

TO SLAY AND TO SPARE

The Bank Couldn't Carry Both the Man from Brunton and the Man from Shapworth

By MAX RITTENBERG

ON a distant continent, six thousand miles away across the seas, two giant-cubs of nations were battling for mastery.

The Great Powers held severely aloof. The lesson of the Balkan blaze had been branded into them. Each would have liked to grab at the spoils of victory, but dared not. They trumpeted their neutrality, proclaiming, "See how nobly impartial are we." Yet, such is the interwoven web of life on this planet, the misery of war eddied out to the continent of Europe, breaking the lives of men and women who had no say and no sentiment in the struggle. The reverberation was named a Trade Crisis, and its tale of slaughter in a score of districts living by manufacture and exporting their products to the two young nations was recorded in the news columns of the papers side by side with the lurid sensations of war.

This story tells of one small eddy.

IN the entrails of England's manufacturing area are two towns four miles apart centre to centre, joined like Siamese twins by connective tissue of textile mills, each with its feudal group of squat, harsh, grey-stone operatives' cottages and petty shops, mission halls and cinema shows. Only a borough official could specify where Brunton ends and Shapworth begins. Their life-blood flows in common. They manufacture the same class of textile goods, and they are dependent on the same world-factors of commerce. The war in South America was forcing the mills of both towns to cut down running-time, dismiss operatives, pare profits to the quick, and clench tight on all running channels of trade. Rumours of pending failures hung like the miasma of grey smoke over the hideous spawn of factory cottage-barracks and blowsy shops.

Brunton and Shapworth glory in a meaningless rivalry. They exult over adding a thousand more stunted souls to their respective tale of population; over football triumphs; over the tax-rate; over climate even, claiming for each that the polluted air is sweeter, the grimed sunshine more abundant. To the native, there is something of majesty in the mere name of Brunton or of Shapworth.

Sir James Langley, chairman of the Brunton and Shapworth Bank, had been summoned from London to decide a question that mattered vitally to the twin towns. Two of the largest mills were deep in the financial quagmire; the bank had called in its loans; they could not meet the obligations; one mill must be closed out, or both, and it was his duty by the shareholders of the bank to slay or to spare, according to the cold dictates of commercial expediency, and regardless of the misery it would entail on the thousands of operatives, clerks and petty traders whose livelihood depended on the running of the two mills.

Sir James was not in himself a hard man. His family knew him as a good husband, and an indulgent father. Charitable organizations classed him in their private lists amongst the "fair to liberal." Nor was he a man of narrow outlook. He divided control in several large business undertakings, and was known by his colleagues as far-seeing and broad-minded. His duty to-day was a painful one; but he knew that the origin of it did not lie with himself—the cause was across the seas, six thousand miles away.

Rhead, general manager of the Bank, met him in the early afternoon at the Brunton station, and sped him in a car to the private offices.

"I have arranged for Owtram and Glenn to call on

you this evening, at nine and ten respectively, in case you would want to get personal statements from them," said the manager.

"Good."

"If that time is not convenient for you—"

"Quite convenient. I shall catch the midnight back to London. Have a sleeping-berth reserved for me."

"The papers relative to their affairs are all prepared for your inspection. They make a bad showing, Sir James. We ought perhaps to have gripped the situation earlier, but everyone here was confident that there would be no war—"

"We all breed



FERGUS KYLE

"Great Victory! Ten thousand killed!"

thoughts from wishes."

"—and closing out the mills would mean a great blow to the district—winter is coming on—I have to live here."

There was a whole volume of meaning compressed into those two last simple statements.

SIR JAMES nodded a sober understanding, and answered generously: "The responsibility will be entirely mine. You can let that be known."

In the fashion of the North, no open word of thanks was made, but the manager's relief was manifest in his features. It would not be pleasant to have to live amongst ruined mill-owners and starving operatives, who might accuse him of bringing about their misery. For Sir James, residing in London, the matter was on a different footing—the footing of cold, impersonal commercialism. His decision once made, he could return to his home and shut his ears to the human consequences.

