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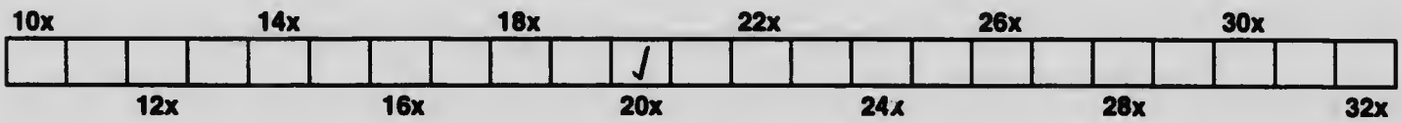

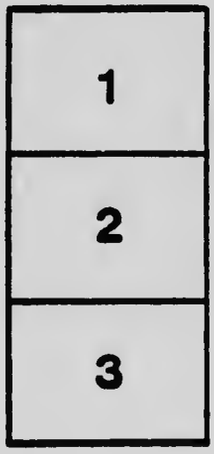

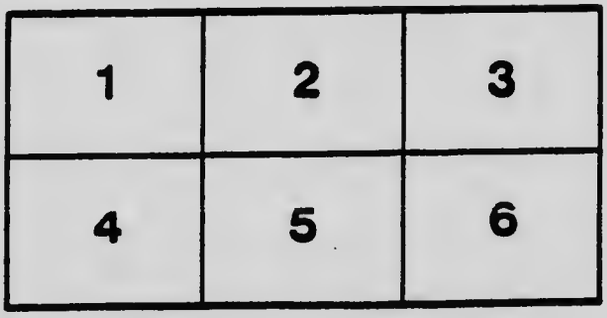

THE GIRL HE LEFT BEHIND

"I leave you, Miss Clayton, to keep things straight here!"

(See page 138)

THE GIRL HE LEFT BEHIND

BY

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The "Janice Day" Books

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TORONTO

McCLELLAND, GOODCHILD AND STEWART
LIMITED

1918

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

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CHAPTER I

"SO PERFECTLY CAPABLE"

ETHEL CLAYTON gathered the several letters with their accompanying checks in a neat sheaf and rose from her desk, which was placed nearest the door of the manager's office. With the papers in her left hand she went to the door on which was stenciled "Mr. Barton" and opened it without waiting for a reply to her knock. She knew only Jim Mayberry was in the room with the manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company.

As she pushed the door inward she heard Frank Barton saying:

"I am puzzled what answer to make them, Jim."

The manager was at his desk. Mayberry, leaning back in his chair, nodded understandingly and in agreement. The general manager was not in the habit of taking the superintendent of the factory into his confidence in particular instances and Mayberry was alive to that fact. He listened. Listening, and keeping one's mouth shut, never hurt a man yet.

The girl at the door of the office waited, too. Her business with the manager was important, if not imperative.

"The Bogata people have been good customers of ours in the past," went on Barton, reflectively. "But I have inside information that their credit is wabbly. It is strained, just as ours has been. If we tied up twenty to thirty thousand dollars in their particular line of goods, and then had the goods left on our hands, it might be fatal to the Hapwood-Diller Company, even now.

"The expansion of mercantile values and the increase in profits have not struck our kind of production, as you very well know, Jim. Our stock is not listed among the 'war brides.' Rather it might better be termed a 'war widow.' The company has had a hard pull, Jim. We can't afford to take many chances."

Again the superintendent sat tight and merely nodded. The declining sun delivered slanting rays in through the high windows of the general manager's office. The two men—neither of whom had arrived at thirty years—sat with preternaturally grave faces, one ruminating upon the event that had unexpectedly arisen in the affairs of the concern they had both worked for since boyhood; the other possibly giving much more thought to his own personal matters.

For Jim Mayberry, without being in the least neglectful of his duties as superintendent of the factory, was a person given much to the contemplation of what he called "the prime law of nature: Looking out for Number One." He did, however, suggest:

"Those Bogata people have been all right folks, Frank. The factory's made money on their orders."

"That's just it," the manager returned briskly, but with a gesture that betrayed his indecision.

He was a tall, black-haired, virile fellow, clean shaven, good color in his cheeks, and impeccably dressed. Mayberry, in contrast, had light hair which already he plastered across his crown to hide an incipient bald spot. He wore a small blond moustache and had numerous wrinkles about his eyes.

"Just the same it is not safe, I firmly believe, to accept the order. But a brusk refusal might do the Hapwood-Diller Company untold harm at some future time. The Bogata concern may come back. Miracles do happen."

Better accept the order then," Mayberry put in. "We can postpone filling it. We don't have to give a bond. If they really prove to be shaky, we can renege."

The girl, who had come in and softly closed the door, flashed the superintendent a glance that was all scorn for business ethics thus expressed. But Barton replied quite calmly:

"Two objections to that, Jim. In the first place the Hapwood-Diller Company has always based its policy on honor. Secondly, it is unwise for us to tie up any money at all in beginning a job we do not intend to complete."

"Aw!" grunted the superintendent. His vocabulary—at this juncture at least—seemed not to be extensive.

There had been a rising murmur in the street under the open windows for some minutes. Now the sudden crash of martial music broke upon their ears. Barton's countenance became vivid with interest, and he swung himself erect and strode to the nearest window.

"Here come the boys," he said, pride vibrating in his voice. He was very military looking. Nothing but the "setting up exercise" could ever have made his shoulders so very square and his splendidly muscled torso taper to so narrow a waist.

Mayberry rose and sauntered after him. "Mailsburg's heroes," he observed. "I suppose you're wishing you were marching away with them, Frank."

The other said nothing, but his eyes glowed. The marching column swung around the corner following the band—a column in khaki, a color already becoming familiar on the streets although war was not many months old.

Ethel had gone to the other window and was likewise looking out upon the quota of the National Guard, with packs and rifles, on their way to the railroad station. A little group of women, girls and children clung to the column and kept pace with it. The men spectators seemed rather ashamed to follow on, but stood, nevertheless, on the curb to watch the boys go by.

"I expect they'll have a hot old time down at that training camp," drawled Mayberry.

Barton did not seem to hear him. His hand came to salute as the colors went by.

A volume of voices rose from below as the band music drifted into the distance.

"And mebbe marching to their graves!"

"It's a shame that some that can least be spared have to go while them that would never be missed keep out of it."

"You're right! Some of 'em's got fathers an' mothers, an' wives!" cried a shrill voice, "while them that ain't got a soul dependent on 'em——"

"There's one yonder," was the quick rejoinder. "And had all the benefit of Guard training too!" And the speaker, a woman, directed the gaze of her companions to the office window.

Mayberry chuckled. "They've pinned you to the wall, Frank," he murmured in the ear of the white-faced manager.

Ethel Clayton had turned suddenly from the window. "Have you time to sign these checks and letters before the outgoing mail, Mr. Barton?" she asked.

He took the papers, but did not verbally reply for a moment. His countenance had become calm again, if still pale, when he had seated himself in his chair and turned in it so that the others could both observe him.

"I will sign them at once, Miss Clayton," Barton said quite composedly. "But first——"

For a moment his gaze centered upon her. There was something wholly good to look at in the girl's face and figure. Had she not dressed so practically for her work her personal attractions would have been further enhanced. Mayberry was watching her, too; and his gaze betrayed a certain eagerness, whereas the manager's eyes merely revealed expectancy. Then he flicked a glance in Mayberry's direction.

"Perhaps Miss Clayton might give us a word of advice upon this matter, Jim?" he said questioningly, and with a quizzical little smile.

The superintendent, a little startled, shifted his gaze from the girl's face to the manager's countenance. Ethel, perfectly composed, waited for the explanation of Barton's observation.

"Woman's intuition forever!" the latter ejaculated.

"What do you mean, Frank?" hastily demanded Jim Mayberry. "If you and I don't know what to do——"

Ethel flushed faintly, but looked questioningly at the manager. The implied doubt of her ability in Mayberry's tone possibly piqued her. Frank Barton said in his good-natured, easy manner:

"Oh, we know *what* to do. But it's the way the thing is done. You know about this new Bogata order, Miss Clayton?"

"Of course, Mr. Barton."

"I do not see how we can accept it The Bogata Company is not in good financial standing. But we must not offend them. The refusal must be one to which they can not take exception. It is a big order, and they have sent it in without question, just as though they expected us to get to work on it with merely an acknowledgment of the favor."

"I see," the girl said in her composed way.

"You are so perfectly capable, Miss Clayton," laughed the general manager. "See what you can do with the matter. Do you think we can keep within the lines of safety, and yet make no enemy of the Bogata people?"

"I believe it can be done, Mr. Barton," replied the girl.

There was a decision in her manner of speaking that revealed Ethel Clayton as being quite what the general manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company had said she was—"capable."

"See what you can do with a letter, then," Barton went on, producing the order sheets in question and handing them to her along with the letters and checks he had signed.

She left the private office without further word. Jim Mayberry was frowning.

"You're trusting a good deal to that girl, Frank," he growled.

"I've never trusted anything to her yet that she hasn't handled all right," the manager replied easily.

"If I manage to—to get away, Jim, you'll find her a great help here."

"Uh-huh!" grunted the superintendent. Maybe."

"You are insular," laughed Frank Barton. "The women are forging to the front, man. Miss Clayton is far more capable than some of the heads of departments who have grown gray here."

"Maybe," agreed the superintendent. "But I don't want to see her out there in overalls, bossing my men around. Don't forget that, Frank."

The superintendent arose and strolled out of the private office. In the larger desk room he halted and watched the "capable" girl at her desk nearest the manager's door. Ethel was the "buffer" between much outside annoyance and the general manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company.

There were gold and red lights in her chestnut hair; the pallor of her countenance was not unhealthy; merely she was not enough in the open. But where the sun had kissed the bridge of her nose there was a sprinkle of tiny freckles. There were flecks of gold, too, in her brown eyes. Her mouth and chin were firm rather than soft, and the gaze of her eyes direct; nevertheless there was nothing unfeminine about her appearance.

The severest critic could hold no brief against the charms of her figure. Her arms were beautifully rounded, her wrists tapering, her hands just the right size. She had a naturally small waist, and the lines

of her hips showed that her limbs were slenderly yet strongly built. She was a tall girl.

The superintendent caught her eye after a moment, she looking up thoughtfully from the papers before her.

