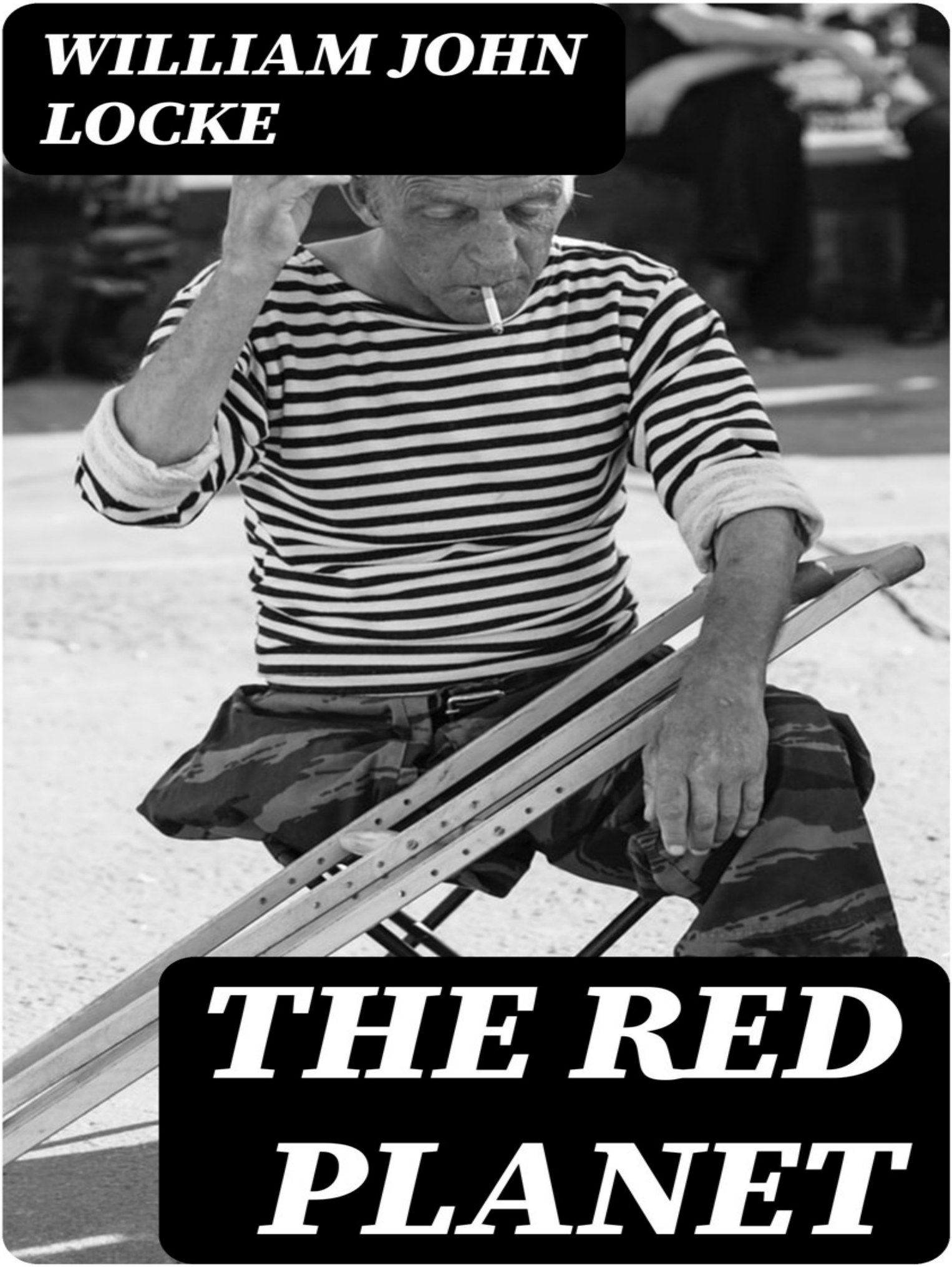
WILLIAM JOHN LOCKE
THE RED PLANET

William John Locke

The Red Planet

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CHAPTER I

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"Lady Fenimore's compliments, sir, and will you be so kind as to step round to Sir Anthony at once?"

Heaven knows that never another step shall I take in this world again; but Sergeant Marigold has always ignored the fact. That is one of the many things I admire about Marigold. He does not throw my poor paralysed legs, so to speak, in my face. He accepts them as the normal equipment of an employer. I don't know what I should do without Marigold.... You see we were old comrades in the South African War, where we both got badly knocked to pieces. He was Sergeant in my battery, and the same Boer shell did for both of us. At times we join in cursing that shell heartily, but I am not sure that we do not hold it in sneaking affection. It initiated us into the brotherhood of death. Shortly afterwards when we had crossed the border-line back into life, we exchanged, as tokens, bits of the shrapnel which they had extracted from our respective carcases. I have not enquired what he did with his bit; but I keep mine in a certain locked drawer.... There were only the two of us left on the gun when we were knocked out.... I should like to tell you the whole story, but you wouldn't listen to me. And no wonder. In comparison with the present world convulsion in which the slaughtered are reckoned by millions, the Boer War seems a trumpery affair of bows and arrows. I am a back-number. Still, back-numbers have their feelings—and their memories.

