

E. M. DELAFIELD



***THE WAR-
WORKERS***

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At the Hostel for Voluntary Workers, in Questerham, Miss Vivian, Director of the Midland Supply Dépôt, was under discussion that evening.

Half a dozen people, all of whom had been working for Miss Vivian ever since ten o'clock that morning, as they had worked the day before and would work again the next day, sat in the Hostel sitting-room and talked about their work and about Miss Vivian.

No one ever talked anything but "shop," either in the office or at the Hostel.

"Didn't you think Miss Vivian looked awfully tired today?"

"No wonder, after Monday night. You know the train wasn't in till past ten o'clock. I think those troop-trains tire her more than anything."

"She doesn't have to cut cake and bread-and-butter and sandwiches for two hours before the train gets in, though. I've got the usual blister today," said an anaemic-looking girl of twenty, examining her forefinger.

There was a low scoffing laugh from her neighbour.

"Miss Vivian cutting bread-and-butter! She does quite enough without that, Henderson. She had the D.G.V.O. in there yesterday afternoon for ages. I thought he was *never* going. I stood outside her door for half an hour, I should think, absolutely hung up over the whole of my work, and I knew she was fearfully busy herself."

"It's all very well for you, Miss Delmege-you're her secretary and work in her room, but we can't get at her

unless we're sent for. I simply didn't know what to do about those surgical supplies for the Town Hospital this morning, and Miss Vivian never sent for me till past eleven o'clock. It simply wasted half my morning."

"She didn't have a minute; the telephone was going the whole time," said Miss Delmege quickly. "But yesterday, you know, when the D.G.V.O. wouldn't go, I thought she was going to be late at the station for that troop-train, and things were fairly desperate, so what d'you suppose I did?"

"Dashed into her room and got your head snapped off?" some one suggested languidly. "I shall never forget one day last week when *I* didn't know which way to *turn*, we were so busy, and I went in without being sent for, and Miss Vivian —"

"Oh yes, I remember," said Miss Delmege rapidly. She was a tall girl with eyeglasses and a superior manner. She did not remember Miss Marsh's irruption into her chief's sanctum with any particular clearness, but she was anxious to finish her own anecdote. "But as *I* was telling you," she hurried on, affecting to be unaware that Miss Marsh and her neighbour were exchanging glances, "when I saw that it was getting later every minute, and the D.G.V.O. seemed rooted to the spot, I simply went straight downstairs and rang up Miss Vivian on the telephone. Miss Cox was on telephone duty, and she was absolutely horrified. She said, 'You *don't* mean to say you're going to ring up Miss Vivian,' she said; and I said, 'Yes, I am. Yes, I am,' I said, and I did it. Miss Cox simply couldn't get over it."

Miss Delmege paused to laugh in solitary enjoyment of her story.

"'Who's there?' Miss Vivian said-you know what she's like when she's in a hurry. 'It's Miss Delmege,' I said. 'I thought you might want to know that the train will be in at eight o'clock, Miss Vivian, and it's half-past seven now.' She just said 'Thank you,' and rang off; but she must have told the D.G.V.O., because he came downstairs two minutes later. And she simply flung on her hat and dashed down into the car and to the station."

"And, after all, the train wasn't in till past ten, so she might just as well have stayed to put her hat on straight," said Miss Henderson boldly. She had a reputation for being "downright" of which she was aware, and which she strenuously sought to maintain by occasionally making small oblique sallies at Miss Vivian's expense.

"I must say it was most awfully crooked. I noticed it myself," said a pretty little giggling girl whom the others always called Tony, because her surname was Anthony. "How killing," I thought; "there's Miss Vivian with her hat on quite crooked."

"Yes, wasn't it killing?"

"Simply killing. I thought the minute I saw her: How killing to see Miss Vivian with her hat on like that!"

"She looked perfectly killing hurrying down the platform," remarked Miss Marsh, with an air of originality. "She was carrying cigarettes for the men, and her hat got crooked every minute. I was pining to tell her."

"Go on, Marshy! She'd have had your head off. Fancy Marsh stopping Miss Vivian in the middle of a troop-train to say her hat was on crooked!"

Every one laughed.

"I should think she'd be shot at dawn," suggested Tony. "That's the official penalty for making personal remarks to your C.O., I believe."

