of the place."

The two men exchanged glances. "This looks like fate," said Bullivant. "By all means go to Isham. The place where your work begins is only a couple of miles off. I want you to spend next Thursday night as the guest of two maiden ladies called Wymondham at Fosse Manor. You will go down there as a lone South African visiting a sick friend. They are hospitable souls and entertain many angels unawares."

"And I get my orders there?"

"You get your orders, and you are under bond to obey them." And Bullivant and Macgillivray smiled at each other.

I was thinking hard about that odd conversation as the small Ford car, which I had wired for to the inn, carried me away from the suburbs of the county town into a land of rolling hills and green water-meadows. It was a gorgeous afternoon and the blossom of early June was on every tree. But I had no eyes for landscape and the summer, being engaged in reprobating Bullivant and cursing my fantastic fate. I detested my new part and looked forward to naked shame. It was bad enough for anyone to have to pose as a pacifist, but for me, strong as a bull and as sunburnt as a gipsy and not looking my forty years, it was a black disgrace. To go into Germany as an anti-British Afrikander was a stoutish adventure, but to lounge about at home talking rot was a very different-sized job. My stomach rose at the thought of it, and I had pretty well decided to wire to Bullivant and cry off. There are some things that no one has a right to ask of any white man.

When I got to Isham and found poor old Blaikie I didn't feel happier. He had been a friend of mine in Rhodesia, and after the German South-West affair was over had come home to a Fusilier battalion, which was in my brigade at Arras. He had been buried by a big crump just before we got our second objective, and was dug out without a scratch on him, but as daft as a hatter. I had heard he was mending, and had promised his family to look him up the first chance I got. I found him sitting on a garden seat, staring steadily before him like a lookout at sea. He knew me all right and cheered up for a second, but very soon he was back at his staring, and every word he uttered was like the careful speech of a drunken man. A bird flew out of a bush, and I could see him holding himself tight to keep from screaming. The best I could do was to put a

hand on his shoulder and stroke him as one strokes a frightened horse. The sight of the price my old friend had paid didn't put me in love with pacificism.

We talked of brother officers and South Africa, for I wanted to keep his thoughts off the war, but he kept edging round to it.

"How long will the damned thing last?" he asked.

"Oh, it's practically over," I lied cheerfully. "No more fighting for you and precious little for me. The Boche is done in all right.... What you've got to do, my lad, is to sleep fourteen hours in the twenty-four and spend half the rest catching trout. We'll have a shot at the grouse-bird together this autumn and we'll get some of the old gang to join us."

Someone put a tea-tray on the table beside us, and I looked up to see the very prettiest girl I ever set eyes on. She seemed little more than a child, and before the war would probably have still ranked as a flapper. She wore the neat blue dress and apron of a V.A.D. and her white cap was set on hair like spun gold. She smiled demurely as she arranged the tea-things, and I thought I had never seen eyes at once so merry and so grave. I stared after her as she walked across the lawn, and I remember noticing that she moved with the free grace of an athletic boy.

"Who on earth's that?" I asked Blaikie.

"That? Oh, one of the sisters," he said listlessly. "There are squads of them. I can't tell one from another."

Nothing gave me such an impression of my friend's sickness as the fact that he should have no interest in something so fresh and jolly as that girl. Presently my time was up and I had to go, and as I looked back I saw him sunk in his chair again, his eyes fixed on vacancy, and his hands gripping his knees.

The thought of him depressed me horribly. Here was I condemned to some rotten buffoonery in inglorious safety, while the salt of the earth like Blaikie was paying the ghastliest price. From him my thoughts flew to old Peter Pienaar, and I sat down on a roadside wall and read his last letter. It nearly made me howl. Peter, you must know, had shaved his beard and joined the Royal Flying Corps the summer before when we got back from the Greenmantle affair. That was the only kind of reward he wanted, and, though he was absurdly over age, the authorities allowed it. They were wise not to stickle about rules, for Peter's eyesight and nerve were as good as those of any boy of twenty. I knew he would do well, but I was not prepared for his immediately blazing success. He got his pilot's certificate in record time and went out to France; and presently even we foot-sloggers, busy shifting ground before the Somme, began to hear rumours of his doings. He developed a perfect genius for air-fighting. There were plenty better trick-flyers, and plenty who knew more about the science of the game, but there was no one with quite Peter's genius for an actual scrap. He was as full of dodges a couple of miles up in the sky as he had been among the rocks of the

Berg. He apparently knew how to hide in the empty air as cleverly as in the long grass of the Lebombo Flats. Amazing yarns began to circulate among the infantry about this new airman, who could take cover below one plane of an enemy squadron while all the rest were looking for him. I remember talking about him with the South Africans when we were out resting next door to them after the bloody Delville Wood business. The day before we had seen a good battle in the clouds when the Boche plane had crashed, and a Transvaal machine-gun officer brought the report that the British airman had been Pienaar. "Well done, the old *takhaar!*" he cried, and started to yarn about Peter's methods. It appeared that Peter had a theory that every man has a blind spot, and that he knew just how to find that blind spot in the world of air. The best cover, he maintained, was not in cloud or a wisp of fog, but in the unseeing patch in the eye of your enemy. I recognised that talk for the real thing. It was on a par with Peter's doctrine of "atmosphere" and "the double bluff" and all the other principles that his queer old mind had cogitated out of his rackety life.