"You want to handle that business with gloves, Ethel," he advised in a low voice. "Barton's hardly himself to-day—the boys going away and all. He thinks that, with three years' experience in bossing those sappies around the armory, he should jump right into this war. Get to be a general or something right off the handle," and he chuckled.

Again the girl's face flushed softly and she dropped her gaze. She made him no reply at all, but Mayberry went on:

"And that Fuller girl's got him running around in circles, too. You can see he isn't himself, or he would not balk at such an order as this from the Bogata people. Why, they're all right folks. The factory's made a lot of money out of their orders. And here——"

"Did Mr. Barton ask you to discuss this matter with me, Mr. Mayberry?" asked the girl coldly and without looking up again. "If not, please remember that he has commissioned me to write a letter to them that will meet his approval. Don't bother me now."

"Oh, pshaw, Ethel!" the man said, smiling down at her unctuously. "Don't take every little thing so blame seriously. Frank Barton and I were kids to-

gether. I can't fall down and worship him the way some of you do. Anyway, you'd better show him how to take a chance with these Bogata people—if you really want to *help*. I know they're all right."

"Why don't you tell that to Mr. Barton?" the girl asked rather tartly

"Oh, pshaw!" chuckled the superintendent. "Let it go till to-morrow. It's almost closing time, anyway. Take a little spin in that car of mine before supper, will you?"

"Thank you; no."

"Aw! don't act so offishly, Ethel. You've never been to ride with me yet."

"I understand that other girls have—to their sorrow," Miss Clayton responded in a tone that cut through even Jim Mayberry's skin. He flushed dully and his lazy eyes began to glow.

"Don't believe everything you hear, Ethel," he said. "I want to talk to you about that. Let me drive you home to-night and I'll explain these stories that you have heard.

He strolled away as Little Skinner came across the room to ask a question. Could it be that Little Skinner had received a secret signal to break in upon the superintendent's objectionable line of conversation? At least, her business with Ethel was brief.

The latter's attention immediately returned to the problem the manager had put up to her for solution. She was made proud whenever Frank Barton did any-

thing like this, and of late it was not infrequent that he had shown his trust in her ability.

Yet there was a sting in the way he had spoken, too. She knew well enough that the sting was unintentional on his part. Never had the general manager been other than scrupulously polite to her. She was always "Miss Clayton" to him, and he deferred to her in many ways and was as courteous in his busiest moments as he could have been meeting her at a social affair. That was Frank Barton's way.

But—

She found that her gaze had wandered from the papers before her to the small mirror set into the rather ornate inkstand that stood upon her desk—a birthday present from her office mates not many months before. The girl reflected there was, Ethel Clayton very well knew, better looking than the average girl. Her even features were quietly beautiful. She perhaps lacked the verve and dash possessed by some girls. She had one particular girl in mind as she thought this. She lacked the tricks of the social trade too, that that same girl possessed.

She shrugged her shoulders and brought her attention back with a jerk to the matter in hand. But there was faint disgust in her tone as she murmured:

"Yes, just as he says: 'Miss Clayton is so perfectly capable.' Pah!"

CHAPTER II

A COMPARISON

SHE read the letter from the Bogata Company and again glanced through the order. It was a large one. It called for certain supplies she knew the factory did not have on hand. She realized that the goods ordered were all of a special pattern and would be practically useless either to the Hapwood-Diller Company or to any other concern save the Bogata people if the latter should be unable to take the goods.

Yet this letter assumed that the order would be accepted and the goods turned out without any hesitancy on the part of the manufacturers, and upon the usual terms. The Bogata Company ignored the possibility of the Hapwood-Diller Company having heard of its financial embarrassments. The letter and accompanying order were sent, Ethel was sure, in a spirit of bravado. To use a common phrase, the Bogata people were "trying to put something over."

If the scheme went through, all well and good. The Hapwood-Diller Company might be made the means of saving the Bogata people from actual and complete collapse. Ethel knew, however, that her employing concern was in no shape to assume such a burden. Yet if the firm ordering the goods finally

pulled out of its quagmire of financial difficulty, its friendship rather than its enmity was to be desired.

Her mind centered upon the matter, the logical circumstances connected with it marching in slow procession through her brain. She was acquainted with every important order now on the factory's books. Even Jim Mayberry had no better grasp of the details of the factory's affairs than Ethel Clayton.

Suddenly she got up and went to a file cabinet wherein was listed the particulars of all orders as yet unfinished. She began to figure with pencil and pad upon the already promised output of the factory and its possible output when the force was driven at top speed.

Her calculations led her to certain unmistakable conclusions. She went back to her desk, calmly wrote the letter, typed it, and took the letter and her figures in to Barton. He was about to close his desk for the day.

"Do you think you have succeeded?" he asked, smiling and taking the typed sheet from her hand. But in a moment he glanced up quickly and with a slight frown. "What is this you say here, Miss Clayton? We cannot accept the order because of work already contracted for? Why, that——"

"Is the plain truth, Mr. Barton!" she exclaimed, putting forward her array of figures. "The factory is now working maximum hours and with a full crew in all departments. I have heard you say yourself

that either extra help or overtime cuts into the profits rather than increases them. To fulfill contracts we have accepted, if you took on this of the Bogata Company, we would have to run the machines longer hours and pay extra wages. The Bogata people offer no price for their work to cover such an increased cost. My letter embodies the actual truth without going into particulars; but my statements can be easily proved if they are inclined to be critical."

Barton's face had been gradually lighting up, and it was with real admiration that he said at her conclusion:

"Fine! I'll sign that and you can put it in the mail in the morning. Has John gone to the post-office?"

"Yes, Mr. Barton."

"The morning will do," said the general manager, affixing his signature to the letter. "You certainly are a capable assistant."

She flushed at his words as she turned from his desk; and the color remained in her countenance for some time. But it was not a flush of pleasure. Indeed, the expression of her countenance was not at all happy as she closed her desk and left the main office a little later.

At the street exit she hesitated; then she went back through the drying and cutting rooms and had John Murphy let her out of the side gate which would not be opened for an hour yet for the exit of the factory

hands. She had caught a glimpse of Jim Mayberry sitting in his car out in front.

She did not like the superintendent, and for more reasons than one. In the first place, he was one of those men who seem to have no respect at all for girls who worked. Ethel was not sure how well he was received by Mailsburg people whose first thoughts were of society. But Mayberry had a bad reputation among many respectable people. Careful mothers and fathers frowned on his attentions to their daughters.

As she turned into Burnaby Street on her way home she saw Frank Barton ahead of her. His military stride was likewise taking him briskly homeward. The girl might have hastened her own steps and joined him; but she hesitated, for that was not like Ethel Clayton. Her association with the handsome general manager of the Hapwood-Diller Manufacturing Company had been entirely on a business footing. The fact that they attended the same church had scarcely brought them together outside the offices of the concern.

Barton was well liked by most Mailsburg people. Especially had he been commended for his work of the last two years—since he had been raised to the pinnacle of general manager of the biggest manufacturing concern in the town.

Yet there are always carping critics in every place and in any event. As mark the criticism hurled at

the young manager from the sidewalk that afternoon as the boys were marching from the National Guard Armory to the railway station.

Ethel knew that the suggestion that Barton was a slacker must have hurt the general manager cruelly. She, perhaps as well as anybody else, knew why Frank Barton, trained in the Guard, and a military man from choice, was not marching away with this first quota at the call to arms.

If many Mailsburg people looked at Barton in the way suggested by the careless criticism which had lately reached his ears, Ethel Clayton knew that the manager's existence was going to be a hard one. She did not want to see him go to the war. Indeed, she was by no means inspired as yet with any degree of patriotism. The war was too remote and our reason for entering into it too theoretical. The blood of but few of our men had been shed, and those were, as a rule, such as were connected with the more spectacular portions of the service, nor had our women and children been butchered by the Hun.

In her heart Ethel longed to say something to Frank Barton to ease the wound which he had suffered that afternoon. Should she overtake him and speak? And then, even while she hesitated, the humming of a smoothly running automobile sounded behind her.

She turned to look, startled, fearing it was Jim Mayberry. But a girl was driving the car that swerved in toward the curb, stopping just beside the

manager of the Hapwood-Diller Manufacturing Company.

"Oh, Mr. Barton!"

The girl in the car was handsome, but with a high color and a shrill voice. She had a great deal of light hair, which was carefully dressed; she wore an expensive motor hat and veil; her cerise motor coat was of heavy silk. If the frame ever sets off the picture to advantage, then Helen Fuller was a work of art!

"It's just too,too lovely that I should catch you this way, Mr. Barton," she cried, as Ethel approached nearer. "You can't say you are busy and I am *sure* it is not yet dinner time. I *must* see you about our garden festival. You know, for the Red Cross. We *all* must do our bit *these* days. Do hop in and advise with poor me."

Ethel came within range of Barton's vision. He gave her as usual one of his warm, kind smiles, lifting his hat. Helen Fuller stared at the passing girl, who plainly heard her scornful query: "One of your factory hands, Mr. Barton?"

"One of our office force—and one of the most valuable on the pay roll of the Hapwood-Diller Company, Miss Fuller, I assure you."

But the cheerful reply did not take the barb out of the wound Helen Fuller's question had made. A little farther along the street, however, Ethel shook herself and murmured:

"What a perfect fool I am! It is ridiculous to mind anything that Helen Fuller says. She remembers very well going to school with me and that I was always at or near the head of the class and she at the foot. That was before Grandon Fuller had that stock in the company left him by Uncle Diller. Dear me! how the possession of money changes some people." Then, and cheerfully, she exclaimed aloud: "Ah! here's Benway."

A young man with a perfectly splendid head of brown curly hair, flawless complexion, level brows, fine, open gray eyes set well apart, a straight nose and lips not full enough to be sensuous but not too thin, the whole countenance softened by a cleft chin and humorous lines at the corners of his mouth—that was Benway Chase.

He came swinging along the walk and seized Ethel companionably by her right arm, although that placed him upon the inner side of the path. She met his look with one of pleasure, and they went on together like the good comrades they were.

People whom they knew and met greeted them with a matter-of-course air. To see Ethel Clayton and Ben Chase together was nothing astonishing for Mailsburg folk. They had been neighbors and chums since they were in rompers.

Her brightness of countenance faded when her old chum left her at the gate of the Clayton cottage. She cast a commiserating glance after him as he went on,

whistling. It was not until then that the withered, useless right arm of the young man became really noticeable.