"You know," said Miss Delmege, in the tones whose refinement was always calculated to show up the unmodulated accents of her neighbours, "one day I absolutely did tell Miss Vivian when her hat was crooked. I said right out: 'Do excuse me, Miss Vivian, but your hat isn't quite straight.' She didn't mind a *bit*."

"I suppose she knows she always looks nice anyway," said Tony easily.

"I mean she didn't mind me telling her," explained Miss Delmege. "She's most awfully human, you know, really. That's what I like about Miss Vivian. She's so frightfully human."

"Yes, she *is* human," Miss Marsh agreed. "Awfully human."

Miss Delmege raised her eyebrows.

"Of course," she said, with quiet emphasis, "working in her room, as I do, I suppose I see quite another side of her—the *human* side, you know."

There was a silence. Nobody felt disposed to encourage Miss Vivian's secretary in her all-too-frequent recapitulations of the privileges which she enjoyed.

Presently another worker came in, looking inky and harassed.

"You're late tonight, Mrs. Potter, aren't you?" Tony asked her.

"Oh yes. It's those awful Belgians, you know. Wherever I put them, they're miserable, and write and ask to be taken

away. There's a family now that I settled simply beautifully at Little Quester village only a month ago, and this afternoon the mother came in to say the air doesn't suit them at all—she has a consumptive son or something—and could they be moved to the seaside at once. So I told Miss Vivian, and she said I was to get them moved directly. At once—today, you know. Of course, it was perfectly absurd—they couldn't even get packed up—and I told her so; but she said, 'Oh, settle it all by telephone'—you know her way. 'But, Miss Vivian,' I said, 'really I don't see how it can be managed. I've got a most fearful amount of work,' I said. 'Well,' she said, 'if you can't get through it, Mrs. Potter, I must simply put some one else at the head of the department who *can*.' It's too bad, you know."

Mrs. Potter sank into the only unoccupied wicker arm-chair in the room, looking very much jaded indeed.

Tony said sympathetically:

"What a shame! Miss Vivian doesn't realize what an awful lot you do, I'm perfectly certain."

"Well, considering that every letter and every bit of work in the whole office passes through Miss Vivian's hands, that's absurd," said Miss Delmege sharply. "She knows exactly what each department has to do, but, of course, she's such a quick worker herself that she can't understand any one not being able to get through the same amount."

Mrs. Potter looked far from enchanted with the proffered explanation.

"It isn't that I can't get through the work," she said resentfully. "Of course I can get through the regular work all right. But I must say, I do think she's inconsiderate over

these lightning touches of hers. What on earth was the sense of making those people move tonight, I should like to know?"

"Miss Vivian never will let the work get behindhand if she can help it," exclaimed Miss Marsh; and Miss Henderson at the same instant said, rather defiantly:

"Well, of course, Miss Vivian always puts the work before everything. She never spares herself, so I don't quite see why she should spare any of us."

"The fact is," said the small, cool voice of Miss Delmege, as usual contriving to filter through every other less refined sound, "she is extraordinarily tender-hearted. She can't bear to think any one is suffering when she could possibly help them; she'll simply go miles out of her way to do something for a wounded soldier or a Belgian refugee. I see that in her correspondence so much. You know—the letters she writes about quite little things, because some one or other wants her to. She'll take *endless* trouble."

"I know she's wonderful," said Mrs. Potter, looking remorseful.

She was a middle-aged woman with light wispy hair, always untidy, and wearing a permanent expression of fluster. She had only been at the Hostel a few weeks. "Isn't it nearly supper-time?" yawned Tony. "I want to go to bed."

"Tired, Tony?"

"Yes, awfully. I was on telephone duty last night, stamping the letters, and I didn't get off till nearly eleven."

"There must have been a lot of letters," said Miss Delmege, with the hint of scepticism which she always

managed to infuse into her tones when speaking of other people's work.

"About a hundred and thirty odd, but they didn't come down till very late. Miss Vivian was still signing the last lot at ten o'clock."

"She must have been very late getting out to Plessing. It's all very well for us," remarked Miss Marsh instructively; "we finish work at about six or seven o'clock, and then just come across the road, and here we are. But poor Miss Vivian has about an hour's drive before she gets home at all."

"She's always at the office by ten every morning, too."