By the end of August that year Peter's was about the best-known figure in the Flying Corps. If the reports had mentioned names he would have been a national hero, but he was only "Lieutenant Blank," and the newspapers, which expatiated on his deeds, had to praise the Service and not the man. That was right enough, for half the magic of our Flying Corps was its freedom from advertisement. But the British Army knew all about him, and the men in the trenches used to discuss him as if he were a crack football-player. There was a very big German airman called Lensch, one of the Albatross heroes, who about the end of August claimed to have destroyed thirty-two Allied machines. Peter had then only seventeen planes to his credit, but he was rapidly increasing his score. Lensch was a mighty man of valour and a good sportsman after his fashion. He was amazingly quick at manœuvring his machine in the actual fight, but Peter was supposed to be better at forcing the kind of fight he wanted. Lensch, if you like, was the tactician and Peter the strategist. Anyhow the two were out to get each other. There were plenty of fellows who saw the campaign as a struggle not between Hun and Briton, but between Lensch and Pienaar.

The 15th September came, and I got knocked out and went to hospital. When I was fit to read the papers again and receive letters, I found to my consternation that Peter had been downed. It happened at the end of October when the southwest gales badly handicapped our airwork. When our bombing or reconnaissance jobs behind the enemy lines were completed, instead of being able to glide back into safety, we had to fight our way home slowly against a head-wind exposed to Archies and Hun planes. Somewhere east of Bapaume on a return journey Peter fell in with Lensch—at least the German Press gave Lensch the credit. His petrol tank was shot to bits and he was forced to descend in a wood near

Morchies. “The celebrated British airman, Pinner,” in the words of the German *communiqué*, was made prisoner.

I had no letter from him till the beginning of the New Year, when I was preparing to return to France. It was a very contented letter. He seemed to have been fairly well treated, though he had always a low standard of what he expected from the world in the way of comfort. I inferred that his captors had not identified in the brilliant airman the Dutch miscreant who a year before had broken out of a German jail. He had discovered the pleasures of reading and had perfected himself in an art which he had once practised indifferently. Somehow or other he had got a *Pilgrim’s Progress*, from which he seemed to extract enormous pleasure. And then at the end, quite casually, he mentioned that he had been badly wounded and that his left leg would never be much use again.

After that I got frequent letters, and I wrote to him every week and sent him every kind of parcel I could think of. His letters used to make me both ashamed and happy. I had always banked on old Peter, and here he was behaving like an early Christian martyr—never a word of complaint, and just as cheery as if it were a winter morning on the high veld and we were off to ride down springbok. I knew what the loss of a leg must mean to him, for bodily fitness had always been his pride. The rest of life must have unrolled itself before him very drab and dusty to the grave. But he wrote as if he were on the top of his form and kept commiserating me on the discomforts of my job. The picture of that patient, gentle old fellow, hobbling about his compound and puzzling over his *Pilgrim’s Progress*, a cripple for life after five months of blazing glory, would have stiffened the back of a jellyfish.

This last letter was horribly touching, for summer had come and the smell of the woods behind his prison reminded Peter of a place in the Woodbush, and one could read in every sentence the ache of exile. I sat on that stone wall and considered how trifling were the crumpled leaves in my bed of life compared with the thorns Peter and Blaikie had to lie on. I thought of Sandy far off in Mesopotamia, and old Blenkiron groaning with dyspepsia somewhere in America, and I considered that they were the kind of fellows who did their jobs without complaining. The result was that when I got up to go on I had recovered a manlier temper. I wasn’t going to shame my friends or pick and choose my duty. I would trust myself to Providence, for, as Blenkiron used to say, Providence was all right if you gave him a chance.

It was not only Peter’s letter that steadied and calmed me. Isham stood high up in a fold of the hills away from the main valley, and the road I was taking brought me over the ridge and back to the stream-side. I climbed through great beechwoods, which seemed in the twilight like some green place far below the sea, and then over a short stretch of hill pasture to the rim of the vale. All about me were little fields enclosed with walls of grey stone and full of dim sheep. Below were dusky woods

around what I took to be Fosse Manor, for the great Roman Fosse Way, straight as an arrow, passed over the hills to the south and skirted its grounds. I could see the stream slipping among its water-meadows and could hear the plash of the weir. A tiny village settled in a crook of the hill, and its church-tower sounded seven with a curiously sweet chime. Otherwise there was no noise but the twitter of small birds and the night wind in the tops of the beeches.

In that moment I had a kind of revelation. I had a vision of what I had been fighting for, what we all were fighting for. It was peace, deep and holy and ancient, peace older than the oldest wars, peace which would endure when all our swords were hammered into ploughshares. It was more; for in that hour England first took hold of me. Before my country had been South Africa, and when I thought of home it had been the wide sun-steeped spaces of the veld or some scented glen of the Berg. But now I realised that I had a new home. I understood what a precious thing this little England was, how old and kindly and comforting, how wholly worth striving for. The freedom of an acre of her soil was cheaply bought by the blood of the best of us. I knew what it meant to be a poet, though for the life of me I could not have made a line of verse. For in that hour I had a prospect as if from a hilltop which made all the present troubles of the road seem of no account. I saw not only victory after war, but a new and happier world after victory, when I should inherit something of this English peace and wrap myself in it till the end of my days.