She called to her mother that she was home from work and went up to her room to freshen her dress for dinner. Benway slipped out of her mind as she did this—and most other things, save one. That was a comparison she had begun to make on Burnaby Street between herself and Helen Fuller.

Was she jealous of the other girl? Why should she be? She was sure she would not care to change places with Miss Fuller, money and all, for any consideration. Yet—

She saw Frank Barton getting into the Fuller car, which Helen drove so conspicuously about the streets of Mailsburg. Ethel Clayton could not do that! Ethel must work, and dress plainly six days in the week because of her position. Miss Fuller was always dressed as gaily as a bird of paradise. And one must confess that men's eyes were attracted—sometimes blinded—by gay clothes. Frank Barton could not be blamed for being a man. No. She had no complaint to make against Frank Barton. He was always polite and kind and appreciative.

"And he'd be all of that to a stray kitten that chanced to cross his path!" she ejaculated in sudden disgust. "Helen Fuller has something to offer him that I haven't."

CHAPTER III

"DOGFENNEL"

FRANK BARTON stepped into the car beside Miss Fuller and was whirled away, a willing captive. To tell the truth, the general manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company had been so busy fitting himself for his present situation with the corporation, which he had now held two years, that he had found little play-time. Having been motherless since childhood, and always sisterless, he probably knew less about women than any normal man in Mailsburg who had arrived at the age of twenty-eight.

No girl had before so plainly shown that she was interested in him—and Miss Fuller only recently. Her curiosity had first been piqued by hearing Grandon Fuller speak in strong approval of the manager. Barton had pulled the concern out of a slough of financial trouble that had threatened to ruin the Hapwood-Diller Company.

The Fullers had not always been wealthy. At least, not the Grandon-Fuller branch. Not until Israel Diller died and left them the bulk of his holdings in the Hapwood-Diller Company were they any better off than their neighbors on the far end of Burnaby Street, where Ethel Clayton and her mother and the Chases still lived.

With the money Mrs. Fuller—an ambitious woman—had set out to be the leader of Mailsburg's society. To a certain degree she had succeeded. Helen was growing up to be a society devotee and with scarcely a sensible idea in her head. But she had beauty, and she made the most of that.

It was the thing, too, to be alive with interest in some semi-public topic or other; and Helen was alive to the value of self-advertising. A week never went by that her name did not appear in the society news of the city or county papers. She had been out just as long as Frank Barton had been manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company.

She did not really care a fillip for Frank Barton—not at this time—nor for any other man. But she thoroughly enjoyed the reputation of having more men dangling after her than any other girl in Mailsburg. She even endured the society of that "tame cat," Morrison Copley; for at least he counted!

"Really, Mr. Barton," Helen said, having got the manager beside her in the driving seat of the car. "Really, you show very little interest in your country's welfare. Don't you realize *yet* we are *at war?*"

Barton's face was rather glum, but he tried to speak lightly. "I read something about it in the papers. I've been so extremely busy, Miss Fuller, I fear I should only know of it from hearsay if the Germans sailed up the creek and landed at old Hammerly's dock."

"The boys of the National Guard marched away to day!" she cried.

"Yes. That does make it look serious," he agreed in a graver strain.

"Everybody should do his or her bit, Mr. Barton," the girl said with an admonitory air. "I am *astonished* at you. As I tell Morry Copley, if I were a man nothing should keep me out of uniform. I *do* think those khaki colors are awfully *sweet*."

"I fear," Barton said grimly, "that the fellows who put on khaki because it looks 'sweet' will not make particularly good soldiers."

"Morry Copley, for instance?" and she laughed at herself and at the non-present Copley. "Oh, well, you know what I mean. It really seems *too* bad that so many of you men in this town are not a bit patriotic."

"You've got me wrong, Miss Fuller," the manager said hastily and in considerable earnestness. "I do not think I lack patriotism. But one must fulfill one's duty."

"Oh, business!" she exclaimed, scornfully.

He was on the defensive. "Your father's income from our company is what enables you to drive about in this car, Miss Fuller," he said bluntly.

"Now, *don't*, for pity's sake, talk *business* to me. I really don't understand a thing about it. I presume that girl who passed us just now—Clayton is her name? —may possess all the business acumen needed. I haven't *her* experience."

And Frank Barton, startled, wondered why Helen Fuller had taken the trouble to slur Ethel Clayton.

The Fuller house, built on the exodus of the family from Burnaby Street, was just the dwelling one knowing Grandon Fuller and his wife would expect it to be. It was very large and very important looking, with a lot of gingerbread trimming about the eaves and veranda roof and the porte-cochère.

A footman in a conspicuous livery stood at attention as Helen stopped her car under the covered way. With a silver whistle this flunky summoned a man from the garage to take the automobile. Barton followed his hostess to the other end of the veranda where quite a party—mostly the younger matrons and the girls of Mailsburg's smart set—were gathered. Tea had been made and two other liveried servants were rolling service tables about from group to group.

"Well, I have accomplished something," Helen said, after an apology for not being at home when her guests arrived and dropping with assumed weariness into a comfortable chair. Immediately her maid put a knitting bag into her lap and her mistress seized the needles with avidity. "Every stitch counts, you know," she went on. "I only wish I might knit while I drive my machine. But that is impossible. And I told father I'd drive the car myself and so let Charles, our chauffeur, enlist. We women must do our part. Let's see, Marie; how many of these sweaters have I done for the soldiers?"

"That is Mam'selle's second this fortnight," said the French maid, without losing her composure. That she did nine-tenths of the work, Helen merely rattling the needles while company was present, was not a matter for the world to know.

"You all know Mr. Barton, I think," Helen went on, placing the manager in a chair near her, as though he were a stray kitten she had picked up on the street and brought home as a curiosity. "I've managed to interest *him* in our garden party. Really, he should be made to do a good deal for the Red Cross. He has not done a sin-gle sol-i-ta-ry thing as yet for the *cause*. I tell him he is a slacker of the first water."

Some who chanced to hear her smiled. Frank Barton's ears fairly burned. It was no joke for him; yet he admitted that Miss Fuller did not understand —*would* not understand, perhaps—why he was not in khaki.

"Bah Jove!" drawled the high and somewhat effeminate voice of Morrison Copley, "Mr. Barton has plenty of company in this burg. I heard old Hammerly say he thought of offering a reward for the discovery of a single man within the conscription age here who joins from patriotic motives. He says patriotism died out in Mailsburg in the last generation."

"By the way, Morry," asked a fellow with the bulging shoulders of a prizefighter together with a dissipated face, "how did *you* get exempted?"

"Dependent parent," returned Copley. "You know, mothaw really couldn't get on without me."

"That's true enough," sneered the other. "Madam Copley would be lost without her baby boy."

Morrison Copley did not, however, lack the keener weapons of retort. "That's all right, Bradley. I understand you gave the exemption board the names of two dependent barkeepers."

The laugh that followed this sally enabled Frank Barton to recover his composure. These fellows boldly acknowledged their lack of patriotic feeling. He knew that his reasons for claiming exemption until the Hapwood-Diller Company was in good shape again were, at least, commendable.

In a desultory way plans were made for the forthcoming garden party to raise funds for the local Red Cross chapter. Barton did not find that either his advice or his efforts were much needed. But he did get a chance to talk with Miss Fuller; and he was not a deep enough student of feminine nature to understand just how shallow she was.

The Fullers were of the best socially [illegible] was in Mailsburg, despite the fact that their money had come to them comparatively late. Mrs. Fuller's maiden name had been Diller, and the Dillers dated their aristocracy in the county back to pre-Revolution days. To Barton, whose antecedents had been quite unimportant, such connections in a social way seemed worthy.

"Come again to see me, Mr. Barton, when I am alone," Helen whispered, when he rose to follow the very first group with their knitting bags that made its departure. "One must give one's self more or less to one's guests when there is a crowd like this. I want you to take dinner with us soon—quite *en famille*. Will you?"

Barton promised. Grandon Fuller had always been cordial with him, and he was glad to be *persona grata* with the family. After all, it meant considerable to him to be taken up by the Fullers.

He was the only person on this occasion to walk away from the house. The others rode in some kind of vehicle. But somebody got into step with Barton less than ten yards from the gateway.

"What brings you into the swagger part of the town, Frank?" demanded a harsh voice. "You are not hatching something with Fuller to double-cross the rest of the Hapwood-Diller stockholders?"

The young manager knew the character of the speaker too well to be offended. Macon Hammerly wore an apparent grouch to shield himself from the importunities of his fellowmen. He actually could not say "No" to any request or favor asked, unless he shouted it.

He was a dry old fellow with stiff, badly brushed iron-gray hair and an aggressive chin-whisker. He was the last man in Mailsburg to wear "half leg" boots and had a local cobbler make them for him.

He kept a feed and grain store down on the docks and possessed in all probability more cash in the bank than any other man in town. But he made no display of it.

He was distantly related to the Fullers; and he made no display of that, although Helen called him "Uncle." He bent a curious and somewhat disapproving eye upon Barton as he waited for his answer.

"I was just calling there."

"Huh! On whom?"

"Miss Fuller took me up into her car and brought me over. It seems there is to be a garden party for the Red Cross——"

"Expected it must be something about a cross," grumbled Macon Hammerly. "Red Cross or what not, it will be the double-cross for you if you don't look out. You've nothing in common, Frank, with that dogfennel."

"With *what?*" asked Barton, chuckling. "That's a new one!"

"A new name for that inconsequential, useless crowd that circle about Grandon Fuller's gal? Huh! D'you know any better name for them? There ain't nothing more useless and picayune along the road than dogfennel. That whole bunch isn't worth the powder to blow it to Halifax!"

" 'Dogfennel'," and Barton still chuckled. "I don't know but you are rather hard on our common may-

weed. But I grant you that some of those people I met back there are quite as futile as the name implies. But Miss Fuller herself! She is a remarkably pretty girl."

The old man in the linen duster and the broad-brimmed hat was quite as emphatic as Barton expected him to be. "So's dogfennel pretty—if you like weeds. I don't want to see you mixing in with that crowd, Frank. How's business?"

"Better. Had to turn down a big order to-day, but I think we were justified in doing so."

"Huh! Who says so? You and Jim Mayberry?" growled Hammerly, who kept in quite close touch with the factory affairs.

