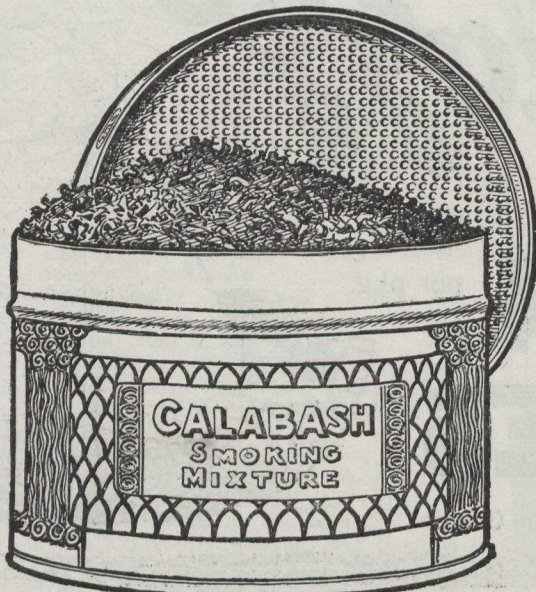


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she ceased to ply her needle, and stared, like her husband, into the fire. They were both dressed in deep mourning.

"Any news?" she asked, after a long silence.

"No, Edith," the Colonel replied, fiercely. "How could there be any news? Haven't we given up hoping for news?"

"I meant—in the paper, Dick?"

"News in the paper? Yes, yes, of course there is news—horrible, incredible news. Didn't I tell you after breakfast?"

"Perhaps, dear," sighed Mrs. Endermine. "If so, it has gone out of my mind."

"Gone out of your mind? Impossible, Edith. Didn't I tell you that the French fleet has been broken up in the Mediterranean, that it has been smashed by the Germans, pulverized, half of it sent to the bottom, the other half crippled and helpless; that the German army is within fifty miles of Paris, that Austria and Italy have thrown in their lot with Germany?"

"No, dear," she answered, quietly, as though all this news were merely the account of a murder or a railway accident. "But if I remember rightly I haven't seen you since breakfast, and your paper did not come till ten o'clock. What will all this mean to us—to England?"

"It will mean," said the Colonel, rising to his feet, and knocking out the ashes of his pipe on the top bar of the grate, "that England will have to fight for her very existence."

Mrs. Endermine picked up her work and continued to embroider a white cross on the violet silk of the stole. Her pale, delicate face and slender, dark-robed figure was a picture of great and patient grief. She had aged very much during the past few months, and there was more grey now among the gold of her hair. Her husband was outwardly unchanged, but he had not been so irritable since he had lost his daughter. In fact, he was at times strangely quiet and gentle for a man of a choleric temperament.

It was now the middle of March, and the New Year had been ushered in by the outbreak of a war which in a few weeks had set all Europe ablaze. Germany had attacked France on some trivial pretext, and for some reason or other Russia had joined forces with Germany. England had come to the assistance of her old enemy and new friend, and now Austria and Italy had joined in the fray. It was England and France against practically the whole of the rest of the Continent.

And now France was being slowly crushed in the iron fist of her most hated foe. England's minute army, a mere handful of men in comparison to the great forces of Russia and Germany, was powerless to give any assistance on land. She had not even been able to save the French Fleet in the Mediterranean. It seemed likely that England would now have to fight, not to save France, but to save herself, that she would have to fight, as Colonel Endermine had said, for her very existence.

But darker than the shadow of a terrible war lay the shadow of a personal loss on the household in Easternhoe. Both the Colonel and his wife were thinking of Joan as they stared at the fire. The clash of arms was still distant, the smoke of battle invisible, but here by the fireside there was an empty seat which they both could see.

"It all depends on our Navy now," the Colonel continued, after a long silence. "The aeroplanes have proved practically useless. We have still the finest fleet in the world, the best sailors, the best shooting. But we haven't quite kept up the two-Power standard, and now that France has met with terrible disaster—"

He paused and looked at the footman, who was crossing the room with a letter on a salver.

"The post is late," he said, taking the letter. Then he stared at the hand-writing as though he had seen a ghost, and the colour slowly ebbed from his red face.

(To be continued.)

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