I sometimes wonder, as I sit in this wheel-chair, with my abominable legs dangling down helplessly, what Sergeant Marigold thinks of me. I know what I think of Marigold. I think him the ugliest devil that God ever created and further marred after creating him. He is a long, bony creature like a knobbly ram-rod, and his face is about the colour and shape of a damp, mildewed walnut. To hide a bald head into which a silver plate has been fixed, he wears a luxuriant curly brown wig, like those that used to adorn waxen gentlemen in hair-dressing windows. His is one of those unhappy moustaches that stick out straight and scanty like a cat's. He has the slit of a letter-box mouth of the Irishman in caricature, and only half a dozen teeth spaced like a skeleton company. Nothing will induce him to procure false ones. It is a matter of principle. Between the wearing of false hair and the wearing of false teeth he makes a distinction of unfathomable subtlety. He is an obstinate beast. If he wasn't he would not, with four fingers of his right hand shot away, have remained with me on that gun. In the same way, neither tears nor entreaties nor abuse have induced him to wear a glass eye. On high days and holidays, whenever he desires to look smart and dashing, he covers the unpleasing orifice with a black shade. In ordinary workaday life he cares not how much he offends the aesthetic sense. But the other eye, the sound left eye, is a wonder—the precious jewel set in the head of the ugly toad. It is large, of ultra-marine blue, steady, fearless, humorous, tender—everything heroic and beautiful and romantic you can imagine about eyes. Let him clap a hand over that eye and you will hold him the most dreadful ogre that ever

escaped out of a fairy tale. Let him clap a hand over the other eye and look full at you out of the good one and you will think him the Knightliest man that ever was—and in my poor opinion, you would not be far wrong.

So, out of this nightmare of a face, the one beautiful eye of Sergeant Marigold was bent on me, as he delivered his message.

I thrust back my chair from the writing-table.

"Is Sir Anthony ill?"

"He rode by the gate an hour ago looking as well as either you or me, sir."

"That's not very reassuring," said I.

Marigold did not take up the argument. "They've sent the car for you, sir."

"In that case," said I, "I'll start immediately."

Marigold wheeled my chair out of the room and down the passage to the hall, where he fitted me with greatcoat and hat. Then, having trundled me to the front gate, he picked me up—luckily I have always been a small spare man—and deposited me in the car. I am always nervous of anyone but Marigold trying to carry me. They seem to stagger and fumble and bungle. Marigold's arms close round me like an iron clamp and they lift me with the mechanical certainty of a crane.

He jumped up beside the chauffeur and we drove off.

Perhaps when I get on a little further I may acquire the trick of telling a story. At present I am baffled by the many things that clamour for prior record. Before bringing Sir Anthony on the scene, I feel I ought to say something more about myself, to explain why Lady Fenimore should have

sent for me in so peremptory a fashion. Following the model of my favourite author Balzac—you need the awful leisure that has been mine to appreciate him—I ought to describe the house in which I live, my establishment—well, I have begun with Sergeant Marigold—and the little country town which is practically the scene of the drama in which were involved so many bound to me by close ties of friendship and affection.

I ought to explain how I come to be writing this at all.

Well, to fill in my time, I first started by a diary—a sort of War Diary of Wellingsford, the little country town in question. Then things happened with which my diary was inadequate to cope. Everyone came and told me his or her side of the story. All through, I found thrust upon me the parts of father-confessor, intermediary, judge, advocate, and conspirator.... For look you, what kind of a life can a man lead situated as I am? The crowning glory of my days, my wife, is dead. I have neither chick nor child. No brothers or sisters, dead or alive. The Bon Dieu and Sergeant Marigold (the latter assisted by his wife and a maid or two) look after my creature comforts. What have I in the world to do that is worth doing save concern myself with my country and my friends?