"Not altogether," Barton smilingly replied. "We took the advice of Miss Clayton."

"Huh! You *did?*" Hammerly listened quietly to the manager's explanation, commenting in his usual tart way, but with open satisfaction: "You do show some sense once in a while, Frank. She's got a head on her, that Ethel Clayton. And you are right, I'll bet a cooky! The Bogata people are due to bust inside of three months. Mark my words."

The two men separated at a corner and Barton strode on to his boarding house and the dinner which he knew would be dished up cold to him now. Mrs. Trevor played no table favorites in her ménage. The manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company was

not happy. His reflections were tinged with a hue of disgust at his own equivocal situation.

He knew he had good and sufficient reason for not enlisting the minute of the declaration that a state of war with Germany existed. The same reason had kept him at home when many of his comrades in the Guard had gone to the Mexican Border.

He had been spending his strength and thought to one end since being placed in charge of the Hapwood-Diller Manufacturing Company. The war had struck the concern hard, cutting off or doubling the price of supplies without broadening the market for manufactured wares or increasing the profit on them.

Upon the dividends of the company many families in Mailsburg depended for their very daily bread. Had the dividends been reduced or even passed for several successive quarters, the Fullers would have got along all right; but there were stockholders whose livelihood depended utterly upon the factory running on full time and turning a profit on every dollar's worth of product that left the shipping room. And Frank Barton seemed to be the only man to keep it so running.

For the most part these needy folk were widows or orphans or old people past working age, who had received their stock from one or another of the original owners of the factory. These helpless people Barton had felt particularly his charge. To throw up his job and join the colors might ruin the small fry de-

pending upon the success of the Hapwood-Diller Company's affairs. Until of late he had scarcely found breathing space to think of anything save the business of the factory.

But now! The boys marching away earlier in the day had stabbed Frank Barton to the quick. He was not a man who wore his heart on his sleeve. It was only those who knew him best who suspected the rankling wound he suffered when his course was unfavorably compared with that of the guardsmen whose brother-in-arms he had been.

Even Hellen Fuller had accused him of being a slacker, and had compared him with Morry Copley and that Bradley fellow. Barton's gorge rose as he thought of this.

"A slacker, eh?" he muttered to himself. "A slacker, am I?"

CHAPTER IV

THE SKINNERS

JIM MAYBERRY was smoking his second cigarette when a girl came out of the main door of the factory offices. She was a slim, rather startled looking girl. Her flaxen hair was pulled back so tightly as to raise her eyebrows perceptibly; this opened very wide her eyes and seemed even to pull the point of her nose up a little and raise her upper lip to display two little rabbit teeth.

"Hello, Skinner," said the superintendent. "Isn't Ethel 'most ready?"

"Hello, Jim Mayberry," responded the girl, who felt no obligation to show the superintendent any particular respect outside the factory. "Going to take me home in your flivver?"

"Aren't you afraid to ride with me?" asked the man with a slow smile.

"Nope. You try to get funny with *me* and I'll scratch your eyes out."

"My!" drawled Mayberry, "aren't you the catty thing?"

"You'd think so," rejoined the flat-chested girl with all the strutting boastfulness of a boy. "No feller's ever going to kiss *me* if I don't want him to."

"I bet you!" agreed the superintendent with mock admiration. "But where's Ethel?"

"You aren't waiting for her, are you, Jim?" the slim girl asked, giggling.

"I thought I was."

"Then there's another thought coming to you," declared the delighted Skinner. "Ethel went long ago—out through the side gate. Guess she must have suspected you'd be waiting here."

Mayberry uttered a brief and impolite expletive. That did not trouble Mabel Skinner. She lived in a house full of rough men. Her mother was dead and an older sister kept house for the Skinners. The children of Sam Skinner had not been brought up according to the Puritan acceptance of the term. Like Topsy, they had "just growed."

"She wouldn't ride in that flivver with you anyway," Mabel Skinner added. "But I would."

"Jump in, then, Little Skinner," the superintendent said, without further advertising his chagrin.

"I hope my Sunday School teacher won't see me," the girl observed, getting in beside him quickly. "If she does she will know I am riding fast to perdition. And *do* make your old rattle-bang go as fast as possible, Jim. I just love to scoot over the road. Gee, if I'd only been made a boy instead of a girl, I'd have been a jockey.

"Hear the girl!" chuckled Mayberry, who was really after all too good-natured to be spiteful to his

guest. "You'll be up in one of these flying machines yet."

"Oh, that would be grand! I'd go to France and join the flying corps. That girl from Texas that got over there with the first batch of Yankee soldiers—did you read about her? They got on to her and sent her back. That's because she got married to one of the buddies. Catch *me!* I wouldn't marry the best man alive."

"You won't," prophesied Jim Mayberry, still chuckling.

"Smartie! Anyhow, I wouldn't fall for any man I've ever seen yet. Not even Mr. Barton," she added, as though there might be some doubt in her mind about the general manager.

"Humph! who has fallen for him?" demanded the superintendent suspiciously.

"Every girl in town but me," declared Mabel Skinner promptly, but grinning impishly, "He's an awfully nice man, is Mr. Barton."

"Yes. I'd fall for him myself if I were a girl, I guess," Mayberry agreed.

"Yes—you—would! Say, that's my corner!"

"I know. But I'm going to spin you around the reservoir and bring you home the other way."

"Oh, bully!" ejaculated the girl, fairly jumping in her seat. "I'm being run away with by a man. Never thought it would happen to me. I really

wish you wasn't so trifling, Jim Mayberry. I'd maybe sue you for breach of promise."

"Then I'm safe, am I?" he asked.

"As far as I am concerned you are. I wouldn't really marry you on a bet, Jim. Don't you know that?"

He was highly amused. Mabel Skinner's tart tongue always delighted him. She lived in one of the poorer quarters of the town. When he finally brought the machine into her street it created a sensation. People left their supper tables to see Mabel Skinner brought home in the superintendent's car.

"What's the matter, Mab? Broke a leg?" demanded one lout of a boy, with an impudent grin for Mayberry, and who was just slipping out of the Skinners' gate. This was "Boots" Skinner, next younger of the clan than Mabel.

"Both of 'em, or you wouldn't catch me ruining my reputation riding home with Mr. Mayberry. Don't tell anybody, Boots."

The superintendent of the Hapwood-Diller factory found that it was he who felt some confusion in bringing Mabel home. The latter took her time in getting out of the car.

"I'm awfully much obliged to you, Mr. Mayberry," she said, in a shrill and penetrating voice, so that the interested neighbors could all hear. "I don't know what I should have done if you hadn't brought me. Walked, I guess. Well! 'Over the river!' "

She popped into the house before he could get the starter into action under the fire of the neighbors' chuckles. They all knew Mabel Skinner; and most of them had sized up Jim Mayberry for what he was, too.

Mayberry drove down into Mailsburg's business quarter and stopped before the Bellevue Hotel. He often took his dinner there and spent the evening, as well, in some upper room where there were shaded lights, much cigar smoke, the clink of glasses and the rattle of poker chips.

The superintendent had been born and brought up in Mailsburg, as Frank Barton had been; but his family was now scattered. He and Barton had been the closest of chums at school. Mayberry owned quite as bright a mind as the general manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company; but he lacked the balance of his friend.

Had it not been for the inspiration of Barton's companionship and example Mayberry would never have obtained the eminence he had in the factory. In truth, his old chum had actually boosted Mayberry into the superintendent's job after having been himself elected manager of the concern. Not that Mayberry was not well fitted for this position. But he lacked that quality of ambition to have gained it for himself without Frank Barton's good offices. At that, he lacked the grace of gratitude.

The Bellevue was the gathering place of the sporting men of the town. When Mayberry came out from dinner, Mr. Grandon Fuller occupied one of the easy chairs on the porch. Fuller's taste for society was not like that of his wife and daughter. He was a big, pursy man with a shock of white hair and a ruddy countenance. He had a hail-fellow-well-met air for most occasions, and his jovial manner made him popular with most people. In local politics he had some prominence.

"Hey, young man!" he called to Mayberry, "you've no engagement, have you? Smith is getting up a party for a little game. Will you join us?"

"Not to-night, Colonel," returned the superintendent, giving Fuller a handle to his name that always delighted the rich man. He had been on the governor's staff once. "I am sorry. I have an appointment."

"Tut, tut! can't you let the girls alone for one night, Son?" and Fuller's laugh was unctuous.

" 'Pon my word it's business."

"Thought nobody had to trouble their heads about business up at the factory except Barton?"

"But Barton may not be there always," laughed the superintendent, although the suggestion of the manager's omnipotence did not please him. Everybody praised Frank Barton's business acumen. Mayberry, being Barton's close friend, knew just how weak

the fellow really was! This was Mayberry's thought; but he made no display of this feeling, saying:

"It really is business, Colonel. I am sorry not to be able to join you and the other gentlemen. But we really all have to work up there at the factory. Barton may get the bulk of the credit. You know how it is when a fellow once gets into the limelight."

"Yes," chuckled Fuller. "But they tell me a lime never gets into the limelight. Don't tell me Frank Barton is to be counted among the citrus fruit."

"Never!" responded Mayberry. "But, then, there are others working for the Hapwood-Diller Company too who are not lemons. Good-night."

He went down the steps whistling cheerfully and Mr. Fuller looked quizzically after him.

"Bright young fellow, just the same," murmured the man. "Perhaps may be made more useful, even, than Barton. But I fear neither Helen nor the wife would stand for *him* as a dinner guest; whereas, Barton——"

These cryptic observations were unheard by Mayberry of course. And the frown on his brow belied his cheerful whistle and airy remarks to Mr. Fuller. He got into his car, started it, and drove away from the hotel with the secret feeling that he would enjoy running over a dog.

He kept on through the old part of Mailsburg and down past the docks and over the Stone Bridge. The creek was a wide, oilily flowing stream—save in the

time of the spring freshets. He took the Creek Road and rolled easily out of town and along past the farms and wooded strips which intervened between Mailsburg and Norville.

He drove slowly and looked at the illuminated dial of the clock before him frequently. It was plain that he had a rendezvous here in the open. Some one has said: "If you have a secret to tell, select the middle of a ten-acre lot." Mayberry's appointment suggested secrecy, for he finally stopped near the bank of the creek with an open, sloping field on the other hand, and no cover but a rock beside the road.