"She ought to have some one to help her," sighed Miss Delmege. "Of course, I'd do anything to take some of the work off her hands, and I think she knows it. I think she knows I'd do simply anything for her; but she really wants some one who could take her place when she has to be away, and sign the letters for her, and see people. That's what she really needs."

"Thank goodness, there's the supper bell," said Tony.

They trooped downstairs.

The house was the ordinary high, narrow building of a provincial town, and held an insufficiency of rooms for the number of people domiciled there. The girls slept three or four in a room; the Superintendent had a tiny bedroom, and a slightly larger sitting-room adjoining the large room on the ground floor where they congregated in the evenings and on Sundays, and the dining-room was in the basement.

Gas flared on to the white shining American-cloth covering the long table and on the wooden kitchen chairs. The windows were set high up in the walls, and gave a view

of area railings and, at certain angles, of a piece of pavement.

One or two coloured lithographs hung on the walls.

There was a hideous sound of scraping as chairs were drawn back or pulled forwards over the uncarpeted boards.

"Sit next me, duck."

"All right. Come on, Tony; get the other side of Sprouts."

Miss Delmege, aloof and superior, received no invitation to place herself beside any one, and settled herself with genteel swishings of her skirt at the foot of the table.

The Superintendent sat at the head.

She was a small, delicate-looking Irish woman with an enthusiastic manner, who had married late in life, and been left a widow within two years of her marriage. She worked very hard, and it was her constant endeavour to maintain an atmosphere of perpetual brightness in the Hostel.

It was with this end in view that she invariably changed her blouse for a slightly cleaner one at suppertime, although all the girls were in uniform, and many of them still wearing a hat. But little Mrs. Bullivant always appeared in a rather pallid example of the dyer or cleaner's art, and said hopefully: "One of these days I must make a rule that all you girls dress for dinner. We shall find ourselves growing dreadfully uncivilized, I'm afraid, if we go on like this."

The Hostel liked Mrs. Bullivant, although she was a bad manager and could never keep a servant for long. She made no secret of the fact that she could not afford to be a voluntary worker.

Every Hostel in the district, and they were numerous owing to the recently-opened Munitions Factory near

Questerham, had rapidly become, as it were, fish for Miss Vivian's net. Each and all were under her control, and the rivalry between the Questerham Hostel "for Miss Vivian's *own* workers" and those reserved for the munition-makers was an embittered one.

"What has every one been doing to-day?" Mrs. Bullivant asked cheerfully.

The inquiry was readily responded to.

The angle of Miss Vivian's hat, when she had gone down to meet the troop-train, was again the subject of comment, and Miss Delmege was again reminded of the story, which she told with quiet and undiminished enjoyment, of her erstwhile daring in approaching Miss Vivian upon the subject.

"Did you really?" said Mrs. Bullivant admiringly. "Of course, it's different for you, Miss Delmege, working in her room all day. You see so much more of her than any one else does."

Every one except the complacent Miss Delmege looked reproachfully at the little Superintendent. She was incapable of snubbing any one, but the Hostel thought her encouragement of Miss Delmege unnecessary in the extreme.

Mrs. Bullivant changed the conversation rather hurriedly.

"Who is on telephone duty tonight?" she inquired.

"I am, worse luck."

"Miss Plumtree? And your head is bad again, isn't it, dear?"

"Yes," said Miss Plumtree wearily.

She was a fair, round-faced girl of five or six and twenty who suffered from frequent sick headaches. She worked for longer hours than any one else, and had a reputation for "making muddles." It was popularly supposed that Miss Vivian "had a down on her," but the Hostel liked Miss Plumtree, and affectionately called her Greengage and Gooseberry-bush.

"Greengage got another headache?" Miss Marsh asked concernedly. "I can take your duty to-night, dear, quite well."

"Thanks awfully, Marsh; it's sweet of you, but I haven't got leave to change. You know last time, when Tony took duty for me, Miss Vivian asked why I wasn't there."

"I can say you're sick."

"Oh, I'm sure she wouldn't like it," said Miss Plumtree, looking nervous and undecided.

"I think you ought to be in bed, I must say," said Mrs. Bullivant uncertainly.

"She certainly doesn't look fit to sit at that awful telephone for two and a half hours; and there are heaps of letters to-night. I can answer for the Hospital Department, anyway," sighed Miss Henderson. "Marshy, you look pretty tired yourself. I can quite well take the telephone if you like. I'm not doing anything."

"I thought you were going to the cinema."

