

CHAPTER XLI

THE British had marched into Mons one Sunday morning, had held it and all their line throughout the day at fearful odds, and in the heat of an August night—went back! Maubeuge—Landre-
cies—Le Cateau—St. Quentin. Retreat; turn and fight; and then again retreat! Now it would be the county regiments, now the Guards; and then the Scots or the Irish. Across the devastated harvest fields in the blazing August sunshine and the dusky heat of the nights went the field-grey tide. The countryside resounded to the boom of many guns. And every inch of the way was fought by the Old Army, which, in fighting, was dying and would soon be no more.

And while the remnants of the Old Army were marching through French villages, tired, bloodstained; companies where there had been battalions, battalions where there had been brigades, the New Army was being formed in Britain.

*“ We don't want to lose you,
But we think you ought to go,
For your King and your Country,
Both need you so——”*

“ I am going,” said Antony Woden, “ and I am going now. I am not going to wait for the flapper press-gangs with their white feathers.”

John nodded. “ I cannot say a word to dissuade you. Were I young enough I should go myself. I have been in

two campaigns, in both of which my military careers were extraordinarily brief. I hope, Antony, that yours will be the same."

"You think this war will be over by Christmas?"

"I daresay it will, but I do not know which Christmas."

Antony laughed. He was young and strong, being but thirty-one, and the excitement of war was in his blood.

"You are five years younger than I was at Gettysburg—a very young man. Antony, will there never be any other girl—another mother for Poppy?"

Antony shook his head. "I can never forget her."

"I can never forget Angeline," said John. "It is over twenty years since she went from me, Antony, but I always remember my wife. But, Antony, there were others. Always others. Lucy——"

"Lucy?"

"You never heard of her, my boy. Never heard of my Lucy. Some day I may tell you of her. And now Diane. It is not good for man to live alone."

Antony shook his head and went to war, and John took seven-year-old Poppy down to Woden, where she was in the tender care of Diane of New Orleans.

It was a splendid summer. Down in Suffolk there were peaceful woods and green fields and clear little streams which wandered under the alders. A few score miles away men were fighting and dying, the wounded were filling the ambulance trains, and burning buildings flared red to the night skies. Whilst queues lined up at the recruiting offices in London, Paris waited in apprehension of the advancing German tide.

The French Government had gone to Bordeaux and the British Base to St. Nazaire.

*"Now all the youth of England are on fire,
And silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies."*

"Left—right; left—right—about tarn! You, No. 3 in

the rear rank, wot the 'ell do you think you're doing? Wot's yer name?"

"Woden, sergeant."

"Remember you're supposed to be a soldier and not a bundle o' washing. Squad—shun! Form—wait for it. Pace to the rear with the left foot, an' a pace to the right with the right foot, an'—well, we'll try it again. Form—fours!"

So the monotonous game went on. The country was plastered with recruiting posters.

"LORD KITCHENER WANTS 100,000 MEN."

"IS YOUR BEST BOY IN KHAKI?"

London and all the cities pulled down their blinds and dimmed their lights by night.

Away on the other side of the Channel the Old Army fought on. Ragged, desperately tired, sleeping almost as they marched, they still kept an unbroken line. Many thousands upon thousands fell during the Retreat from Mons. Almost ten thousand more of the 7th Division alone went down at Ypres in October. But now the reinforcements were pouring into France and Flanders; clerks, artisans, gentlemen of leisure, peer and commoner, rich and poor, were filling up the gaps in the line. As the Old Army died, the New Army was waxing strong.

It was March 1915 that Private Antony Woden went into action in time for the Second Battle of Ypres, and the first of the chlorine gas.

The rush of events had pleased for he was new to war. The weary monotony of training was over; now the Real Thing was to come.

An old Clyde pleasure steamer took him and others over the Channel, from Southampton right past the city of Havre gleaming in the morning sunlight, up the Seine to Rouen.

That long march up to the camp tired him, and he was

glad to rest after tea, in the cool pine woods at the back of the tents. Then there came a chill in the March night, and he wandered back to the light and warmth of the Y.M.C.A. canteen, where he commenced to write letters to Poppy, and his grandfather.

It was rather soul-stirring to be able to put "*On Active Service*" on the outside of your envelope. . . .

Dear Poppy,

Be a good girl and pray for Daddy and do all that grandpa tells you. . . .

Dear Grandpater,

Came across the Channel without being sick, and I think we go up the line next week. Hope the Censor doesn't cut this out. Rouen seems a fine town. . . .

"Yes," thought John, reading it. "It is. I was there once. I wonder if those *maisons tolérées* are still there in the street between the Cathedral and the river?"