There was shadow enough about the rock, however, to protect the figure of a man on the landward side. But the scent of his tobacco permeated the air.

"Hello, Blaisdell?" Jim Mayberry said quietly and questioningly, having brought his car to a stop just opposite this rock.

"Welcome, dear boy," was the prompt reply. The waiting man stretched his long limbs and came out of the shadow, still puffing his pipe, to rest a foot upon the step of the car. Mayberry lit a cigarette and pinched out the glowing end of the match before dropping it. "What's the news?" asked Blaisdell.

"Kind of bad—for you and me," Mayberry admitted.

"What do you mean? Doesn't that order go through?"

"It may not. I'm no intriguer, Blaisdell. I can keep you informed; but I am not up in diplomacy. Barton has heard some yarn about you fellows. He is for turning the order down—flat."

"Can't you influence him? I thought you and he were thicker than the hair on a dog's neck."

"We've always been chums," drawled Mayberry. "That doesn't give me any hold over Frank's processes of reasoning. And he can talk me off my feet. I didn't agree to do the impossible, Blaisdell. If the order goes through the best I can do is to rush it."

"Yet you expect to get your rake-off," sneered the other.

"That's my legitimate graft. It's for letting everything go through smoothly. You know, in my position, I can favor your company, Blaisdell."

"It doesn't seem that you can—not if this order clogs the chute. I am frank to tell you, Jim, we've got to get those goods without question or we shall be in untold trouble."

"Ye-as," drawled the superintendent, "so I inferred. That is what is bothering Barton. He seems to be wise to the state of your credit."

"He doesn't *know* it," snapped the other. "He only suspects. Nobody knows it but Billings, Hempstead, me and—you."

"And I'm sitting tight and saying nothing. I want my rake-off on the order of course—By jinks, I *need*

it! Money is as scarce with me just now as gold filling in a hen's teeth."

"Then do something to help us," urged Blaisdell.

"I'll do all I can. If I were in charge—Oh, well! I *could* do something in that case."

"Say! any chance of that happening?" demanded the other and with eagerness.

"I—don't—know. There may be. Frank has got the war fever. Fact! Any fellow that got exempted as easy as he did——"

"By the way," asked Blaisdell, "how did you get past the board?"

"Conscientious objector," replied Mayberry glibly. "Sure! My mother and father were Quakers and I often attended the Friends' Meeting House," and he laughed.

"You are a liar, Jim," said the other frankly. "The Quakers are putting their young men into the Red Cross and all such work. That claim don't go. I believe it cost you money. Doc Flammer has bought a new runabout—and it's a better car than you drive, Jim. I believe that foxy medico knows how to feather his nest."

"I really have a bad heart," said the superintendent of the Hapwood-Diller Company seriously. "Quite a murmur. You can hear it sometimes without the stethoscope."

"But the doc never advised you to cut out the tobacco, did he?" drily queried Blaisdell, as May-

berry lit another cigarette at the coal of his first. "Now, see here, to get back to biz: You say Barton has the fever?"

"He's wanted to go all along. You should hear him talk! He makes me sick!" scoffed the superintendent. "If he should go I shall step into his shoes *pro tem.* He wants to go to the officers' training camp at Lake Quehasset. *Then* I might be able to help you fellows—and myself—Blaisdell."

"You think Barton will immediately turn down our order? Before he goes away—if he does go?"

"I believe he has already." Mayberry gave no particulars, but he spoke of the letter the manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company had ordered written that afternoon. It was not to his advantage to say anything about Ethel Clayton and the confidence Barton had in her good sense and ability.

"Postpone the sending of that letter, Jim," said Blaisdell hastily. "It has not left the office yet, has it?"

"I do not believe so. It was too late for the last mail," Mayberry agreed. But he was puzzled.

"I'll tell you what I mean," Blaisdell said, leaning nearer to the superintendent. He laid a hand upon the latter's shoulder. His lips were close to Mayberry's ear. Nobody could have heard then what he said, not if they had been at Blaisdell's elbow. And there was nobody so near. A few minutes later the superintendent turned his car and started back toward

Mailsburg while Blaisdell strolled away in the opposite direction. Then it was that a cramped figure rolled out from the shadow on the creek side of the great rock.

"Those two chumps purty near made me late setting my lines," observed Boots Skinner under his breath. "The moon'll be up in a few minutes and then mebbe I'd git nabbed.

"Old Man Hammerly says that if I'm caught doing this ag'in he'll give me all the laws allows—an' then some. The old jackdaw! I bet he never gits the chance.

"That's the way. Ain't no chance for a poor feller, jest as dad says. Such rich chaps as them two can plan to do all the devilment that they want, and nobody dast touch 'em. But me! I ain't let to ketch a mess o' fish in peace. Huh! Jest the same, me an' dad will have a fish-fry for breakfast," and he grinned in the darkness, carefully baiting his hooks.

CHAPTER V

THE DREAM OF A STAR

MRS. CLAYTON was a Diller. She often stated this fact with pride.

"The Dillers, my dear, are among the very oldest and the very best families in the country; and when one has family as every sensible person recognizes, money is of secondary importance," Ethel's mother insisted over and over, in season and out.

"All very well, dear," agreed the girl cheerfully. "But money is more essential to our daily comfort than blue blood. I presume I am glad I have Diller blood in my veins. I am much gladder I have Diller brains in my head; for they enable me to earn twenty dollars a week—more than any other girl earns, I do believe, in Mailsburg."

Mrs. Clayton, with all her horror of things common, could not deny that Israel Diller had been the saviour of the family by his business ability. He went into trade and he made good in it. By grace of his doing so, and leaving her a few shares of the Hapwood-Diller Company—and Grandon Fuller's wife a good many—both the Claytons and the Fullers were benefitted. Indeed, Mrs. Clayton and Ethel lived much more comfortably in the little cottage at the end of Burnaby Street by grace of the dividends from those

shares than they had while Mr. Clayton was alive.

"But I sometimes wonder," Mrs. Clayton sighed, "how it came about that Mehitable Fuller and I should have been so unevenly treated by Great-uncle Israel. Mehitable never did a hand's turn for old Mr. Diller in her life. While you can remember yourself, Ethel, although you were but a tiny girl, that the old gentleman was brought here that time he had typhoid and he was a care on my hands for six months."

"Oh, Mother!"

"I'm not begrudging the care," her mother hastened to say. "And of course his lawyer afterward brought me the money for his board—six dollars a week for twenty-seven weeks. And I signed a paper saying it was all I could expect. Still—Well! if he had been alone in his own home and had had to hire a trained nurse and all that he'd have paid out a lot more money than he did."

"Now, Mother, never mind all that," Ethel urged.

"No, I realize it doesn't sound nice," Mrs. Clayton agreed. "But it seems funny. When I see those Fullers driving around so haughtily, and read about Mehitable, that I went to school with, and that pug-nosed girl of hers——"

"Mercy! don't let anybody hear you speak of Helen Fuller's nose in such terms," laughed Ethel. "And Helen is pretty. You've got to acknowledge that."

"Her nose *is* a pug," declared Mrs. Clayton. "That's got nothing to do with those stocks. Great-uncle Israel's will was peculiar. So they all say. No administrator mentioned. And he died with Gran Fuller right in the house——"

"Don't!" begged Ethel. "You must not intimate any wrongdoing, when there can have been no wrongdoing."

"What do you know about it? And you but a chit of a girl at the time!" demanded Mrs. Clayton. "Anyway, Gran Fuller was there, and he found the will. Mr. Mestinger, the lawyer, was dead then."

"But the witnesses were alive if the lawyer wasn't. Of course it was Mr. Diller's honest will."

"And he gave all that lump of money to Mehitable who never scarcely spoke to him, and only a little, meaching few stocks of the Hapwood-Diller Company to me. Oh, well, small favors thankfully received. The money's very welcome every quarter."

Of course, Ethel was the recipient of a fairly comfortable salary. But they could not have lived so nicely as they did upon her weekly stipend only. Moreover, it was but recently that the girl was able to earn the amount at present paid her.

"And there was a time," pursued Mrs. Clayton on this particular evening, "when I came near selling the shares for a song." She and Ethel were sitting, after the dinner dishes were cleared up, on the sheltered porch. "Grandon Fuller made me an offer

for my stock. That was just before Mr. Barton was made manager, and people said the company was going to fail."

"Mr. Barton has done wonders," declared the girl with admiration.

"Oh, I don't know," responded her mother deprecatingly. "I suppose business just chanced to change. But it's lucky we held on to our stock."

"It was Mr. Barton who saved us and the rest of the small stockholders," the girl said firmly.

"Well, I suppose you must say so. I presume you feel some gratitude to him for raising your pay. You never would have got it without his say-so."

"I hope I earn it," Ethel observed with some sharpness. "I believe I am worthy of my wages, just as Mr. Barton is worthy of the credit of having put the Hapwood-Diller Company on its feet."

"Still talking shop?" asked the cheerful voice of Benway Chase. He had come up the walk without the widow and her daughter hearing him till he spoke.

"Oh, Ethel is singing the praises of that wonderful Mr. Barton, as usual," her mother said.

"I'll join in," Ben Chase chuckled, and he sat down on the step of the porch to fill and light his pipe. "We've got to hand it to Mr. Barton, Mrs. Clayton. He did another good deed to-day. Promised to take me into the offices."

"Oh, Ben!" exclaimed the girl in sheer delight. "Did you speak to him as I advised you?"

"Certainly did. I got tired of waiting on the pleasure of those other people who had promised me a job. I have spent every cent we can afford getting a business course and just because I am left-handed the business men I have seen hem and haw over hiring me—or even giving me a chance to show them I am as quick as a fellow with two hands."

"Dear me, Bennie, don't talk in that way," murmured Mrs. Clayton.

"Nobody wants a fellow with one hand—not really!" exclaimed the young man with vigor. "They won't take me in the army—though a fellow could work a machine gun very well with one paw," and he laughed without managing to get much mirth into the sound.

"But your Mr. Barton is different," he added, turning to Ethel. "I saw him to-day at lunch hour—while you were out, Ethel. He never said a word about my bum wing. By the way, did you know he was going away?"

"Who's going away?" asked Mrs. Clayton, scenting gossip.

"Not Mr. Barton?" cried her daughter quickly.

"Spoke as though he expected to be absent from the offices in the near future. Said you and that Jim Mayberry would break me in all right. What did he mean if it wasn't that he expected to be absent?"