"I don't care. I can do that another night. I'm not a bit keen on pictures, really, and it's raining hard."

"Thanks most awfully, both of you," repeated Miss Plumtree, "but I really think I'd better go myself. You know what Miss Vivian is, if she thinks one's shirking, and I'm not

at all in her good books at the moment, either. There was the most ghastly muddle about those returns last month, and I sent in the averages as wrong as they could be."

"That's nothing to do with your being unfit for telephone duty tonight," said Miss Delmege, with acid sweetness. "I think I can answer for it that Miss Vivian would be the first person to say you ought to let some one else take duty for you. I'd do it myself, only I really must get some letters written tonight. One never has a minute here. But I think I can answer for Miss Vivian."

In spite of the number of times that Miss Delmege expressed herself as ready to answer for Miss Vivian, no one had ever yet failed to be moved to exasperation by her pretensions.

"On the whole, Plumtree, you may be right not to risk it," said Miss Henderson freezingly, as she rose from the table.

"I'll manage all right," declared Miss Plumtree; but her round apple-blossom face was drawn with pain, and she stumbled up the dark stairs.

In the hall there was a hurried consultation between Miss Marsh and Miss Anthony.

"I say, Tony, old Gooseberry-bush isn't fit to stir. She ought to be tucked up in her bye-byes this minute. Shall I risk it, and go instead of her, leave or no leave?"

"I should think so, yes. What have things been like today?"

"Oh, fairly serene. I didn't see Miss Vivian this morning, myself, but nobody seems to have had their heads snapped off. There wasn't a fearful lot of work for her, either, because Miss Delmege came in quite early."

"Delmege makes me sick, the way she goes on! As though nobody else knew anything about Miss Vivian, and she was a sort of connecting-link between her and us. Didn't you hear her tonight? 'I think I can answer for Miss Vivian,'" mimicked Tony in an exaggerated falsetto. "I should jolly well like Miss Vivian to hear her one of these days. She'd appreciate being answered for like that by her secretary—I don't think!"

"I say, Marshy, can you keep a secret?"

"Rather!"

"Well, swear not to tell, and, mind, I'm speaking absolutely unofficially. I've no business to know it officially at all, because I only saw it on a telegram I sent for the Billeting Department. Miss Delmege is going to get her nose put out of joint with Miss V. Another secretary is coming."

"She's not! D'you mean Delmege has got the sack?"

"Oh, Lord, no! It's only somebody coming to help her, because there is so much work for one secretary. She's coming from Wales, and her name is Jones."

"I seem to have heard that name before."

They both giggled explosively; then made a simultaneous dash at the hall-door as Miss Plumtree, in hat and coat, came slowly out of the sitting-room.

"No, you don't, Plumtree! You're going straight up to bed, and I'll tell Miss Vivian you were ill. It'll be all right."

"You are a brick, Marsh."

"Nonsense! You'll do as much for me some day. Goodnight, dear."

Miss Marsh hurried out, and Miss Plumtree thankfully took the felt uniform hat off her aching head.

"Get into bed," directed Tony, "and take an aspirin."

"Haven't got one left, worse luck."

"I'll see if any one else has any. I believe Mrs. Potter has."

Tony hurried into the sitting-room. Mrs. Potter had no aspirin, but she hoisted herself out of her arm-chair and said she would go round to the chemist and get some.

She went out into the rain.

Tony borrowed a rubber hot-water bottle from Miss Henderson, and a kettle from somebody else, and went upstairs to boil some water, forgetting that she was tired and had meant to go to bed after supper.

Presently little Mrs. Bullivant came upstairs with a cup of tea and the aspirin, both of which she administered to the patient.

"You'll go to sleep after that, I expect," she said consolingly.

"I'll tell the girls to get into bed quietly," Tony whispered.

Miss Plumtree shared a room with Miss Delmege and Miss Henderson.

"I never do make any noise in the room that I am aware of," said Miss Delmege coldly; but she and her room-mate both crept upstairs soon after nine o'clock, lest their entrance later should awaken the sufferer, and they undressed with the gas turned as low as it would go, and in silence.

Padding softly in dressing-slippers to the bathroom later on, for the lukewarm water which was all that they could hope to get until the solitary gas-ring should have served the turn of numerous waiting kettles, they heard Miss Marsh

returning from telephone duty, bolting the hall-door, and putting up the chain.