Very humbly and quietly, like a man walking through a cathedral, I went down the hill to the Manor lodge, and came to a door in an old red-brick façade, smothered in magnolias which smelt like hot lemons in the June dusk. The car from the inn had brought on my baggage, and presently I was dressing in a room which looked out on a water-garden. For the first time for more than a year I put on a starched shirt and a dinner-jacket, and as I dressed I could have sung from pure lightheartedness. I was in for some arduous job, and sometime that evening in that place I should get my marching orders. Someone would arrive—perhaps Bullivant—and read me the riddle. But whatever it was, I was ready for it, for my whole being had found a new purpose. Living in the trenches, you are apt to get your horizon narrowed down to the front line of enemy barbed wire on one side and the nearest rest billets on the other. But now I seemed to see beyond the fog to a happy country.

High-pitched voices greeted my ears as I came down the broad staircase, voices which scarcely accorded with the panelled walls and the austere family portraits; and when I found my hostesses in the hall I thought their looks still less in keeping with the house. Both ladies were on the wrong side of forty, but their dress was that of young girls. Miss Doria Wymondham was tall and thin with a mass of nondescript pale

hair confined by a black velvet fillet. Miss Claire Wymondham was shorter and plumper and had done her best by ill-applied cosmetics to make herself look like a foreign *demi-mondaine*. They greeted me with the friendly casualness which I had long ago discovered was the right English manner towards your guests; as if they had just strolled in and billeted themselves, and you were quite glad to see them but mustn't be asked to trouble yourself further. The next second they were cooing like pigeons round a picture which a young man was holding up in the lamplight.

He was a tallish, lean fellow of round about thirty years, wearing grey flannels and shoes dusty from the country roads. His thin face was sallow as if from living indoors, and he had rather more hair on his head than most of us. In the glow of the lamp his features were very clear, and I examined them with interest, for, remember, I was expecting a stranger to give me orders. He had a long, rather strong chin and an obstinate mouth with peevish lines about its corners. But the remarkable feature was his eyes. I can best describe them by saying that they looked hot—not fierce or angry, but so restless that they seemed to ache physically and to want sponging with cold water.

They finished their talk about the picture—which was couched in a jargon of which I did not understand one word—and Miss Doria turned to me and the young man.

"My cousin Launcelot Wake—Mr Brand."

We nodded stiffly and Mr Wake's hand went up to smooth his hair in a self-conscious gesture.

"Has Barnard announced dinner? By the way, where is Mary?"

"She came in five minutes ago and I sent her to change," said Miss Claire. "I won't have her spoiling the evening with that horrid uniform. She may masquerade as she likes out-of-doors, but this house is for civilised people."

The butler appeared and mumbled something. "Come along," cried Miss Doria, "for I'm sure you are starving, Mr Brand. And Launcelot has bicycled ten miles."

The dining-room was very unlike the hall. The panelling had been stripped off, and the walls and ceiling were covered with a dead-black satiny paper on which hung the most monstrous pictures in large dull-gold frames. I could only see them dimly, but they seemed to be a mere riot of ugly colour. The young man nodded towards them. "I see you have got the Dégousses hung at last," he said.

"How exquisite they are!" cried Miss Claire. "How subtle and candid and brave! Doria and I warm our souls at their flame."

Some aromatic wood had been burned in the room, and there was a queer sickly scent about. Everything in that place was strained and uneasy and abnormal—the candle shades on the table, the mass of faked china fruit in the centre dish, the gaudy hangings and the nightmarish

walls. But the food was magnificent. It was the best dinner I had eaten since 1914.

"Tell me, Mr Brand," said Miss Doria, her long white face propped on a much-beringed hand. "You are one of us? You are in revolt against this crazy war?"

"Why, yes," I said, remembering my part. "I think a little common-sense would settle it right away."

"With a little common-sense it would never have started," said Mr Wake.

"Launcelot's a C.O., you know," said Miss Doria.

I did not know, for he did not look any kind of soldier.... I was just about to ask him what he commanded, when I remembered that the letters stood also for "Conscientious Objector," and stopped in time.

At that moment someone slipped into the vacant seat on my right hand. I turned and saw the V.A.D. girl who had brought tea to Blaikie that afternoon at the hospital.

"He was exempted by his Department," the lady went on, "for he's a Civil Servant, and so he never had a chance of testifying in court, but no one has done better work for our cause. He is on the committee of the L.D.A., and questions have been asked about him in Parliament."

The man was not quite comfortable at this biography. He glanced nervously at me and was going to begin some kind of explanation, when Miss Doria cut him short. "Remember our rule, Launcelot. No turgid war controversy within these walls."

I agreed with her. The war had seemed closely knit to the summer landscape for all its peace, and to the noble old chambers of the Manor. But in that demented modish dining-room it was shriekingly incongruous.

Then they spoke of other things. Mostly of pictures or common friends, and a little of books. They paid no heed to me, which was fortunate, for I know nothing about these matters and didn't understand half the language. But once Miss Doria tried to bring me in. They were talking about some Russian novel—a name like *Leprous Souls*—and she asked me if I had read it. By a curious chance I had. It had drifted somehow into our dug-out on the Scarpe, and after we had all stuck in the second chapter it had disappeared in the mud to which it naturally belonged. The lady praised its "poignancy" and "grave beauty." I assented and congratulated myself on my second escape—for if the question had been put to me I should have described it as God-forgotten twaddle.