With regard to my country, in these days of war, I do what I can. Until finally flattened out by the War Office, I pestered them for such employment as a cripple might undertake. As an instance of what a paralytic was capable I quoted Couthon, member of the National Convention and the Committee of Public Safety. You can see his chair, not very unlike mine, in the Musee Carnavalet in Paris. Perhaps

that is where I blundered. The idea of a shrieking revolutionary in Whitehall must have sent a cold shiver down their spines. In the meanwhile, I serve on as many War Committees in Wellingsford as is physically possible for Sergeant Marigold to get me into. I address recruiting meetings. I have taken earnest young Territorial artillery officers in courses of gunnery. You know they work with my own beloved old fifteen pounders, brought up to date with new breeches, recoils, shields, and limbers. For months there was a brigade in Wellings Park, and I used to watch their drill. I was like an old actor coming once again before the footlights.... Of course it was only in the mathematics of the business that I could be of any help, and doubtless if the War Office had heard of the goings on in my study, they would have dropped severely on all of us. Still, I taught them lots of things about parabolas that they did not know and did not know were to be known—things that, considering the shells they fired went in parabolas, ought certainly to be known by artillery officers; so I think, in this way, I have done a little bit for my country.

With regard to my friends, God has given me many in this quiet market town—once a Sleepy Hollow awakened only on Thursdays by bleating sheep and lowing cattle and red-faced men in gaiters and hard felt hats; its life flowing on drowsily as the gaudily painted barges that are towed on the canal towards which, in scattered buildings, it drifts aimlessly; a Sleepy Hollow with one broad High Street, melting gradually at each end through shops, villas, cottages, into the King's Highway, yet boasting in its central heart a hundred yards or so of splendour, where the

truculent new red brick Post Office sneers across the flagged market square at the new Portland-stone Town Hall, while the old thatched corn-market sleeps in the middle and the Early English spire of the Norman church dreams calmly above them. Once, I say, a Sleepy Hollow, but now alive with the tramp of soldiers and the rumble of artillery and transport; for Wellingsford is the centre of a district occupied by a division, which means twenty thousand men of all arms, and the streets and roads swarm with men in khaki, and troops are billeted in all the houses. The War has changed many aspects, but not my old friendships. I had made a home here during my soldiering days, long before the South African War, my wife being a kinswoman of Sir Anthony, and so I have grown into the intimacy of many folks around. And, as they have been more than good to me, surely I must give them of my best in the way of sympathy and counsel. So it is in no spirit of curiosity that I have pried into my friends' affairs. They have become my own, very vitally my own; and this book is a record of things as I know them to have happened.

My name is Meredyth, with a "Y," as my poor mother used proudly to say, though what advantage a "Y" has over an "I," save that of a swaggering tail, I have always been at a loss to determine; Major Duncan Meredyth, late R.F.A., aged forty-seven; and I live in a comfortable little house at the extreme north end of the High Street, standing some way back from the road; so that in fine weather I can sit in my front garden and watch everybody going into the town. And whenever any of my friends pass by, it is their kindly habit to cast an eye towards my gate, and, if I am visible, to

pass the time of day with me for such time as they can spare.

Years ago, when first I realised what would be my fate for the rest of my life, I nearly broke my heart. But afterwards, whether owing to the power of human adaptability or to the theory of compensation, I grew to disregard my infirmity. By building a series of two or three rooms on to the ground floor of the house, so that I could live in it without the need of being carried up and down stairs, and by acquiring skill in the manipulation of my tricycle chair, I can get about the place pretty much as I choose. And Marigold is my second self. So, in spite of the sorrow and grief incident to humanity of which God has given me my share, I feel that my lot is cast in pleasant places and I am thankful.

The High Street, towards its southern extremity, takes a sudden bend, forming what the French stage directions call a pan coupe. On the inner angle are the gates of Wellings Park, the residence of Sir Anthony Fenimore, third baronet, and the most considerable man in our little community. Through these gates the car took me and down the long avenue of chestnut trees, the pride of a district braggart of its chestnuts and its beeches, but now leafless and dreary, spreading out an infinite tracery of branch and twig against a grey February sky. Thence we emerged into the open of rolling pasture and meadow on the highest ground of which the white Georgian house was situated. As we neared the house I shivered, not only with the cold, but with a premonition of disaster. For why should Lady Fenimore have sent for me to see Sir Anthony, when he, strong and hearty, could have sent for me himself, or, for the matter of that,

could have visited me at my own home? The house looked stark and desolate. And when we drew up at the front door and Pardoe, the elderly butler, appeared, his face too looked stark and desolate.

Marigold lifted me out and carried me up the steps and put me into a chair like my own which the Fenimores have the goodness to keep in a hall cupboard for my use.

"What's the matter, Pardoe?" I asked.

"Sir Anthony and her ladyship will tell you, sir. They're in the morning room."

So I was shewn into the morning room—a noble square room with French windows, looking on to the wintry garden, and with a log fire roaring up a great chimney. On one side of the fire sat Sir Anthony, and on the other, Lady Fenimore. And both were crying. He rose as he saw me—a short, crop-haired, clean-shaven, ruddy, jockey-faced man of fifty-five, the corners of his thin lips, usually curled up in a cheery smile, now piteously drawn down, and his bright little eyes now dim like those of a dead bird. She, buxom, dark, without a grey hair in her head, a fine woman defying her years, buried her face in her hands and sobbed afresh.