"You're back early," whispered Miss Henderson, coming halfway downstairs in her pink flannelette dressing-gown, her scanty fair hair screwed back into a tight plait.

"Wasn't much doing. Miss Vivian got off at half-past nine. Jolly good thing, too; she's been late every night this week."

"Was it all right about your taking duty?"

"Ab-solutely. Said she was glad Miss Plumtree had gone to bed, and asked if she had anything to take for her head."

"How awfully decent of her!"

"Wasn't it? It'll buck old Greengage up, too. She always thinks Miss Vivian has a down on her."

Miss Delmege leant over the banisters and said in a subdued but very complacent undertone:

"I thought Miss Vivian would be all right. I thought I could safely answer for her."



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Plessing was also speaking of Miss Vivian that evening.

"Where is this to end, Miss Bruce? I ask you, where is it to end?" demanded Miss Vivian's mother.

Miss Bruce knew quite well that Lady Vivian was not asking her at all, in the sense of expecting to receive from her any suggestion of a term to that which in fact appeared to be interminable, so she only made a clicking sound of sympathy with her tongue and went on rapidly stamping postcards.

"I am not unpatriotic, though I do dislike Flagdays, and I was the first person to say that Char must go and do work somewhere—nurse in a hospital if she liked, or do censor's work at the War Office. Sir Piers said 'No' at first—you know he's old-fashioned in many ways—and then he said Char wasn't strong enough, and to a certain extent I agreed with him. But I put aside all that and absolutely encouraged her, as you know, to organize this Supply Dépôt. But I must say, Miss Bruce, that I never expected the thing to grow to these dimensions. Of course, it may be a very splendid work—in fact, I'm sure it is, and every one says how proud I must be of such a wonderful daughter but *is* it all absolutely necessary?"

"Oh, Lady Vivian," said the secretary reproachfully. "Why, the very War Office itself knows the value of dear Charmian's work. They are always asking her to take on fresh branches."

"That's just what I am complaining of. Why should the Midland Supply Dépôt do all these odd jobs? Hospital supplies are all very well, but when it comes to meeting all the troop-trains and supplying all the bandages, and being central Dépôt for sphagnum moss, and all the rest of it—all I can say is, that it's beyond a joke."

Miss Bruce took instant advantage of her employer's infelicitous final *cliché* to remark austerely:

"Certainly one would never dream of looking upon it as a *joke*, Lady Vivian. I quite feel with you about the working so fearfully hard, and keeping these strange, irregular hours, but I'm convinced that it's perfectly unavoidable—perfectly

unavoidable. Charmian owns herself that no one can possibly take her place at the Dépôt, even for a day."

This striking testimony to the irreplaceableness of her daughter appeared to leave Lady Vivian cold.

"I dare say," she said curtly. "Of course, she's got a gift for organization, and all she's done is perfectly marvellous, but I must say I wish she'd taken up nursing or something reasonable, like anybody else, when she could have had proper holidays and kept regular hours."

Miss Bruce gave the secretarial equivalent for laughing the suggestion to scorn.

"As though nursing wasn't something that *anyone* could do! Why, any ordinary girl can work in a hospital. But I should like to know what other woman could do Charmian's work. Why, if she left, the whole organization would break down in a week."

"Well," said the goaded Lady Vivian, "the war wouldn't go on any the longer if it did, I don't suppose—any more than it's going to end twenty-four hours sooner because Char has dinner at eleven o'clock every night and spends five pounds a day on postage stamps."

Miss Bruce looked hurt, as she went on applying halfpenny stamps to the postcards that formed an increasing mountain on the writing-table in front of her.

"I suppose you're working for her now?"

"I only wish I could do more," said the secretary fervently. "She gives me these odd jobs because I'm always imploring her to let me do some of the mechanical work that any one can manage, and spare her for other things. But, of course, no one can really do anything much to help her."

"I'm sorry to hear it, since she has a staff of thirty or forty people there. Pray, are they all being paid out of Red Cross funds for doing nothing at all?" inquired Lady Vivian satirically.

"Oh, of course they all do their bit. Routine work, as Charmian calls it. But she has to superintend everything—hold the whole thing together. She looks through every letter that leaves that office, and knows the workings of every single department, and they come and ask her about every little thing."

"Yes, they do. She enjoys that."