I turned to the girl, who welcomed me with a smile. I had thought her pretty in her V.A.D. dress, but now, in a filmy black gown and with her hair no longer hidden by a cap, she was the most ravishing thing you ever saw. And I observed something else. There was more than good looks in her young face. Her broad, low brow and her laughing eyes were

amazingly intelligent. She had an uncanny power of making her eyes go suddenly grave and deep, like a glittering river narrowing into a pool.

"We shall never be introduced," she said, "so let me reveal myself. I'm Mary Lamington and these are my aunts.... Did you really like *Leprous Souls*?"

It was easy enough to talk to her. And oddly enough her mere presence took away the oppression I had felt in that room. For she belonged to the out-of-doors and to the old house and to the world at large. She belonged to the war, and to that happier world beyond it—a world which must be won by going through the struggle and not by shirking it, like those two silly ladies.

I could see Wake's eyes often on the girl, while he boomed and oraculated and the Misses Wymondham prattled. Presently the conversation seemed to leave the flowery paths of art and to verge perilously near forbidden topics. He began to abuse our generals in the field. I could not choose but listen. Miss Lamington's brows were slightly bent, as if in disapproval, and my own temper began to rise.

He had every kind of idiotic criticism—incompetence, faint-heartedness, corruption. Where he got the stuff I can't imagine, for the most grousing Tommy, with his leave stopped, never put together such balderdash. Worst of all he asked me to agree with him.

It took all my sense of discipline. "I don't know much about the subject," I said, "but out in South Africa I did hear that the British leading was the weak point. I expect there's a good deal in what you say."

It may have been fancy, but the girl at my side seemed to whisper "Well done!"

Wake and I did not remain long behind before joining the ladies; I purposely cut it short, for I was in mortal fear lest I should lose my temper and spoil everything. I stood up with my back against the mantelpiece for as long as a man may smoke a cigarette, and I let him yarn to me, while I looked steadily at his face. By this time I was very clear that Wake was not the fellow to give me my instructions. He wasn't playing a game. He was a perfectly honest crank, but not a fanatic, for he wasn't sure of himself. He had somehow lost his self-respect and was trying to argue himself back into it. He had considerable brains, for the reasons he gave for differing from most of his countrymen were good so far as they went. I shouldn't have cared to take him on in public argument. If you had told me about such a fellow a week before I should have been sick at the thought of him. But now I didn't dislike him. I was bored by him and I was also tremendously sorry for him. You could see he was as restless as a hen.

When we went back to the hall he announced that he must get on the road, and commandeered Miss Lamington to help him find his bicycle. It appeared he was staying at an inn a dozen miles off for a couple of days'

fishing, and the news somehow made me like him better. Presently the ladies of the house departed to bed for their beauty sleep and I was left to my own devices.

For some time I sat smoking in the hall wondering when the messenger would arrive. It was getting late and there seemed to be no preparation in the house to receive anybody. The butler came in with a tray of drinks and I asked him if he expected another guest that night.

"I 'adn't 'eard of it, sir," was his answer. "There 'asn't been a telegram that I know of, and I 'ave received no instructions."

I lit my pipe and sat for twenty minutes reading a weekly paper. Then I got up and looked at the family portraits. The moon coming through the lattice invited me out-of-doors as a cure for my anxiety. It was after eleven o'clock, and I was still without any knowledge of my next step. It is a maddening business to be screwed up for an unpleasant job and to have the wheels of the confounded thing tarry.

Outside the house beyond a flagged terrace the lawn fell away, white in the moonshine, to the edge of the stream, which here had expanded into a miniature lake. By the water's edge was a little formal garden with grey stone parapets which now gleamed like dusky marble. Great wafts of scent rose from it, for the lilacs were scarcely over and the may was in full blossom. Out from the shade of it came suddenly a voice like a nightingale.

It was singing the old song "Cherry Ripe", a common enough thing which I had chiefly known from barrel-organs. But heard in the scented moonlight it seemed to hold all the lingering magic of an elder England and of this hallowed countryside. I stepped inside the garden bounds and saw the head of the girl Mary.

She was conscious of my presence, for she turned towards me.

"I was coming to look for you," she said, "now that the house is quiet. I have something to say to you, General Hannay."

She knew my name and must be somehow in the business. The thought entranced me.

"Thank God I can speak to you freely," I cried. "Who and what are you—living in that house in that kind of company?"

"My good aunts!" She laughed softly. "They talk a great deal about their souls, but they really mean their nerves. Why, they are what you call my camouflage, and a very good one too."

"And that cadaverous young prig?"

"Poor Launcelot! Yes—camouflage too—perhaps something a little more. You must not judge him too harshly."

"But ... but—" I did not know how to put it, and stammered in my eagerness. "How can I tell that you are the right person for me to speak to? You see I am under orders, and I have got none about you."

"I will give you proof," she said. "Three days ago Sir Walter Bullivant and Mr Macgillivray told you to come here tonight and to wait here for

further instructions. You met them in the little smoking-room at the back of the Rota Club. You were bidden take the name of Cornelius Brand, and turn yourself from a successful general into a pacifist South African engineer. Is that correct?"

"Perfectly."

"You have been restless all evening looking for the messenger to give you these instructions. Set your mind at ease. No messenger is coming. You will get your orders from me."

"I could not take them from a more welcome source," I said.

"Very prettily put. If you want further credentials I can tell you much about your own doings in the past three years. I can explain to you who don't need the explanation, every step in the business of the Black Stone. I think I could draw a pretty accurate map of your journey to Erzerum. You have a letter from Peter Pienaar in your pocket—I can tell you its contents. Are you willing to trust me?"