"It's good of you to come, old man," said Sir Anthony, "but you're in it with us."

He handed me a telegram. I knew, before reading it, what message it contained. I had known, all along, but dared not confess it to myself.

"I deeply regret to inform you that your son, Lieutenant Oswald Fenimore, was killed in action yesterday while leading his men with the utmost gallantry."

I had known him since he was a child. By reason of my wife's kinship, I was "Uncle Duncan." He was just one and twenty, but a couple of years out of Sandhurst. Only a week before I had received an exuberant letter from him extolling his men as "super-devil-angels," and imploring me if I loved him and desired to establish the supremacy of British arms, to send him some of Mrs. Marigold's potted shrimp.

And now, there he was dead; and, if lucky, buried with a little wooden cross with his name rudely inscribed, marking his grave.

I reached out my hand.

"My poor old Anthony!"

He jerked his head and glance towards his wife and wheeled me to her side, so that I could put my hand on her shoulder.

"It's bitter hard, Edith, but—"

"I know, I know. But all the same—"

"Well, damn it all!" cried Sir Anthony, in a quavering voice, "he died like a man and there's nothing more to be said."

Presently he looked at his watch.

"By George," said he, "I've only just time to get to my Committee."

"What Committee?" I asked.

"The Lord Lieutenant's. I promised to take the chair."

For the first time Lady Fenimore lifted her stricken face.

"Are you going, Anthony?"

"The boy didn't shirk his duty. Why should I?"

She looked at him squarely and the most poignant simulacrum of a smile I have ever seen flitted over her lips.

"Why not, darling? Duncan will keep me company till you come back."

He kissed his wife, a trifle more demonstratively than he had ever done in alien presence, and with a nod at me, went out of the room.

And suddenly she burst into sobbing again.

"I know it's wrong and wicked and foolish," she said brokenly. "But I can't help it. Oh, God! I can't help it."

Then, like an ass, I began to cry, too; for I loved the boy, and that perhaps helped her on a bit.

CHAPTER II

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Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori. The tag has been all but outworn during these unending days of death; it has become almost a cant phrase which the judicious shrink from using. Yet to hundreds of thousands of mourning men and women there has been nothing but its truth to bring consolation. They are conscious of the supreme sacrifice and thereby are ennobled. The cause in which they made it becomes more sacred. The community of grief raises human dignity. In England, at any rate, there are no widows of Ashur. All are silent in their lamentations. You see little black worn in the public ways. The Fenimores mourned for their only son, the idol of their hearts; but the manifestation of their grief was stoical compared with their unconcealed desolation on the occasion of a tragedy that occurred the year before.

Towards the end of the preceding June their only daughter, Althea, had been drowned in the canal. Here was a tragedy unrelieved, stupid, useless. Here was no consoling knowledge of glorious sacrifice; no dying for one's country. There was no dismissing it with a heroic word that caught in the throat.

I have not started out to write this little chronicle of Wellingsford in order to weep over the pain of the world. God knows there is in it an infinity of beauty, fresh revelations of which are being every day unfolded before my eyes.

If I did not believe with all my soul that out of Darkness cometh Light, I would take my old service revolver from its holster and blow out my brains this very minute. The eternal laughter of the earth has ever since its creation pierced through the mist of tears in which at times it has been shrouded. What has been will be. Nay, more, what has been shall be. It is the Law of what I believe to be God.... As a concrete instance, where do you find a fuller expression of the divine gaiety of the human spirit than in the Houses of Pain, strewn the length and breadth of the land, filled with maimed and shattered men who have looked into the jaws of Hell? If it comes to that, I have looked into them myself, and have heard the heroic jests of men who looked with me.

For some years up to the outbreak of the war which has knocked all so-called modern values silly, my young friends, with a certain respectful superciliousness, regarded me as an amiable person hopelessly out of date. Now that we are at grip with elementals, I find myself, if anything, in advance of the fashion. This, however, by the way. What I am clumsily trying to explain is that if I am to make this story intelligible I must start from the darkness where its roots lie hidden. And that darkness is the black depths of the canal by the lock gates where Althea Fenimore's body was found.