Lady Vivian's tone held nothing more than reflectiveness, but the little secretary reddened unbecomingly, and said in a strongly protesting voice:

"Of course, it's a very big responsibility, and she knows that it all rests on her."

"Well, well," said Lady Vivian soothingly. "No one is ever a prophet in his own country, and I suppose Char is no exception. Anyhow, she has a most devoted champion in you, Miss Bruce."

"It has nothing to do with any—any personal liking, Lady Vivian, I assure you," said the secretary, her voice trembling and her colour rising yet more. "I don't say it because it's her, but quite dispassionately. I hope that even if I knew nothing of Charmian's own personal attractiveness and—kindness, I should still be able to see how wonderful her devotion and self-sacrifice are, and admire her extraordinary capacity for work. Speaking quite impersonally, you know."

Anything less impersonal than her secretary's impassioned utterances, it seemed to Lady Vivian, would

have been hard to find, and she shrugged her shoulders very slightly.

"Well, Char certainly needs a champion, for she's making herself very unpopular in the county. All these people who ran their small organizations and war charities quite comfortably for the first six or eight months of the war naturally don't like the way everything has been snatched away and affiliated to this Central Dépôt—"

"Official co-ordination is absolutely—"

"Yes, yes, I know; that's Char's *cri de bataille*. But there are ways and ways of doing things, and I must say that some of the things she's said and written, to perfectly well-meaning people who've been doing their best and giving endless time and trouble to the work, seem to me tactless to a degree."

"She says herself that anyone in her position is bound to give offence sometimes."

"Position fiddlesticks!" said Miss Vivian's parent briskly. "Why can't she behave like anybody else? She might be the War Office and the Admiralty rolled into one, to hear her talk sometimes. Of course, people who've known her ever since she was a little scrap in short petticoats aren't going to stand it. Why, she won't even be thirty till next month!—though, I must say, she might be sixty from the way she talks. But then she always was like that, from the time she was five years old. It worried poor Sir Piers dreadfully when he wanted to show her how to manage her hoop, and she insisted on arguing with him about the law of gravitation instead. I suppose I ought to have smacked her then."

Miss Bruce choked, but any protest at the thought of the obviously regretted opportunity lost by Lady Vivian for the perpetration of the suggested outrage remained unuttered.

The sharp sound of the telephone-bell cut across the air.

Miss Bruce attempted to rise, but was hampered by the paraphernalia of her clerical work, and Lady Vivian said:

"Sir Piers will answer it. He is in the hall, and you know he likes telephoning, because then he can think he isn't really getting as deaf as he sometimes thinks he is."

Miss Bruce, respecting this rather complicated reason, sat down again, and Lady Vivian remarked dispassionately:

"Of course it's Char, probably to say she can't come back to dinner. You know, I specially asked her to get back early tonight because John Trevellyan is dining with us. There! what did I tell you?"

They listened to the one-sided conversation.

"Sir Piers Vivian speaking. What's that? Oh, you'll put me through to Miss Vivian. Very well; I'll hold on. That you, my dear? Your mother and I are most anxious you should be back for dinner—Trevellyan is coming.... We'll put off dinner for half an hour if that would help you.... But, my dear, he'll be very much disappointed not to see you, and it really seems a pity, when the poor chap is just back ... he'll be so disappointed.... Yes, yes, I see. I'm sure it's very good of you, but couldn't they manage without you just for once?... Very well, my dear, I'll tell him.... It's really very good of you, my poor dear child...."

Lady Vivian stamped her foot noiselessly as her husband's voice reached her; but when Sir Piers had put

back the receiver and come slowly into the room, she greeted him with a smile.

"Was that Char? To say she couldn't be back in time for dinner tonight, I suppose?"

Quick-tempered, sharp-tongued woman as she was, Joanna Vivian's voice was always gentle in speaking to her white-haired husband, twenty years her senior.

"The poor child seems to think she can't be spared. Very good of her, but isn't she overdoing it just a little—eh, Joanna? Aren't they working her rather too hard?"

"It's mostly her own doing, Piers. She's head of this show, you know. I suppose that's why she thinks she can't leave it."

"The whole thing would go to pieces without her," thrust in the secretary, in the sudden falsetto with which she always impressed upon Sir Piers her recollection of his increasing deafness. "She supervises the whole organization, and if she's away there isn't any one to take her place."