Yes; they were still there. It was a very dark street now, and a military picket paced up and down it. Between its pacings, old women stood at the doors and beckoned curious troops to the delights within.

"The red lamps?" asked Diane of New Orleans.

"Yes, Diane, the red lamps. But Antony will have nothing to do with those; he is not that sort."

"He does not take after his good grandfather?"

"Diane, at my time of life there are a lot of things I should forget. You must not remind me. . . Now, see Poppy to bed and before you go pour me out a drink. I am thankful I am not too old to drink brandy."

"It is a good brandy; the Normandin '75."

"A splendid brandy, Diane." He read the rest of the letter.

"I hope he will come back to me," he murmured. "He

is my only heir male—it is true the title would descend to Poppy, but I want Antony to succeed me.”

Then there came a letter saying that Antony had been made a lance-corporal.

“Diane, Diane, have we any left of the Napoleon brandy?”

“Two bottles,” said Diane of New Orleans. “We were to keep those for some special occasion.”

“Open one, for it has arrived. A good lad, Antony. We must get him a commission, Diane. I must see the War Office about it immediately.”

“When will daddy come home?” asked Poppy.

“Soon, I hope, Poppy—very soon.”

A reserve trench, somewhere in Flanders. A grey sky, mud and rain and the eternal boom of guns.

“Antony, isn’t this hell?”

“Might be worse, Tom,” said Antony Woden. He wrapped his khaki overcoat more tightly round him. As he moved the gathering rainwater squelched through the slats of the duckboards.—Round the corner of the next traverse lay a still figure under a groundsheet—Yes, it might be worse.

“When I joined up, I thought it was fine to be a soldier; that nothing could be worse than the drudgery of the office, but now——”

“Got to take things as we find them, old man. You wouldn’t care to be in that office now, knowing that others were out here. Have a cigarette? I’ve a spare Woodbine.”

“Thanks, Antony. I’m the devil of a discontented fellow, I know. It does me good to hear you talk. When I think of it, I haven’t given up much in comparison to you. You’ll be a peer of the realm some day, and I——”

“We are only two Tommies here,” Antony reminded him, gently.

"Rummy thing, war, isn't it? We shouldn't know each other in peacetime; we live in different worlds."

"I am not going to drop you when this bally war is over, Tom, so don't think it. Don't be so self-conscious, old chap. My dear old grandpater started life in a chemist's shop, with very little beyond his pluck and enterprise."

"I wish mine had been that sort," sighed Tom, "between ourselves, Antony, he wasn't, well—I don't know much concerning him, but what I do isn't anything to write home about. I know he left his wife stranded in Melbourne with a young son—my father. Believe the police were after him. Anyway, he was never heard of again."

"So you are an Australian?"

"No, my father came to England, and I was born here. Now, both my people are dead, and I am of a higher social standing than I have hitherto attained—like yourself, a full-blown lance-corporal."

Antony laughed, and clapped the other on the back. "The only way is to keep smiling," he said, cheerfully.

A rousing chorus came from a neighbouring dugout.

• "*Mademoiselle from Armentieres, parley-voo,*
Mademoiselle from Armentieres, parley-voo.
She hasn't been kissed for twenty years—"

• There was a loud shriek in the air, and a fountain of earth shot to the sky at the back of the trench.

"There, now, you ruddy fool, see wot you're doing. Attracting the blinkin' shell-fire."

The singer pointed out in unprintable language that the German gunner was miles away and that his critic was getting the wind up. He recommenced.

"It's the fight spirit," agreed Tom, "Antony, old fellow, your cheerfulness is as good as a tonic."

"It is the only possible way to get through things. The Germans do the same. You remember when we crept over

to their wire the other night, and heard them singing
'Püppchen!'

*"Püppchen, Du bist mein Augensterne
Püppchen, ich hab' Dich, ah! so gern
Püppchen, mein liebes Püppchen—"*

"I forget the rest. . . Listen to old Ginger behind,
bursting his lungs."

"She's a cousin of mine—"

"Now, then, that's enough of that." A sergeant came round the traverse. "Cookhouse fatigue, you. Get a move on. . . . Corporal Woden, the C.O. wants to see you in his dug-out. 'Bout your commission, I expect. Blessed if I know what the Army's coming to."

For the sergeant wore the ribbons of the King's and Queen's South African medals, and regarded the New Army with suspicion, and promotion from the ranks to the Sam Browne belt with grave concern.

That night the company went into the front line. . . . Verey lights, and the *rat-tat-tat* of machine guns—the dull sounds of the mallets of wiring parties—spasmodic rifle fire—in one word, War. Then in the morning, in the first flush of light, down came the German *barrage*, and their troops rushed to the attack.