"With all my heart," I said.

"Good. Then my first order will try you pretty hard. For I have no orders to give you except to bid you go and steep yourself in a particular kind of life. Your first duty is to get 'atmosphere', as your friend Peter used to say. Oh, I will tell you where to go and how to behave. But I can't bid you *do* anything, only live idly with open eyes and ears till you have got the 'feel' of the situation."

She stopped and laid a hand on my arm.

"It won't be easy. It would madden me, and it will be a far heavier burden for a man like you. You have got to sink down deep into the life of the half-baked, the people whom this war hasn't touched or has touched in the wrong way, the people who split hairs all day and are engrossed in what you and I would call selfish little fads. Yes. People like my aunts and Launcelot, only for the most part in a different social grade. You won't live in an old manor like this, but among gimcrack little 'arty' houses. You will hear everything you regard as sacred laughed at and condemned, and every kind of nauseous folly acclaimed, and you must hold your tongue and pretend to agree. You will have nothing in the world to do except to let the life soak into you, and, as I have said, keep your eyes and ears open."

"But you must give me some clue as to what I should be looking for?"

"My orders are to give you none. Our chiefs—yours and mine—want you to go where you are going without any kind of *parti pris*. Remember we are still in the intelligence stage of the affair. The time hasn't yet come for a plan of campaign, and still less for action."

"Tell me one thing," I said. "Is it a really big thing we're after?"

"A—really—big—thing," she said slowly and very gravely. "You and I and some hundred others are hunting the most dangerous man in all the world. Till we succeed everything that Britain does is crippled. If we fail or succeed too late the Allies may never win the victory which is their

right. I will tell you one thing to cheer you. It is in some sort a race against time, so your purgatory won't endure too long."

I was bound to obey, and she knew it, for she took my willingness for granted.

From a little gold satchel she selected a tiny box, and opening it extracted a thing like a purple wafer with a white St Andrew's Cross on it.

"What kind of watch have you? Ah, a hunter. Paste that inside the lid. Some day you may be called on to show it.... One other thing. Buy tomorrow a copy of the *Pilgrim's Progress* and get it by heart. You will receive letters and messages some day and the style of our friends is apt to be reminiscent of John Bunyan.... The car will be at the door tomorrow to catch the ten-thirty, and I will give you the address of the rooms that have been taken for you.... Beyond that I have nothing to say, except to beg you to play the part well and keep your temper. You behaved very nicely at dinner."

I asked one last question as we said good night in the hall. "Shall I see you again?"

"Soon, and often," was the answer. "Remember we are colleagues."

I went upstairs feeling extraordinarily comforted. I had a perfectly beastly time ahead of me, but now it was all glorified and coloured with the thought of the girl who had sung "Cherry Ripe" in the garden. I commended the wisdom of that old serpent Bullivant in the choice of his intermediary, for I'm hanged if I would have taken such orders from anyone else.

CHAPTER II
“The Village Named Morality”

Up on the high veld our rivers are apt to be strings of pools linked by muddy trickles—the most stagnant kind of watercourse you would look for in a day’s journey. But presently they reach the edge of the plateau and are tossed down into the flats in noble ravines, and roll thereafter in full and sounding currents to the sea. So with the story I am telling. It began in smooth reaches, as idle as a mill-pond; yet the day soon came when I was in the grip of a torrent, flung breathless from rock to rock by a destiny which I could not control. But for the present I was in a backwater, no less than the Garden City of Biggleswick, where Mr Cornelius Brand, a South African gentleman visiting England on holiday, lodged in a pair of rooms in the cottage of Mr Tancred Jimson.

The house—or “home” as they preferred to name it at Biggleswick—was one of some two hundred others which ringed a pleasant Midland common. It was badly built and oddly furnished; the bed was too short, the windows did not fit, the doors did not stay shut; but it was as clean as soap and water and scrubbing could make it. The three-quarters of an acre of garden were mainly devoted to the culture of potatoes, though under the parlour window Mrs Jimson had a plot of sweet-smelling herbs, and lines of lank sunflowers fringed the path that led to the front door. It was Mrs Jimson who received me as I descended from the station fly—a large red woman with hair bleached by constant exposure to weather, clad in a gown which, both in shape and material, seemed to have been modelled on a chintz curtain. She was a good kindly soul, and as proud as Punch of her house.

“We follow the simple life here, Mr Brand,” she said. “You must take us as you find us.”

I assured her that I asked for nothing better, and as I unpacked in my fresh little bedroom with a west wind blowing in at the window I considered that I had seen worse quarters.

I had bought in London a considerable number of books, for I thought that, as I would have time on my hands, I might as well do something about my education. They were mostly English classics, whose names I knew but which I had never read, and they were all in a little flat-backed series at a shilling apiece. I arranged them on top of a chest of drawers, but I kept the *Pilgrim’s Progress* beside my bed, for that was one of my working tools and I had to get it by heart.

Mrs Jimson, who came in while I was unpacking to see if the room was to my liking, approved my taste. At our midday dinner she wanted to

discuss books with me, and was so full of her own knowledge that I was able to conceal my ignorance.

"We are all labouring to express our personalities," she informed me. "Have you found your medium, Mr Brand? is it to be the pen or the pencil? Or perhaps it is music? You have the brow of an artist, the frontal 'bar of Michelangelo', you remember!"