It was high June, in leafy England, in a world at peace. Can one picture it? With such a wrench of memory does one recall scenes of tender childhood. In the shelter of a stately house lived Althea Fenimore. She was twenty-one; pretty, buxom, like her mother, modern, with (to me) a pathetic touch of mid-Victorian softness and sentimentality; independent in outward action, what we call "open-air"; yet

an anomaly, fond at once of games and babies. I have seen her in the morning tearing away across country by the side of her father, the most passionate and reckless rider to hounds in the county, and in the evening I have come across her, a pretty mass of pink flesh and muslin—no, it can't be muslin—say chiffon—anyhow, something white and filmy and girlish—curled up on a sofa and absorbed in a novel of Mrs. Henry Wood, borrowed, if one could judge by the state of its greasy brown paper cover, from the servants' hall. I confess that, though to her as to her brother I was "Uncle Duncan," and loved her as a dear, sweet English girl, I found her lacking in spirituality, in intellectual grasp, in emotional distinction. I should have said that she was sealed by God to be the chaste, healthy, placid mother of men. She was forever laughing—just the spontaneous laughter of the gladness of life.

On the last afternoon of her existence she came to see me, bringing me a basket of giant strawberries from her own particular bed. We had tea in the garden, and with her young appetite she consumed half the fruit she had brought. At the time I did not notice an unusual touch of depression. I remember her holding by its stalk a great half-eaten strawberry and asking me whether sometimes I didn't find life rather rotten. I said idly:

"You can't expect the world to be a peach without a speck on it. Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven. The wise person avoids the specks."

"But suppose you've bitten a specky bit by accident?"

"Spit it out," said I.

She laughed. "You think you're like the wise Uncle in the Sunday School books, don't you?"

"I know I am," I said.

Whereupon she laughed again, finished the strawberry, and changed the conversation.

There seemed to be no foreshadowing of tragedy in that. I had known her (like many of her kind) to proclaim the rottenness of the Universe when she was off her stroke at golf, or when a favourite young man did not appear at a dance. I attributed no importance to it. But the next day I remembered. What was she doing after half-past ten o'clock, when she had bidden her father and mother goodnight, on the steep and lonely bank of the canal, about a mile and a half away? No one had seen her leave the house. No one, apparently, had seen her walking through the town. Nothing was known of her until dawn when they found her body by the lock gate. She had been dead some hours. It was a mysterious affair, upon which no light was thrown at the inquest. No one save myself had observed any sign of depression, and her half-bantering talk with me was trivial enough. No one could adduce a reason for her midnight walk on the tow-path. The obvious question arose. Whom had she gone forth to meet? What man? There was not a man in the neighbourhood with whom her name could be particularly associated. Generally, it could be associated with a score or so. The modern young girl of her position and upbringing has a drove of young male intimates. With one she rides, with another she golfs, with another she dances a two-step, with another she Bostons; she will let Tom read poetry to her, although, as she expresses it, "he

bores her stiff," because her sex responds to the tribute; she plays lady patroness to Dick, and tries to intrigue him into a soft job; and as for Harry she goes on telling him month after month that unless he forswears sack and lives cleanly she will visit him with her high displeasure. Meanwhile, most of these satellites have affaires de coeur of their own, some respectable, others not; they regard the young lady with engaging frankness as a woman and a sister, they have the run of her father's house, and would feel insulted if anybody questioned the perfect correctness of their behaviour. Each man has, say, half a dozen houses where he is welcomed on the same understanding. Of course, when one particular young man and one particular young woman read lunatic things in each other's eyes, then the rest of the respective quasi-sisters and quasi-brothers have to go hang. (In parenthesis, I may state that the sisters are more ruthlessly sacrificed than the brothers.) At any rate, frankness is the saving quality of the modern note.

In the case of Althea, there had been no sign of such specialisation. She could not have gone forth, poor child, to meet the twenty with whom she was known to be on terms of careless comradeship. She had gone from her home, driven by God knows what impulse, to walk in the starlight—there was no moon—along the banks of the canal. In the darkness, had she missed her footing and stepped into nothingness and the black water? The Coroner's Jury decided the question in the affirmative. They brought in a verdict of death by misadventure. And up to the date on which I begin this little Chronicle of Wellingsford, namely that of the summons to Wellings Park, when I heard of the

death of young Oswald Fenimore, that is all I knew of the matter.

Throughout July my friends were like dead people. There was nothing that could be said to them by way of consolation. The sun had gone out of their heaven. There was no light in the world. Having known Death as a familiar foe, and having fought against its terrors; having only by the grace of God been able to lift up a man's voice in my hour of awful bereavement, and cry, "O Death, where is thy sting, O Grave, thy Victory?" I could suffer with them and fear for their reason. They lived in a state of coma, unaware of life, performing, like automata, their daily tasks.

Then, in the early days of August, came the Trumpet of War, and they awakened. In my life have I seen nothing so marvellous. No broken spell of enchantment in an Arabian tale when dead warriors spring into life was ever more instant and complete. They arose in their full vigour; the colour came back to their cheeks and the purpose into their eyes. They laughed once more. Their days were filled with work and cheerfulness. In November Sir Anthony was elected Mayor. Being a practical, hard-headed little man, loved and respected by everybody, he drove a hitherto contentious Town Council into paths of high patriotism like a flock of sheep. And no less energy did Lady Fenimore exhibit in the sphere of her own activities.