The girl looked at him breathlessly and her face was actually pale. Mrs. Clayton drawled:

"I suppose he must mean to take a vacation."

"That's not it, is it?" Benway Chase asked Ethel, realizing that she was deeply moved.

"It's the war!" gasped the girl

"The war?" rejoined her mother. "What's that to do with Mr. Barton? He's exempt, isn't he?"

"He will enlist. I knew he would!" The girl's hands were clasped in real agony and her voice showed imminent tears. "Oh, I knew he would!!"

"Not really?" exclaimed Benway forgetting to keep his pipe alight. "Mr. Barton can't be spared, can he?"

"I suspected all along how he felt about it," moaned the girl. "Ever since April when war was declared—even before."

"But, goodness! there are so many other men to go," cried her mother. "And you were just saying that he was necessary to the well-being of the Hapwood-Diller Company, Ethel. Surely he will not desert us."

"The business is in very good shape again—thanks to him," Ethel answered, trying to recover her composure. "I suppose he feels that now, at least, he can go to the officers' training camp. And if we get along all right I just know he will go to France."

Benway whistled—low and thoughtfully. "He's that kind of a chap, I guess," he observed. "Good-

ness knows, this town is full of those who think differently. The boards had the hardest time getting their full quota for this first draft. There's got to be a general awakening before the second call comes——"

"But war is dreadful!" cried Mrs. Clayton.

"It must be. But we haven't come to a realization of it yet or we'd all be glad to try to help keep it in Europe, instead of letting it dribble over here after militarism has ruined the less prepared countries over there. This war is going to mean a good deal. The government is awfully particular about the men they take right now; but they won't be so particular before it is all over.

"Why!" cried the young fellow with a break in his voice that showed a deeper emotion, "even the Red Cross or the Y. M. C. A. won't accept for service a fellow with a single solitary thing the matter with him!"

Ethel, who had slipped down into a seat on the step beside him, suddenly patted his shoulder in a sisterly way. She knew that he had tried to serve his country under the banner of the Cross of Peace and had been refused because of his withered arm.

"Heigho!" added Benway, shrugging his shoulders and swallowing his emotion, "that's neither here nor there. Mr. Barton spoke as though he expected to leave soon, anyway. I expect Ethel, here, will pretty near be boss of those offices while he is gone. How

about it, Ethel? Going to be a hard taskmaster to yours truly?"

"I am afraid if Mr. Barton goes that my influence there will be curbed rather than increased," the girl said with gravity.

"No!"

"Naturally Mr. Mayberry will be boss. Mr. Mayberry does not consider me as capable as does Mr. Barton."

"Jim Mayberry!" exclaimed Ben. "He's dead in love with you, they say."

The girl's head came up and she turned a haughty look upon her friend.

"Do you consider that complimentary to me?" she demanded.

"No. But complimentary to his good sense," returned Benway. "I don't know much about Mayberry; only that he hangs about the Bellevue too much."

"You've said it all," Ethel declared, with less sternness. "I do not like Mr. Mayberry."

"All right. I shan't like him, either, then," said Benway cheerfully. "But, goodness, girl! you can't blame men for falling in love with you. I wonder the whole town doesn't tail along after you when you walk down the street."

She laughed at him then—and with him.

"There is one thing about your compliments, Ben," she said. "They may lack grace; but they

are unmistakable. Ridiculous! There are hundreds of girls in Mailsburg better looking than I am."

"Now, did I say anything about looks?" he asked her wickedly. "It's your sweet disposition that makes you so many friends."

"Like Jim Mayberry, I suppose?" she said in some disgust.

They continued to wrangle in a friendly way. Mrs. Clayton, frankly yawning, bade them good-night. The moment her mother withdrew Ethel's manner changed. She removed herself a little from Benway's vicinity and her witticisms ceased.

"I believe I shall retire early myself, Ben," she said. "This has been a trying day. I—I shall be glad to have you in the offices with us."

"Shall you?" There was something in his tone that increased her seriousness.

"If I can do anything there to help you, let me do it," she said earnestly. "You know we have always been such chums, Ben."

"Haven't we?" Again the disturbing accent. She started to rise. He caught her hand. "Wait," he said. "Let me say a little something to you, Ethel."

"Ben! Ben! Had you better? You know——"

"I know—everything you can tell me," he interrupted bitterly. "I know I am only half a man. A fellow shy a wing hasn't much chance in this world.

I ought to know it after all my experience. Especially as the folks have no money to back me. But I have a whole brain——"

"I've always told you that, Ben," she hastened to say. "A perfectly good brain. I would not harp so much on that withered arm."

"No, perhaps you wouldn't. You wouldn't unless the old arm happened to be hitched to your shoulder, as it is to mine. No, it is easy enough to say to a cripple, 'Forget it.' Wait till you try it yourself! Though, Heaven forbid! I hope you will never suffer such a handicap, Ethel."

"Oh, Benway!"

"Now, I didn't mean to make you feel bad, Ethel," he returned, and patted her hand. "Fact is, I feel rather toppy to-night myself. I know that Mr. Barton is taking me on for just what he thinks is in me, and no more. He must think that a withered arm will not make me less useful around the offices of the Hapwood-Diller Company. Influence is not getting me this footing.

"And he was kind enough to say," went on the boy, "that he saw no reason why I should not rise there as he had risen. He told me how be began in one of the shops and worked up. Of course, I am not beginning just in that way; but he says that a practical knowledge of the mechanical end of the business is not absolutely necessary to advancement.

"If I make good, Ethel—if I prove that the stuff is in me to get up in the business world, after all——"

"Of all your friends I shall be the one who will be the most delighted, Ben," she interrupted, rising now with finality. "Don't forget that I have always said it was in you to make something of yourself. Even if your parents could not afford to send you to college, I know—absolutely know—you will make your mark."

"Well, yes," he said, rather piqued that she had not let him finish. She stood above him now, looking down.

"Good-night, Benway. I suppose you will come to the offices on Monday?"

"Yes, I'll see you then, Ethel, every day," he said wistfully.

"Good-night," she repeated and went quickly within. Once inside the screen door she watched his shadowy figure down the path. "'No influence'?" she murmured. "He does not suspect how I fairly had to beg Mr. Barton to give him a chance! Poor Benway! Poor, poor boy!"

The girl went on to her bedroom. She stood a moment in the darkness.

"Frank Barton going—leaving—" she gasped. "Oh, why can't he see? Why can't he see?" she added, moaning.

Then she began her preparations for bed.

Benway Chase crossed the road and entered the field that divided his own home from the end of Burnaby Street. This was a surburban locality. There was the fine smell of new-mown hay in his nostrils. Half way across the field he stumbled upon a cock of hay that had been thrown up for the night, and he fell upon it, rolling upon his back luxuriously and gazing back.

There was a light in a certain window of the Clayton Cottage. He had watched it many a night, for he knew that it was the window of Ethel's room. Above the rooftree hung a brilliant star. He had watched that, too, often and again. And when the light in Ethel's room was snuffed out he fixed his eyes on the star and dreamed.

It was only a boy's dream at best. It was a foolish dream, perhaps. But Benway Chase often dreamed it.

He was fully a year older than Ethel Clayton; but sometimes she made him feel very much younger than she. Dreamer by nature, he; and she one of those practical souls that chafe in the bodies of women. At least, they chafe where women's growth is hampered. But Ethel was numbered of the emancipated. She was a business woman. Moreover, she was a successful business woman.

As she had said, no girl in Mailsburg in all probability earned a larger wage than she did. She had a grasp upon the details of the business of the Hap-

wood-Diller Company that fitted her without question for a position as important as that of Jim Mayberry for instance. Indeed, she was better informed and more capable than even Frank Barton realized.

The manager merely found her surprisingly helpful on occasion. He respected her; he admired her good business sense displayed at these times. Ethel Clayton did not wish to be admired by the manager for any such reason.

Perhaps hers, too, was a dream of a star.

CHAPTER VI

TWO GOOD-BYES

AFTER the porter, who dusted and removed the waste paper, Mabel Skinner was the first of the office force to arrive at the Hapwood-Diller Company the next morning.

Her startled face was preternaturally grave on this occasion. Before she even removed her hat and the tight little jacket she wore, the girl went to the mail basket on Ethel Clayton's desk, dumped the outgoing letters on its flat surface, and ran through them quickly, scrutinizing each address. She did this twice and then puzzlement, as well as gravity, showed in her sharp features. She stacked the letters slowly again in the basket, deep in thought.

Then she went to the letter files. She found under the B heading a quantity of correspondence relating to the Bogata Company of Norville. But there was nothing of recent date. It seemed no letter had been written the day before by the Hapwood-Diller Company to the Bogata people.

"Well," the girl sighed, "I know Boots is an awful liar. But this time he fooled me. Guess I'll keep my nose out of what don't concern me. But that Boots!"

And that evening she gave the recreant Boots a most decisive thrashing out behind the barn. For any older Skinner that could not trounce a younger Skinner, male or female, was not worthy of the clan.

Mabel's appearance at her desk when the rest of the office force arrived caused much comment.

"Life is short and time is fleeting," said Sydney, the bookkeeper. "We are warned of the Great Change to come. Littie Skinner is here on time and at work."

"That happens three days before you die, Syd," responded Mabel sepulchrally, and made no further explanation, not even to Ethel.

Ethel went about her work with some feeling of depression. Barton had said nothing directly to her about going away. Indeed, he was not likely to take Ethel Clayton into his confidence in private matters. Yet she understood now, from several things he had been doing of late, that he had it in mind to absent himself from the offices.

Jim Mayberry was in conference with the general manager on more than one occasion during the next few days. Ethel could only be thankful that the superintendent seemed to have too much on his mind to bother her. He did not even mention her refusal to ride with him in his car. But the girl thought more than once of the possibility of Mayberry's becoming objectionable when Barton was gone and he, the superintendent, had charge of affairs.

On Monday Benway Chase came into the offices. Ethel had paved the way for his reception by her associates, and Benway was made to feel welcome at once. Only Mayberry seemed surprised to see him.

"Why, say!" drawled the superintendent, "what does Barton expect to make of *you?*"

"I'm after your job, Mr. Mayberry," responded Benway, smiling into the rather sneering face of the older man. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Not if you can cop it," said the other. "But it takes a two-fisted man to handle some of the huskies we've got in the shops. Don't forget that."