I told her that I concluded I would try literature, but before writing anything I would read a bit more.

It was a Saturday, so Jimson came back from town in the early afternoon. He was a managing clerk in some shipping office, but you wouldn't have guessed it from his appearance. His city clothes were loose dark-grey flannels, a soft collar, an orange tie, and a soft black hat. His wife went down the road to meet him, and they returned hand-in-hand, swinging their arms like a couple of schoolchildren. He had a skimpy red beard streaked with grey, and mild blue eyes behind strong glasses. He was the most friendly creature in the world, full of rapid questions, and eager to make me feel one of the family. Presently he got into a tweed Norfolk jacket, and started to cultivate his garden. I took off my coat and lent him a hand, and when he stopped to rest from his labours—which was every five minutes, for he had no kind of physique—he would mop his brow and rub his spectacles and declaim about the good smell of the earth and the joy of getting close to Nature.

Once he looked at my big brown hands and muscular arms with a kind of wistfulness. "You are one of the *doers*, Mr Brand," he said, "and I could find it in my heart to envy you. You have seen Nature in wild forms in far countries. Some day I hope you will tell us about your life. I must be content with my little corner, but happily there are no territorial limits for the mind. This modest dwelling is a watch-tower from which I look over all the world."

After that he took me for a walk. We met parties of returning tennis-players and here and there a golfer. There seemed to be an abundance of young men, mostly rather weedy-looking, but with one or two well-grown ones who should have been fighting. The names of some of them Jimson mentioned with awe. An unwholesome youth was Aronson, the great novelist; a sturdy, bristling fellow with a fierce moustache was Letchford, the celebrated leader-writer of the *Critic*. Several were pointed out to me as artists who had gone one better than anybody else, and a vast billowy creature was described as the leader of the new Orientalism in England. I noticed that these people, according to Jimson, were all "great", and that they all dabbled in something "new". There were quantities of young women, too, most of them rather badly dressed and inclining to untidy hair. And there were several decent couples taking the air like house-holders of an evening all the world over. Most of these last were Jimson's friends, to whom he introduced me. They

were his own class—modest folk, who sought for a coloured background to their prosaic city lives and found it in this odd settlement.

At supper I was initiated into the peculiar merits of Biggleswick.

"It is one great laboratory of thought," said Mrs Jimson. "It is glorious to feel that you are living among the eager, vital people who are at the head of all the newest movements, and that the intellectual history of England is being made in our studies and gardens. The war to us seems a remote and secondary affair. As someone has said, the great fights of the world are all fought in the mind."

A spasm of pain crossed her husband's face. "I wish I could feel it far away. After all, Ursula, it is the sacrifice of the young that gives people like us leisure and peace to think. Our duty is to do the best which is permitted to us, but that duty is a poor thing compared with what our young soldiers are giving! I may be quite wrong about the war.... I know I can't argue with Letchford. But I will not pretend to a superiority I do not feel."

I went to bed feeling that in Jimson I had struck a pretty sound fellow. As I lit the candles on my dressing-table I observed that the stack of silver which I had taken out of my pockets when I washed before supper was top-heavy. It had two big coins at the top and sixpences and shillings beneath. Now it is one of my oddities that ever since I was a small boy I have arranged my loose coins symmetrically, with the smallest uppermost. That made me observant and led me to notice a second point. The English classics on the top of the chest of drawers were not in the order I had left them. Izaak Walton had got to the left of Sir Thomas Browne, and the poet Burns was wedged disconsolately between two volumes of Hazlitt. Moreover a receipted bill which I had stuck in the *Pilgrim's Progress* to mark my place had been moved. Someone had been going through my belongings.

A moment's reflection convinced me that it couldn't have been Mrs Jimson. She had no servant and did the housework herself, but my things had been untouched when I left the room before supper, for she had come to tidy up before I had gone downstairs. Someone had been here while we were at supper, and had examined elaborately everything I possessed. Happily I had little luggage, and no papers save the new books and a bill or two in the name of Cornelius Brand. The inquisitor, whoever he was, had found nothing.... The incident gave me a good deal of comfort. It had been hard to believe that any mystery could exist in this public place, where people lived brazenly in the open, and wore their hearts on their sleeves and proclaimed their opinions from the rooftops. Yet mystery there must be, or an inoffensive stranger with a kit-bag would not have received these strange attentions. I made a practice after that of sleeping with my watch below my pillow, for inside the case was Mary Lamington's label.

Now began a period of pleasant idle receptiveness. Once a week it was my custom to go up to London for the day to receive letters and instructions, if any should come. I had moved from my chambers in Park Lane, which I leased under my proper name, to a small flat in Westminster taken in the name of Cornelius Brand. The letters addressed to Park Lane were forwarded to Sir Walter, who sent them round under cover to my new address. For the rest I used to spend my mornings reading in the garden, and I discovered for the first time what a pleasure was to be got from old books. They recalled and amplified that vision I had seen from the Cotswold ridge, the revelation of the priceless heritage which is England. I imbibed a mighty quantity of history, but especially I liked the writers, like Walton, who got at the very heart of the English countryside. Soon, too, I found the *Pilgrim's Progress* not a duty but a delight. I discovered new jewels daily in the honest old story, and my letters to Peter began to be as full of it as Peter's own epistles. I loved, also, the songs of the Elizabethans, for they reminded me of the girl who had sung to me in the June night.