A few days after the tidings came of Oswald's death, Sir Anthony was riding through the town and pulled up before Perkins' the fishmonger's. Perkins emerged from his shop and crossed the pavement.

"I hear you've had bad news."

"Yes, indeed, Sir Anthony."

"I'm sorry. He was a fine fellow. So was my boy. We're in the same boat, Perkins."

Perkins assented. "It sort of knocks one's life to bits, doesn't it?" said he. "We've nothing left."

"We have our country."

"Our country isn't our only son," said the other dully.

"No. She's our mother," said Sir Anthony.

"Isn't that a kind of abstraction?"

"Abstraction!" cried Sir Anthony, indignantly. "You must be imbibing the notions of that poisonous beast Gedge."

Gedge was a smug, socialistic, pacifist builder who did not hold with war—and with this one least of all, which he maintained was being waged for the exclusive benefit of the capitalist classes. In the eyes of the stalwarts of Wellingsford, he was a horrible fellow, capable of any stratagem or treason.

Perkins flushed. "I've always voted conservative, like my father before me, Sir Anthony, and like yourself I've given my boy to my country. I've no dealings with unpatriotic people like Gedge, as you know very well."

"Of course I do," cried Sir Anthony. "And that's why I ask you what the devil you mean by calling England an abstraction. For us, she's the only thing in the world. We're elderly chaps, you and I, Perkins, and the only thing we can do to help her is to keep our heads high. If people like you and me crumple up, the British Empire will crumple up."

"That's quite true," said Perkins.

Sir Anthony bent down and held out his hand.

"It's damned hard lines for us, and for the women. But we must keep our end up. It's doing our bit."

Perkins wrung his hand. "I wish to God," said he, "I was young enough—"

"By God! so do I!" said Sir Anthony.

This little conversation (which I afterwards verified) was reported to me by my arch-gossip, Sergeant Marigold.

"And I tell you what, sir," said he after the conclusion, "I'm of the same way of thinking and feeling."

"So am I."

"Besides, I'm not so old, sir. I'm only forty-two."

"The prime of life," said I.

"Then why won't they take me, sir?"

If there had been no age limit and no medical examination Marigold would have re-enlisted as John Smith, on the outbreak of war, without a moment's consideration of the position of his wife and myself. And Mrs. Marigold, a soldier's wife of twenty years' standing, would have taken it, just like myself, as a matter of course. But as he could not re-enlist, he pestered the War Office (just as I did) and I pestered for him to give him military employment. And all in vain.

"Why don't they take me, sir? When I see these fellows with three stripes on their arms, and looking at them and wondering at them as if they were struck three stripes by lightning, and calling themselves Sergeants and swanking about and letting their men waddle up to their gun like cows —and when I see them, as I've done with your eyes—watch one of their men pass by an officer in the street without saluting, and don't kick the blighter to—to—to barracks—it

fairly makes me sick. And I ask myself, sir, what I've done that I should be loafing here instead of serving my country."

"You've somehow mislaid an eye and a hand and gone and got a tin head. That's what you've done," said I. "And the War Office has a mark against you as a damned careless fellow."

"Tin head or no tin head," he grumbled, "I could teach those mother's darlings up there the difference between a battery of artillery and a skittle-ally."

"I believe you've mentioned the matter to them already," I observed softly.

Marigold met my eye for a second and then looked rather sheepish. I had heard of a certain wordy battle between him and a Territorial Sergeant whom he had set out to teach. Marigold encountered a cannonade of blasphemous profanity, new, up-to-date, scientific, against which the time-worn expletives in use during his service days were ineffectual. He was routed with heavy loss.

"This is a war of the young," I continued. "New men, new guns, new notions. Even a new language," I insinuated.

"I wish 'em joy of their language," said Marigold. Then seeing that I was mildly amusing myself at his expense, he asked me stiffly if there was anything more that he could do for me, and on my saying no, he replied "Thank you, sir," most correctly and left the room.

On the 3d of March Betty Fairfax came to tea.

Of all the young women of Wellingsford she was my particular favourite. She was so tall and straight, with a certain Rosalind boyishness about her that made for charm. I am not yet, thank goodness, one of the fossils who hold up

horror-stricken hands at the independent ways of the modern young woman. If it were not for those same independent ways the mighty work that English women are doing in this war would be left undone. Betty Fairfax was breezily independent. She had a little money of her own and lived, when it suited her, with a well-to-do and comfortable aunt. She was two and twenty. I shall try to tell you more about her, as I go on.