"But they don't want to work after six o'clock," said the old man, looking puzzled. "Ten to six—that's office hours. She oughtn't to want to be there after the place is shut up."

"Oh, there's no 'close time' for the Midland Supply Dépôt," said Miss Bruce, looking superior. "They may have orders to meet a train at any hour of the day or night, and the telephone often goes on ringing till eleven or twelve o'clock, I believe. And Charmian *never* leaves till everyone else has finished work."

Sir Piers looked bewildered, and his wife said quietly:

"I'm thinking of suggesting to Char that she should sleep at the Hostel they opened last year, instead of coming back here at impossible hours every night. It really is very hard on the servants, and, besides, I don't think we shall have enough petrol this winter for it to be possible. She could always come home for week-ends, and on the whole it would be less tiring for her to be altogether in Questerham during the week."

"But is it necessary?" inquired Sir Piers piteously.

His wife shrugged her shoulders.

"If she'd been a boy she would be in the trenches now. I suppose we must let her do what she can, even though she's a girl. Other parents have to make greater sacrifices than ours, Piers."

"Yes, yes, to be sure," he assented. "And it's very good of the dear child to give up all her time as she does. But I'm sorry she can't be back for dinner tonight, Joanna—very sorry. Poor Trevellyan will be disappointed."

"Yes," said Lady Vivian, and refrained from adding, "I hope he will be."

She had once hoped that Char and John Trevellyan might marry; but Char's easy contempt for her cousin's Philistinism was only equalled by his unconcealed regret that so much prettiness should be allied to such alarming quick-wittedness.

"Miss Bruce," she said, turning to her secretary, "I hope you will dine with us tonight. Captain Trevellyan is bringing over a brother-officer and his wife, and we shall be an odd number, since there is no hope of Char."

"What's that, my dear?" said Sir Piers. "I hadn't heard that. Who is Trevellyan bringing with him?"

"Major Willoughby and his wife. She used to be Lesbia Carroll, and I knew her years ago—before she married. I shall be rather curious to see her again."

"Are they motoring?"

"Yes, in Johnnie's new car."

The dressing-gong reverberated through the hall.

"They will very likely be late," remarked Lady Vivian, "but I must go and dress at once."

She went across the long room, a tall, upright woman with a beautiful figure, obviously better-looking at fifty-two than she could ever have been as a girl. Her hair was thick and dark, with more than a sprinkling of white, and two deep vertical lines ran from the corners of her nostrils to her rather square chin. But her blue eyes were brilliant, and deeply set under a forehead that was singularly unlined.

As Joanna Trevellyan, ungainly and devoid of beauty, she had been far too outspoken to conceal her native cleverness, and had never known popularity. As the wife of Sir Piers Vivian, the only man who had ever wished to marry her, and mistress of Plessing, her wit and shrewdness became her, and as the years went on she was even accounted good-looking.

Miss Bruce, returning to her postcards after a hurried toilet, thought that Lady Vivian looked very handsome as she came down in her black-lace evening-dress with a high amethyst comb in her hair.

"Have the evening papers come?" was her first inquiry.

"I think Sir Piers had them taken upstairs."

Lady Vivian frowned quickly.

"How I wish he wouldn't do that! The casualty lists depress him so dreadfully. We must try and keep off the subject of the war at dinner, Miss Bruce, or he won't sleep all night."

Miss Bruce said nothing, but she pursed up her lips in a manner which meant that a possibly wakeful night for Sir Piers Vivian ought not to be weighed in the balance against the universal tendency to discuss the war. That the subject was never willingly embarked upon at Plessing, except by Char Vivian, seemed to her a confession of weakness.

Lady Vivian was perfectly aware of her secretary's point of view, and profoundly indifferent to it. She even took a rather malicious pleasure in saying lightly and yet very decidedly:

"John is safe enough, but I don't know what Lesbia Willoughby may choose to talk about. As a girl she had the voice of a pea-hen, and never stopped chattering. So, if you can, please head her off war-talk at dinner."

Her employer's trenchant simile as to Mrs. Willoughby's vocal powers could not but recur to Miss Bruce with a sense of its extreme appositeness when the guests entered.

Mrs. Willoughby billowed into the room. There was really no other word to describe that rapid, undulating, and yet buoyant advance. Tall as Lady Vivian was, and by no means slightly built, she seemed to Miss Bruce to be at once physically overpowered and almost eclipsed in the strident and voluminous greeting of her old acquaintance.