In the afternoons I took my exercise in long tramps along the good dusty English roads. The country fell away from Biggleswick into a plain of wood and pasture-land, with low hills on the horizon. The place was sown with villages, each with its green and pond and ancient church. Most, too, had inns, and there I had many a draught of cool nutty ale, for the inn at Biggleswick was a reformed place which sold nothing but washy cider. Often, tramping home in the dusk, I was so much in love with the land that I could have sung with the pure joy of it. And in the evening, after a bath, there would be supper, when a rather fagged Jimson struggled between sleep and hunger, and the lady, with an artistic mutch on her untidy head, talked ruthlessly of culture.

Bit by bit I edged my way into local society. The Jimsons were a great help, for they were popular and had a nodding acquaintance with most of the inhabitants. They regarded me as a meritorious aspirant towards a higher life, and I was paraded before their friends with the suggestion of a vivid, if Philistine, past. If I had any gift for writing, I would make a book about the inhabitants of Biggleswick. About half were respectable citizens who came there for country air and low rates, but even these had a touch of queerness and had picked up the jargon of the place. The younger men were mostly Government clerks or writers or artists. There were a few widows with flocks of daughters, and on the outskirts were several bigger houses—mostly houses which had been there before the garden city was planted. One of them was brand-new, a staring villa with sham-antique timbering, stuck on the top of a hill among raw gardens. It belonged to a man called Moxon Ivery, who was a kind of academic pacificist and a great god in the place. Another, a quiet Georgian manor house, was owned by a London publisher, an ardent Liberal whose particular branch of business compelled him to keep in

touch with the new movements. I used to see him hurrying to the station swinging a little black bag and returning at night with the fish for dinner.

I soon got to know a surprising lot of people, and they were the rummiest birds you can imagine. For example, there were the Weekeses, three girls who lived with their mother in a house so artistic that you broke your head whichever way you turned in it. The son of the family was a conscientious objector who had refused to do any sort of work whatever, and had got quodded for his pains. They were immensely proud of him and used to relate his sufferings in Dartmoor with a gusto which I thought rather heartless. Art was their great subject, and I am afraid they found me pretty heavy going. It was their fashion never to admire anything that was obviously beautiful, like a sunset or a pretty woman, but to find surprising loveliness in things which I thought hideous. Also they talked a language that was beyond me. This kind of conversation used to happen.—Miss Weekes: "Don't you admire Ursula Jimson?" Self: "Rather!" Miss W.: "She is so John-esque in her lines." Self: "Exactly!" Miss W.: "And Tancred, too—he is so full of *nuances*." Self: "Rather!" Miss W.: "He suggests one of Dégousse's countrymen." Self: "Exactly!"

They hadn't much use for books, except some Russian ones, and I acquired merit in their eyes for having read *Leprous Souls*. If you talked to them about that divine countryside, you found they didn't give a rap for it and had never been a mile beyond the village. But they admired greatly the sombre effect of a train going into Marylebone station on a rainy day.

But it was the men who interested me most. Aronson, the novelist, proved on acquaintance the worst kind of blighter. He considered himself a genius whom it was the duty of the country to support, and he sponged on his wretched relatives and anyone who would lend him money. He was always babbling about his sins, and pretty squalid they were. I should like to have flung him among a few good old-fashioned full-blooded sinners of my acquaintance; they would have scared him considerably. He told me that he sought "reality" and "life" and "truth", but it was hard to see how he could know much about them, for he spent half the day in bed smoking cheap cigarettes, and the rest sunning

himself in the admiration of half-witted girls. The creature was tuberculous in mind and body, and the only novel of his I read, pretty well turned my stomach. Mr Aronson's strong point was jokes about the war. If he heard of any acquaintance who had joined up or was even doing war work his merriment knew no bounds. My fingers used to itch to box the little wretch's ears.

Letchford was a different pair of shoes. He was some kind of a man, to begin with, and had an excellent brain and the worst manners conceivable. He contradicted everything you said, and looked out for an argument as other people look for their dinner. He was a double-engined, high-speed pacificist, because he was the kind of cantankerous fellow who must always be in a minority. If Britain had stood out of the war he would have been a raving militarist, but since she was in it he had got to find reasons why she was wrong. And jolly good reasons they were, too. I couldn't have met his arguments if I had wanted to, so I sat docilely at his feet. The world was all crooked for Letchford, and God had created him with two left hands. But the fellow had merits. He had a couple of jolly children whom he adored, and he would walk miles with me on a Sunday, and spout poetry about the beauty and greatness of England. He was forty-five; if he had been thirty and in my battalion I could have made a soldier out of him.

There were dozens more whose names I have forgotten, but they had one common characteristic. They were puffed up with spiritual pride, and I used to amuse myself with finding their originals in the *Pilgrim's Progress*. When I tried to judge them by the standard of old Peter, they fell woefully short. They shut out the war from their lives, some out of funk, some out of pure levity of mind, and some because they were really convinced that the thing was all wrong. I think I grew rather popular in my role of the seeker after truth, the honest colonial who was against the war by instinct and was looking for instruction in the matter. They regarded me as a convert from an alien world of action which they secretly dreaded, though they affected to despise it. Anyhow they talked to me very freely, and before long I had all the pacifist arguments by heart. I made out that there were three schools. One objected to war altogether, and this had few adherents except Aronson and Weekes, C.O., now languishing in Dartmoor. The second thought that the Allies' cause was tainted, and that Britain had contributed as much as Germany to the catastrophe. This included all the adherents of the L.D.A.—or League of Democrats against Aggression—a very proud body. The third and much the largest, which embraced everybody else, held that we had fought long enough and that the business could now be settled by negotiation, since Germany had learned her lesson. I was myself a modest member of the last school, but I was gradually working my way up to the second, and I hoped with luck to qualify for the first. My acquaintances approved my progress. Letchford said I had a core of

fanaticism in my slow nature, and that I would end by waving the red flag.