As I have said, and as my diary tells me, she came to tea on the 3d of March. She was looking particularly attractive that afternoon. Shaded lamps and the firelight of a cosy room, with all their soft shadows, give a touch of mysterious charm to a pretty girl. Her jacket had a high sort of Medici collar edged with fur, which set off her shapely throat. The hair below her hat was soft and brown. Her brows were wide, her eyes brown and steady, nose and lips sensitive. She had a way of throwing back her head and pointing her chin fearlessly, as though in perpetual declaration that she cared not a hang either for black-beetles or Germans. And she was straight as a dart, with the figure of a young Diana —Diana before she began to worry her head about beauty competitions. A kind of dark hat stuck at a considerable angle on her head gave her the prettiest little swaggering air in the world.... Well, there was I, a small, brown, withered, grizzled, elderly, mustachioed monkey, chained to my wheel-chair; there were the brave logs blazing up the wide chimney; there was the tea table on my right with its array of silver and old china; and there, on the other side of it, attending to my wants, sat as brave and sweet a type of young English womanhood as you could find throughout the

length and breadth of the land. Had I not been happy, I should have been an ungrateful dog.

We talked of the war, of local news, of the wounded at the hospital.

And here I must say that we are very proud of our Wellingsford Hospital. It is the largest and the wealthiest in the county. We owe it to the uneasy conscience of a Wellingsford man, a railway speculator in the forties, who, having robbed widows and orphans and, after trial at the Old Bailey, having escaped penal servitude by the skin of his teeth, died in the odour of sanctity, and the possessor of a colossal fortune in the year eighteen sixty-three. This worthy gentleman built the hospital and endowed it so generously that a wing of it has been turned into a military hospital with forty beds. I have the honour to serve on the Committee. Betty Fairfax entered as a Probationer early in September, and has worked there night and day ever since. That is why we chatted about the wounded. Having a day off, she had indulged in the luxury of pretty clothes. Of these I had duly expressed my admiration.

Tea over, she lit a cigarette for me and one for herself and drew her chair a trifle nearer the fire. After a little knitting of the brow, she said:—

"You haven't asked me why I invited myself to tea."

"I thought," said I, "it was for my beaux yeux."

"Not this time. I rather wanted you to be the first to receive a certain piece of information."

I glanced at her sharply. "You don't mean to say you're going to be married at last?"

In some astonishment she retorted:—

"How did you guess?"

"Holy simplicity!" said I. "You told me so yourself."

She laughed. Suddenly, on reflection, her face changed.

"Why did you say 'at last'?"

"Well—" said I, with a significant gesture.

She made a defiant announcement:—

"I am going to marry Willie Connor."

It was my turn to be astonished. "Captain Connor?" I echoed.

"Yes. What have you to say against him?"

"Nothing, my dear, nothing."

And I hadn't. He was an exemplary young fellow, a Captain in a Territorial regiment that had been in hard training in the neighbourhood since August. He was of decent family and upbringing, a barrister by profession, and a comely pink-faced boy with a fair moustache. He brought a letter or two of introduction, was billeted on Mrs. Fairfax, together with one of his subs, and was made welcome at various houses. Living under the same roof as Betty, it was natural that he should fall in love with her. But it was not at all natural that she should fall in love with him. She was not one of the kind that suffer fools gladly.... No; I had nothing against Willie Connor. He was merely a common-place, negative young man; patriotic, keen in his work, an excellent soldier, and, as far as I knew, of blameless life; but having met him two or three times in general company, I had found him a dull dog, a terribly dull dog,—the last man in the world for Betty Fairfax.

And then there was Leonard Boyce. I naturally had him in my head, when I used the words "at last."

"You don't seem very enthusiastic," said Betty.

"You've taken me by surprise," said I. "I'm not young enough to be familiar with these sudden jerks."

"You thought it was Major Boyce."

"I did, Betty. True, you've said nothing about it to me for ever so long, and when I have asked you for news of him your answers have shewed me that all was not well. But you've never told me, or anyone, that the engagement was broken off."

Her young face was set sternly as she looked into the fire.

"It's not broken off—in the formal sense. Leonard thought fit to let it dwindle, and it has dwindled until it has perished of inanition." She flashed round. "I'm not the sort to ask any man for explanations."

"Boyce went out with the first lot in August," I said. "He has had seven awful months. Mons and all the rest of it. You must excuse a man in the circumstances for not being aux petits soins des dames. And he seems to be doing magnificently—twice mentioned in dispatches."

"I know all that," she said. "I'm not a fool. But the war has nothing to do with it. It started a month before the war broke out. Don't let us talk of it."

She threw the end of her cigarette into the fire and lit a fresh one. I accepted the action as symbolical. I dismissed Boyce, and said:—

"And so you're engaged to Captain Connor?"

"More than that," she laughed. "I'm going to marry him. He's going out next week. It's idiotic to have an

engagement. So I'm going to marry him the day after to-morrow."