Several hours were spent in a concentrated examination of the papers prepared by the general manager relative to the affairs of John Owtram and Son, the Owtram Mill, Brunton, and David Glenn & Co., the Brookside Mill, Shapworth.

At length the Chairman straightened himself wearily. "Both ought to go," he said.

Rhead caught at the conditional "Ought to go—yes, in strict business. But that would hit the towns very hard. And winter coming on—if you could spare one of them? The war can't last for ever. Too fierce to last long. Afterwards—"

"Spare which?"

"Glenn, I think."

"Why?"

"Well, I'm a Shapworth man myself."

"No other reason?"

"He's a decent fellow."

"And Owtram?"

"I've nothing particular against Owtram. He's hard, of course, but a man of his word. And he's done a good deal for his workpeople—the Owtram model village and all that."

"Drive me round to the two mills."

"Shall I telephone to say you're coming?"

"No—I shall not go inside."

The manager called for his car, and in the grey of the late afternoon they drove through the twin towns. Opposite the bank premises was the Brunton Town Hall, a gloomy building, almost dead-black with accumulation of soot. Corinthian in its formal design, but entirely lacking in the Greek gracefulness, as though the atmosphere of commercialism had coarsened it and killed the spirit of the original thought. At the base of the building were two marble lions recently washed white, and looking by contrast almost ridiculously meek.

The mercantile centre of the town, gloomy but substantial, was quickly left behind, and they were in the region of the factories, and rows of mean dwellings, hopelessly alike, and criss-crossing railway lines, thrusting out tentacles of track to grasp the trade of works and coal-yards. The street humped over a narrow canal of dead water, greasy, iridescent water, flanked by a vista of square-cut chunks of factory-buildings with innumerable windows, some yellow with lights, others black and lifeless.

Rhead pointed along the vista. "Two years ago there were lights in every window, and smoke from every chimney," he said.

"Boom-time and slump," commented the Chairman. "Why don't men learn the lessons of the past?"

THE street became a road bordered by oddments of fields with dispirited grass and better class dwellings struggling bravely to rear gardens in the atmosphere of miasma. Presently a huge-squared building loomed through the twilight grey, its two monster chimneys striking strangely enough, the one note of artistry in the splayed hideousness of the pilgrimage. Sir James had the car slowed to a walking pace.

"The Owtram model village?" he asked.

"Just beyond the mill."

They ascended a slight incline into a region of grey-stone, grey-tiled cottages, flank to flank in row after row, their square fronts flush to the pavement, each with its two steps leading to the entrance door, and its one parlour window on the ground-floor half filled with geranium or sombre aspidistra. These villas were cleaner than the workmen's dwellings in the more central part of the town, but otherwise there was little to distinguish them.

"Why call it a model village?" asked Sir James.

"It's well regulated. Owtram has a long set of rules for the tenants, and keeps them strictly in line . . . And that's the Helen Owtram memorial hall, built in memory of his wife."

The hall was conceived by the same mind that had designed the cottages. It was plain, substantial, hopelessly uninspired and uninspiring.

"Drive on," said Sir James.

The road plunged into brief country, and then quickly reverted to a narrow, high street of another manufacturing village. And so they passed, by this connective tissue of mill and workmen's cottages and petty shops, into the twin town of Shapworth.

"That's Brookside Mill," pointed out Rhead.

Another huge prison-house loomed out of the mist. Around it were rows of huddled cottages, this time in red brick, red-tiled.

"A shade less hopeless," mused Sir James.

"There's the recreation park. Glenn started the idea, and raised subscriptions for it."

The dark trees of the park were silently shedding their leaves to a sluggish, tired breeze.

A factory hooter boomed out the note of evening release, and a moment later, it seemed, a scurrying crowd of men and women were gorging the streets, the noise of their clogs waking a myriad echoes.

"All those," said Rhead. "And the winter coming on!"

Sir James' mouth was a straight line. He gave no answer.

The two men dined soberly at the house of the manager and his wife. No word of business passed during the meal. Afterwards they smoked in silence, and returned by car to the shuttered bank premises at Brunton.

"I will see the two men alone," said Sir James. (Concluded on P. 16.)



David Glenn, of Shapworth.



John Owtram, of Brunton.