Spiritual pride and vanity, as I have said, were at the bottom of most of them, and, try as I might, I could find nothing very dangerous in it all. This vexed me, for I began to wonder if the mission which I had embarked on so solemnly were not going to be a fiasco. Sometimes they worried me beyond endurance. When the news of Messines came nobody took the slightest interest, while I was aching to tooth every detail of the great fight. And when they talked on military affairs, as Letchford and others did sometimes, it was difficult to keep from sending them all to the devil, for their amateur cocksureness would have riled Job. One had got to batten down the recollection of our fellows out there who were sweating blood to keep these fools snug. Yet I found it impossible to be angry with them for long, they were so babyishly innocent. Indeed, I couldn't help liking them, and finding a sort of quality in them. I had spent three years among soldiers, and the British regular, great fellow that he is, has his faults. His discipline makes him in a funk of red-tape and any kind of superior authority. Now these people were quite honest and in a perverted way courageous. Letchford was, at any rate. I could no more have done what he did and got hunted off platforms by the crowd and hooted at by women in the streets than I could have written his leading articles.

All the same I was rather low about my job. Barring the episode of the ransacking of my effects the first night, I had not a suspicion of a clue or a hint of any mystery. The place and the people were as open and bright as a Y.M.C.A. hut. But one day I got a solid wad of comfort. In a corner of Letchford's paper, the *Critic*, I found a letter which was one of the steepest pieces of invective I had ever met with. The writer gave tongue like a beagle pup about the prostitution, as he called it, of American republicanism to the vices of European aristocracies. He declared that Senator La Follette was a much-misunderstood patriot, seeing that he alone spoke for the toiling millions who had no other friend. He was mad with President Wilson, and he prophesied a great awakening when Uncle Sam got up against John Bull in Europe and found out the kind of standpatter he was. The letter was signed "John S. Blenkiron" and dated "London, July 3rd".

The thought that Blenkiron was in England put a new complexion on my business. I reckoned I would see him soon, for he wasn't the man to stand still in his tracks. He had taken up the rôle he had played before he left in December 1915, and very right too, for not more than half a dozen people knew of the Erzerum affair, and to the British public he was only the man who had been fired out of the Savoy for talking treason. I had felt a bit lonely before, but now somewhere within the four corners of the island the best companion God ever made was writing nonsense with his tongue in his old cheek.

There was an institution in Biggleswick which deserves mention. On the south of the common, near the station, stood a red-brick building called the Moot Hall, which was a kind of church for the very undevout population. Undevout in the ordinary sense, I mean, for I had already counted twenty-seven varieties of religious conviction, including three Buddhists, a Celestial Hierarch, five Latter-day Saints, and about ten varieties of Mystic whose names I could never remember. The hall had been the gift of the publisher I have spoken of, and twice a week it was used for lectures and debates. The place was managed by a committee and was surprisingly popular, for it gave all the bubbling intellects a chance of airing their views. When you asked where somebody was and were told he was "at Moot," the answer was spoken in the respectful tone in which you would mention a sacrament.

I went there regularly and got my mind broadened to cracking point. We had all the stars of the New Movements. We had Doctor Chirk, who lectured on "God", which, as far as I could make out, was a new name he had invented for himself. There was a woman, a terrible woman, who had come back from Russia with what she called a "message of healing". And to my joy, one night there was a great buck nigger who had a lot to say about "Africa for the Africans". I had a few words with him in Sesutu afterwards, and rather spoiled his visit. Some of the people were extraordinarily good, especially one jolly old fellow who talked about English folk songs and dances, and wanted us to set up a Maypole. In the debates which generally followed I began to join, very coyly at first, but presently with some confidence. If my time at Biggleswick did nothing else it taught me to argue on my feet.

The first big effort I made was on a full-dress occasion, when Launcelot Wake came down to speak. Mr Ivery was in the chair—the first I had seen of him—a plump middle-aged man, with a colourless face and nondescript features. I was not interested in him till he began to talk, and then I sat bolt upright and took notice. For he was the genuine silver-tongue, the sentences flowing from his mouth as smooth as butter and as neatly dovetailed as a parquet floor. He had a sort of man-of-the-world manner, treating his opponents with condescending geniality, deprecating all passion and exaggeration and making you feel that his urbane statement must be right, for if he had wanted he could have put the case so much higher. I watched him, fascinated, studying his face carefully; and the thing that struck me was that there was nothing in it—nothing, that is to say, to lay hold on. It was simply nondescript, so almightily commonplace that that very fact made it rather remarkable.

Wake was speaking of the revelations of the Sukhomlinov trial in Russia, which showed that Germany had not been responsible for the war. He was jolly good at the job, and put as clear an argument as a first-class lawyer. I had been sweating away at the subject and had all the ordinary case at my fingers' ends, so when I got a chance of speaking I