"My *dear* Joanna! After *all* these years ... how too, too delightful to see you so absolutely and utterly unchanged!

Dear old days! And now we meet in the midst of all these horrors!"

The exaggeration of the look she cast round her seemed to include the drawing-room and its occupants alike in the pleasing category.

"I'm sorry you don't like my Louis XV.," said Lady Vivian flippantly, and turned to greet the rest of the party.

Her cousin John, who looked, even in khaki, a great deal less than his thirty years, smiled at her with steady blue eyes that bore a great resemblance to her own, and wrung her hand, saying, "This is very jolly, Cousin Joanna," in a pleasant, rather serious voice.

"And here," said Lesbia Willoughby piercingly—"here is my Lewis."

Her Lewis advanced, looking not unnaturally sheepish, and Trevellyan said conscientiously:

"May I introduce Major Willoughby to you? My cousin, Lady Vivian."

"You *never* told me, Joanna, that this dear thing was a cousin of yours," shrieked Lesbia reproachfully. "I think it quite disgustingly mean of you, considering that we were girls together."

"In the days when we were girls together," said Lady Vivian ruthlessly, "he wasn't born or thought of. Have they announced dinner, Miss Bruce?"

"This moment."

"Then, do let's go in at once. You must all be very hungry after such a drive."

"I *never* eat nowadays—simply never," proclaimed Mrs. Willoughby as she crossed the hall on Sir Piers's arm. "I

think it most unpatriotic. We're all going to be starving quite soon, and the poor are living on simply nothing a day as it is. And one can't *bear* to touch food while our poor dear boys in the trenches and in Germany are literally starving."

Mrs. Willoughby's voice was of a very piercing quality, and she emphasized her words by rolling round a pair of enormous and over-prominent light grey eyes as she spoke. Seated at the dinner-table, she contrived to present an appearance that almost amounted to impropriety, by merely putting a large bare elbow on the table and flinging back an elaborately dressed head set on a short neck and opulent shoulders, thickly dredged with heavily scented powder. Miss Bruce, on the opposite side of the table, eyed her with distrustful disapproval. It did not appear to her likely that she would be able to carry out Lady Vivian's injunction that war-talk was to be avoided.

"Isn't Char at home?" Trevellyan inquired of his hostess.

"She's at Questerham, and the car has gone in for her, but she telephoned to say that she couldn't get back till late. It's this Supply Dépôt of hers; she's giving every minute of the day and night to it," said Lady Vivian, characteristically allowing no tinge of disapproval or disappointment to colour her voice.

"Is that your delightful girl?" inquired Lesbia across the table, and pronouncing the word as though it rhymed with "curl." "Isn't it too wonderful to see all these young things devoting themselves? As for me, I'm literally run off my feet in town. I'm having a holiday here—just to see something of Lewis, who's stationed in these parts indefinitely, poor dear

lamb—because my doctor said I was *killing* myself—literally killing myself."

"Really?" said Lady Vivian placidly. "I hope you're going to be here for some time. Are you staying—"

"Only till I'm fit to move. That *moment*," said Lesbia impressively, "that very moment, I must simply dash back to London. My dear, I can't tell you what it's like. I never have an instant to call my own—have I, Lewis?"

"Rather not," said Lewis hastily.

He was a small, brown-faced man, who had won his D.S.O. in South Africa, and whom no doctor could now be induced to pass for service abroad.

"Perhaps some charitable organization takes up your time," suggested Sir Piers to Mrs. Willoughby. His deafness seldom permitted him to follow more than the drift of general conversation. "Now, Charmian, our daughter, has taken up a most creditable piece of work—most creditable—although, perhaps, she is a little inclined to overdo things just at present."

"No one can *possibly* overdo war-work," Mrs. Willoughby told him trenchantly. "Nothing that we women of England can do could ever be enough for the brave fathers, and husbands, and brothers, and sweethearts, who are risking their lives for us out there. Think of what the trenches are—just *hell*, as a boy said to me the other day—hell let loose!"

Sir Piers looked very much distressed, and his white head began to shake. He had only heard part of Lesbia's discourse. Trevellyan's boyishly fair face flushed scarlet. He had fought in Belgium, and in Flanders, until a bullet lodged in his knee, and now his next Medical Board might send him