The intimation was brutal, but the boy with the withered arm only paled a little about the lips.

"You know," he said coolly, "we left-handed chaps have all the luck. Ask any ball fan."

Mayberry laughed shortly and passed on. Ethel was particularly kind to Benway for the rest of that day, and Mabel Skinner, who also had heard the superintendent, stuck out her tongue at his retreating figure.

"He's such a nasty thing!" she whispered to Ethel. "I wish his old flivver would try to climb a telegraph pole with him—or go into the ditch!"

For Skinner was a strong partisan of Ethel's. Her friends were Skinner's friends and her enemies Skinner's particular foes. Besides, the younger girl

had at once taken a fancy to Benway Chase. In looks alone the young fellow had the advantage of any man Mabel Skinner had ever seen before—not barring the general manager, whom she worshipped as a kind of god.

A smile from Benway Chase would turn almost any girl's head. He had the darlingest curls! His complexion was finer and clearer than any girl's Skinner knew. There were shades of brown and red in his cheeks that reminded her of a ripe russet apple.

"My!" she whispered to herself, her china-blue eyes staring from her head more staringly than usual, "wouldn't I just like to put my two hands into his hair and pull it—ever so gently? And his eyes are just as lovely as our setter-pup's. Oh, my! And of course he's set his heart on Ethel!"

She was not jealous of Ethel. Skinner was much too modest to feel such an emotion for one whom she so much admired. She considered Benway Chase as far above her as the moon and stars. She thought them beautiful in much the same way as she admired Benway.

In the middle of that week Ethel was called into the manager's office at an unusual hour—not long before closing time. He usually dictated his letters in the morning. But she carried her notebook and pencil when she answered the summons.

"No letters, Miss Clayton," Barton said, smiling and wheeling sideways in his chair to face her. "Sit down. This is a business conference——"

"Oh! Mr. Mayberry——"

"I've talked to Jim," said Barton quickly. "I've been hammering things into him this fortnight, off and on. He has finally got to the point where he admits he may be able to swing things here for a bit while I run away."

Ethel flashed him a glance that he could not help but note. He raised an admonishing hand.

"Don't think I am running away from duty, Miss Clayton. I believe we are in such shape now—the Hapwood-Diller Company, I mean—that the business will run smoothly under the guidance of Mr. Mayberry—and you. I am banking a good deal on you, Miss Clayton," his kindly smile again lighting up his face.

"On me, Mr. Barton?" she hesitated.

"You are such a perfectly capable person, Miss Clayton," he said. "I believe you have a better grasp on details here than almost anybody else. Of course, Mr. Mayberry and I ought to know fully as much as you do; but the other day you proved that we did not," and he laughed. "That Bogata matter, you remember. We had overlooked the very point which we should have remembered. You did not overlook it. Therefore——You see?

"That is exactly what I mean. Jim is all right. He has a grasp of the mechanical part of the business. But you must run the office end, more or less——"

"But, Mr. Barton! you are n t going to remain away for long, are you?" she interposed.

"I cannot say, Miss Clayton," he returned gravely. "We none of us know what this war may amount to. I only know that I can be of some help if the war continues; and with my experience in the Guard I should be preparing to give my country all the help in my power if I am called on. I am leaving for the training camp at Lake Quehasset this evening."

She could not suppress a murmur, and the pallor of her cheek was marked, but he noticed neither.

"The exemption board allowed my claim of business need. But I am promised to the service if the business here can get along without me. The time has now come to try it," and he laughed a little whimsically. "You know, a dead man is seldom missed, no matter how important his place in life seems to be. After a little somebody is found to fill his shoes. I fancy it will not be so hard, Miss Clayton, to fill mine.

"I am depending on Mr. Mayberry and you, Miss Clayton, to keep the stockholders of the company satisfied that I can be spared. We have some months' training in camp in any case. I have felt the call from 'over there' for a long time. I own frankly,"

he added, his voice vibrant with emotion, "that had I been free, I should not have waited for our Government to declare war before getting into the scrimmage.

"But never mind that! I was held here. You know something of the circumstances we faced two years ago when I took hold. Now we seem to have got out of the mire. We're standing on firm ground. With ordinary care everything should go smoothly with the Hapwood-Diller Company. Can I depend on you to do your part, Miss Clayton?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Barton! I will! I will!" cried the girl with clasped hands, but looking away from him.

"Fine! Help Mr. Mayberry all you can. He's rather brusk, perhaps, but he knows the business. Still——

"I've one favor to ask of you, Miss Clayton. It is important, and it is particular. I want you to write to me."

She looked at him then. But there was nothing in his serious face to warrant the slight flush that came into her cheeks.

"I'd like to have you write me about once a week. Consult nobody as to what you write, but just detail as briefly as you please matters as they occur—business matters and whatever you may think will give me a correct impression of the situation of affairs in the factory and the office.

"I haven't the least idea," he added, once again smiling, "that things will not run along all right.

But I shall be anxious—nervous, if you will. Mayberry will write, of course. But you will look on things with quite different eyes from the way he will look at them. In the first place, you are a woman and you have a different mental slant upon every occurrence from that of a man, it seems to me. I am sure anything you may have to report will be illuminating."

"Yes, Mr. Barton."

"Will you do it, Miss Clayton?"

"Am I to understand I am to render a weekly report and keep the matter secret from everybody—even from Mr. Mayberry?"

"I am exacting no spy-duty from you!" he said hastily. "That is not my meaning."

"I understand you perfectly, I think," Ethel said gently. "You undoubtedly will be anxious."

"But I want the truth—the exact truth, Miss Clayton," Barton went on.

"Yes, I understand that too," she replied.

They arose at the same moment and Frank Barton put out his hand. "You will be of great help to me, I am sure, Miss Clayton," he said, her hand lost for a moment in the embrace of his larger palm. "You have been of sure and practical assistance to me on many occasions. I know you will be of equal aid to Mayberry. Now, good-bye, Miss Clayton. I hope I shall not add much to your burdens."

"Oh, Mr. Barton! I am glad to do anything within reason. I feel that it is but a small thing I do compared with what you must face."

At that he flushed suddenly, and like a boy. "Oh that!" he murmured. "My duty has held me here. Now duty calls me elsewhere. Duty is our master, Miss Clayton. Good-bye."

"And—I hope you—will return to us safely," she said, her eyes filling with tears.

"Thank you, Miss Clayton. I hope to come back all right. I believe I shall," he said cheerfully, and sat down immediately to sort some papers upon his desk. He did not look again in her direction as she went out of the private office.

He heard the raucous note of an automobile horn a little later. He stacked the documents together and stuck them in their proper pigeonhole. He was leaving his desk open for Jim Mayberry to use if he wished.

Stepping quickly to the window Barton saw the Fuller car stopping at the curb. Helen was driving, and was alone. He took down his hat and dust-coat and passed rapidly through the office. But at the outer door he stopped a moment and looked back. He faced the entire office force from that position.

"Be good children till I return—all of you," he said, laughing. "I am banking heavy on you, Sydney. Good-bye, all. I want to hear good reports of you while I am away."

Mayberry was to meet him later and go to the train with him. But Helen Fuller had come to take him for a spin and for a little talk on this, his last day in town. Somehow, he had not been invited to dinner as she suggested. Was it because Grandon Fuller after all considered the general manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company of less importance to his schemes, now that he was going away?

"Dear *me*, Mr. Barton," sighed Helen, dexterously turning the car, "my conscience *condemns* me."

"Why so?"

"I fear something *I* may have said is sending you off like this—so *suddenly*—and to train for the army. Dear me! suppose you should be killed or wounded?"

"Scarcely likely in the training camp," he returned, happy in the concern the girl seemed to show

"Oh, but *afterward!* For I know you will go over there, Mr. Barton. I feel it! And if anything *I* have said——"

"I am sure," he told her quietly, "that you have said nothing to me or to any of your gentlemen acquaintances regarding our duty in this trying time that was not perfectly justified, Miss Fuller."

"Oh, do you *think* so?" she cried. "Do you *know*, Mr. Barton, I am greatly tempted to go to France *myself*. Some girls I know have already gone. You know, really, it puts one on the *qui vive* to hear so much about it—and—and all that," she added rather vaguely.

He was so much in earnest himself, he felt so strongly the exaltation of his decision, that he did not notice the futility of her speech. And then Helen Fuller was strikingly, if a little flamboyantly, pretty. He nodded with pursed lips.

"It's a job we all have to decide for ourselves. I can imagine how you feel, Miss Fuller. As for myself, I've got to be in it!"

"It's too bad," she drawled, "that you couldn't influence Morry Copley to go with you."

"Well, Mr. Copley now will have to decide for himself, won't he?"

She laughed. "It seems he has allowed Mrs. Copley to decide for him," she said.

Somehow their conversation did not take that personal tinge which Helen desired. To tell the truth, a girl cannot give her escort just the right feeling of intimacy when both her eyes and her hands are engaged in guiding a motor-car. Helen finally dropped Barton at his lodgings in time for dinner, and their good-bye was much more casual than she had intended it should be.

"But I shall go over to the camp to see you," she promised, as she wheeled away from the curb. "Best of luck!"

The man stood bareheaded till the girl had turned the corner. But that night when he closed his eyes, in his Pullman berth, it was the face of another girl, with brown eyes tear-filled, that rose to his vision and dissolved only when he sank to sleep.

CHAPTER VII

LEADING UP TO A CLIMAX

For Ethel Clayton the days that immediately followed the departure of the manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company were merely busy days. Positively nothing happened. The particular work that came to her was not different from that which had been her portion for some months; only in her oversight of things in general (and that oversight secretive) was she differently engaged.

She took her book and pencil into the private office each morning at the usual hour and took dictation from Jim Mayberry.

Mayberry was not the clear-headed, forceful thinker that Barton was. But his letters were brief and to the point nevertheless; he was not a numbskull. Nor did he lack a grasp of business details quite necessary to the carrying on of the affairs of the big concern. He worked faithfully, seemed to neglect nothing; and though he did not admit it, Ethel felt sure he was thankful to her when she smoothed the crudeness of his English, or brought out more clearly the points he desired to make in his correspondence.

To her satisfaction he did not at first show those amorous proclivities which had so annoyed her in

the past. His thoughts seemed to be centered on the business of trying to fill both Barton's and his own jobs. Or was it that Jim Mayberry had something on his mind other than the business affairs of the Hapwood-Diller Company to trouble him?