Now here was a piece of news, all flung at my head in a couple of minutes. The day after to-morrow! I asked for the reason of this disconcerting suddenness.

"He's going out next week."

"My dear," said I, "I have known you for a very long time—and I suppose it's because I'm such a very old friend that you've come to tell me all about it. So I can talk to you frankly. Have you considered the terrible chances of this war? Heaven knows what may happen. He may be killed."

"That's why I'm marrying him," she said.

There was a little pause. For the moment I had nothing to say, as I was busily searching for her point of view. Then, with pauses between each sentence, she went on:—

"He asked me two months ago, and again a month ago. I told him to put such ideas out of his head. Yesterday he told me they were off to the front and said what a wonderful help it would be to him if he could carry away some hope of my love. So I gave it to him."—She threw back her head and looked at me, with flushed cheeks. "The love, not the hope."

"I don't think it was right of him to press for an immediate marriage," said I, in a grandfatherly way—though God knows if I had been mad for a girl I should have done the same myself when I was young.

"He didn't" said Betty, coolly. "It was all my doing. I fixed it up there and then. Looked up Whitaker's Almanack for the necessary information, and sent him off to get a special license."

I nodded a non-committal head. It all seemed rather mad. Betty rose and from her graceful height gazed down on me.

"If you don't look more cheerful, Major, I shall cry. I've never done so yet, but I'm sure I've got it in me."

I stretched out my hand. She took it, and, still holding it, seated herself on a footstool close to my chair.

"There are such a lot of things that occur to me," I said. "Things that your poor mother, if she were alive, would be more fitted to touch on than myself."

"Such as—"

She knelt by me and gave me both her hands. It was a pretty way she had. She had begun it soon after her head overtopped mine in my eternal wheelbarrow. There was a little mockery in her eyes.

"Well—" said I. "You know what marriage means. There is the question of children."

She broke into frank laughter.

"My darling Majy—" That is the penalty one pays for admitting irresponsible modern young people into one's intimacy. They miscall one abominably. I thought she had outgrown this childish, though affectionate appellation of disrespect. "My darling Majy!" she said. "Children! How many do you think I'm going to have?"

I was taken aback. There was this pure, proud, laughing young face a foot away from me. I said in desperation:—

"You know very well what I mean, young woman. I want to put things clearly before you—" It is the most difficult thing in the world for a man—even without legs—to talk straight about the facts of life to a young girl. He has no

idea how much she knows about them and how much she doesn't. To tear away veils and reveal frightening starkness is an act from which he shrinks with all the modesty of a (perhaps) deluded sex. I took courage. "I want," I repeated, "to put things clearly before you. You are marrying this young man. You will have a week's married life. He goes away like a gallant fellow to fight for his country. He may be killed in the course of the next few weeks. Like a brave girl you've got to face it. In the course of time a child may be born—without a father to look after him. It's a terrific responsibility."

She knelt upright and put both her hands on my shoulders, almost embracing me, and the laughter died away from her eyes, giving place to something which awakened memories of what I had seen once or twice in the eyes of the dearest of all women. She put her face very close to mine and whispered:

"Don't you see, dear, it's in some sort of way because of that? Don't you think it would be awful for a strong, clean, brave English life like his to go out without leaving behind him someone to—well, you know what I mean—to carry on the same traditions—to be the same clean brave Englishman in the future?"

I smiled and nodded. Quite a different kind of nod from the previous one.

"Thousands of girls are doing it, you dear old Early Victorian, and aren't ashamed to say so to those who really love and can understand them. And you do love and understand, don't you?"

She set me off at arm's length, and held me with her bright unflinching eyes.

"I do, my dear," said I. "But there's only one thing that troubles me. Marriage is a lifelong business. Captain Connor may win through to a green old age. I hope to God the gallant fellow will. Your present motives are beautiful and heroic. But do you care for him sufficiently to pass a lifetime with him—after the war—an ordinary, commonplace lifetime?"

With the same clear gaze full on me she said:—

"Didn't I tell you that I had given him my love?"

"You did."

"Then," she retorted with a smile, "my dear Major Didymus, what more do you want?"

"Nothing, my dear Betty."

I kissed her. She threw her arms round my neck and kissed me again. Sergeant Marigold entered on the sentimental scene and preserved a face of wood. Betty rose to her feet slowly and serenely and smiled at Marigold.

"Miss Fairfax's car," he announced.

"Marigold," said I, "Miss Fairfax is going to be married the day after to-morrow to Captain Connor of the—"

"I know, sir," interrupted my one-eyed ramrod. "I'm very glad, if I may be permitted to say so, Miss. I've made it my duty to inspect all the troops that have been quartered hereabouts during the last eight months. And Captain Connor is one of the few that really know their business. I shouldn't at all mind to serve under him. I can't say more, Miss. I wish you happiness."