The office force, of course, buzzed at first because of the departure of Mr. Barton. But every individual was on his best behavior. They had all liked the general manager; and, perhaps, they had visions of his returning suddenly and taking them to task for sins of both omission and commission.

Mayberry left the people in the outer office strictly and entirely alone; even Sydney came to Ethel at times for advice, or to report some slight matter which needed to be "put up to the boss." It had been so before Barton went away, although the girl had not then remarked it. She was still "the buffer" between the small annoyances of the office and the man at the head of affairs.

Grandon Fuller came in one day and had a somewhat extended conference with the manager *pro tem.* Ethel noted that the holder of so large a block of the company's stock seemed to be very friendly with Mayberry, whereas when Mr. Macon Hammerly came in, as was his wont, he always timed his calls so as to miss Mayberry. The shrewd old grain dealer was frank to say that he did not like the present head of the Hapwood-Diller Company.

"Jim always looked to me like a well-fed fox," grumbled Hammerly to Ethel. "I always wonder who's pullet he's just swallowed."

Although Mayberry did not greatly disturb Ethel's quiet pool of existence, Benway Chase seemed to have been an agitating pebble flung into it. Her old friend took hold of his duties with all the energy and keenness of perception that she knew he would display, once he was given a chance. Sydney and the rest of the office force liked him immensely.

On her own part, however, Ethel found him trying. He was promptly at her gate every morning to accompany her to work; and at night he escorted her home. It had been like that when they went to school together. But Ethel felt altogether different about it now. She did not like to be made conspicuous or to be appropriated in such a fashion. And when Benway undertook to go to lunch with her, she put her foot down firmly.

Yet, she could not hurt his feelings. Because of his affliction she had been all her life striving to be particularly kind to Benway. From her earliest remembrance, when she had felt spasms of pity and sympathy for her little playmate and had impulsively run to him to pat his cheek and say, "Poor, poor Bennie!" to this very chance she had begged for him with the Hapwood-Diller Manufacturing Company, Ethel Clayton had mothered the boy. Naturally

and quite unconsciously he took advantage of her kindness.

She shrank from having the rest of the office force suspect any tender relation between herself and the boy. "Boy" was of course the term in which she thought of him. And when he undertook to time his absence from the office so as to accompany her to the restaurant which she usually patronized, she had to put a stop to that. She quietly inaugurated a system of "taking turn about" for lunch hour which pretty well put it out of Benway's power to leave at the same time she did.

Likewise, she went farther away, to the Orleans Tea Room, instead of to the place at which it was the custom of most of the Hapwood-Diller office force to have their midday meal. The tea room was a more expensive place and was largely patronized by "up town" folk; and it was because of this change in her habits that Ethel chanced to learn, not two weeks after the manager's departure for the training camp, something that she thought really did not concern her, but which interested her immensely, as it was connected with Frank Barton.

She saw one noon a gaily, though beautifully, dressed and unmistakable figure entering the tea room ahead of her—that of Helen Fuller. Her escort was Morrison Copley—one of those men whose names made Ethel's lips involuntarily curl. And yet, as far

as Ethel Clayton knew, there was nothing bad about Morry Copley.

She considered it a misfortune that the only empty table should be next the one occupied by those two from what Macon Hammerly called "the swagger part of town." Miss Fuller looked the employee of the Hapwood-Diller Company over with a cold disdain which might have hurt cruelly a supersensitive soul. Ethel's was too well balanced a nature to be disturbed by the ill breeding of the other girl.

"You boys are going to be *terribly* put to it for styles this fall," Helen was drawling, her elbows on the table and her hands cupped to hold her pretty chin. Somebody had told her that the pose became her. "Everything offered for masculine wear will have a military cut."

"I don't see why we're to be put to it," returned Morry, gazing at the girl before him with doglike devotion. "Belted things always did look well on me, you know, Nell. I'm slim waisted."

"Slim in every way, Morry," the girl said laughing. "Morrison Copley, S. S. quite fits you. Slim slacker. My! *I'd* be ashamed if *I* were a man——"

"Plenty of fellows are going. Those that like army life and—and all that," complained Morry. "I don't see why you should hound me, all the time, Nell. And mothaw really would make an awful row if I said I wanted to go."

"If you even *said* so, Morry?" she scoffed.

"Say, aren't you satisfied?" demanded the young man with more energy than usual. "You say you made Frank Barton go to camp. How many scalps do you want to hang in your wigwam?"

"Your scalp, as you call it, would look pretty good to me," she laughed. "I want to send all the fellows I can. Bradley's half promised. He was in the Guard for two years, but got out because he was too lazy to drill, I suppose," Miss Fuller said.

"Pooh, they're only stalling," grumbled Morry. "You know just about how far Brad will get at that training camp. And Barton's only going for a show. They'll never get to France, any of them."

"Why don't *you* try it, then? If there's no danger, that should suit *you*, Morry!"

"I tell you what!" exclaimed the young man indignantly and forgetting his drawl, "if I go into this thing I'll go the whole figure, don't forget that! If other fellows go to France I shall go. I won't hunt me a soft job here where I can wear a uniform and never smell powder."

Helen Fuller looked at him and thoughtfully.

"I wonder, Morry, if you really *would*," she finally said.

Ethel could not help hearing this. Indeed, the heedlessness with which the two conversed on their private affairs in public made it imperative that all within earshot should know what they were talking about.

Slight as was Ethel's interest in the two, and in their affairs, one point did not escape her. It could not fail to impress the girl's mind and linger in her thoughts.

Had Frank Barton gone to the training camp because of the bite of Helen Fuller's tart tongue? Miss Fuller was taking much commendation for inspiring the manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company with patriotism. Was Barton's brand of patriotism of that character? How much influence did the girl really have over him?

These questions could not be stilled in Ethel's mind. She reverted to them time and again. Helen's claim that her influence drove her young men friends to patriotic service seemed to be believed by other people. Somebody told Ethel on Sunday at church that Charlie Bradley and young Copley had both gone to the officers' camp.

"Of course, it's more of a lark than anything else for most of those who go," said the person who told Ethel. "Fancy Morry Copley trying to give orders in that squeaky voice of his!"

Ethel's letters to Barton were strictly business, without being coldly formal. She allowed them to sound a note of cool friendliness in the beginning and at the close but nothing deeper. An expression of hope for his good health was as warm a phrase as entered into them. His polite, brief acknowledgments, addressed to her home, showed that he con-

sidered their correspondence nothing more than a business arrangement.

She realized that she was by no means the only person in Mailsburg interested in the absent ones in camp and barracks. The town was beginning to wake up to the exigencies of the war. The ministers prayed for the boys on Sunday, and every social and charitable organization in Mailsburg began to talk of work for the soldiers at least, whether or not any of them really did much at first.

At this time in her heart Ethel hated the idea of war so desperately that the many activities connected with the draft and the going away and the war itself seemed to her mind both futile and non-beneficial. If those young men really got as far as France, and into the trenches, they would be killed. They were merely "cannon fodder" in that case. And if they did not go—if the war ended, as some people said it would, before many of them got over there—then all this talk and planning was so much wasted breath and time and money.

It was a fact that, at this particular time, Ethel Clayton had little interest save in her work and in the affairs of the Hapwood-Diller Company—particularly in Frank Barton's absence from his post and how it might affect the concern for which they both worked.

Just as she felt that there were plenty of other men to go to the war and that Barton might be spared,

so she felt that there were already too many women, both foolish and wise, giving their time and thought to war work. The local papers began to be full of news of the various activities of the several organizations in this connection. In addition some of those desirous of notoriety were getting a heap of free advertising.

"I declare!" said Mrs. Clayton, busily clicking her knitting needles, "the *Clarion* toots a loud note almost every day for that girl of Mehitable Fuller's. She's first into one thing and then another—like a spoiled kitten. And all this folderol about the war seems to give her more of a chance than ever to show off."

"I wonder," said Ethel, thoughtfully, "if we ought not to think more about it than we do, Mother? I sit here with my hands idle in the evening. I wonder if all this knitting I see going on hasn't a basis of honest endeavor in it, after all?"

"Pshaw!" said her mother.

"I know it looks silly. Looks like a fad. One of the girls in the office brings her knitting bag. She's at the switchboard and has more or less idle time. Instead of reading silly love stories as she used, she knits."

"What does she knit?"

"Why, she says she hopes it will turn out to be a sweater when she gets it done; and if it is good enough

she will give it to the Red Cross," and Ethel laughed gently.

"Humph!" mumbled Mrs. Clayton. "I wonder if she has a good pattern?"

Thus grew the stirrings of general interest in Mailsburg in the war and in our preparations for entering it. Ethel realized amid her manifold office duties that the undercurrent of their life was becoming more strongly patriotic.

It was learned that at least one Mailsburg boy was already at the front. It was true he had disappeared from town some years before, and under a cloud; but his mother had always known where he was.

Now the *Clarion* came out with a full page on Sunday, "Mailsburg's First Boy in France." Sergeant Willy O'Rourke of General Pershing's forces had sent his mother several postal cards from "over there." Here they were reproduced, with a tintype of the sergeant and a sympathetic wash-drawing of Mrs. O'Rourke—a little old woman living down by the docks who said to the reporter:

"Shure an' th' O'Rourkes was all fighters. 'Tis no wonder Willy got over there first. Them Garmans 'll have their own troubles now."

And yet there was something in it that made the reader choke up. Macon Hammerly had his brusk comment to make:

"It may be that Bill O'Rourke left town just ahead of the constable. I remember well the red-headed

gossoon. He wasn't a mite better than this Boots Skinner is now. But, by the holy poker! he's a *man*. There's nothing soft and sissified about Bill. If Bill dies for his country he'll be doing something better than a whole lot of these trifling, dawdling fellows will ever arrive at."

If he dies for his country! That might be Frank Barton's fate if he went "over there." The thought more than once brought Ethel Clatyon upright in bed at night. It sometimes wet her pillow with tears. Yet, if it was the truth that Helen Fuller's influence had urged Barton away to the wars, Ethel was jealous of the other girl for it, and she realized the fact with shame.

Affairs in the Hapwood-Diller Company offices continued much as usual for several weeks. The directors seemed to think Jim Mayberry a satisfactory substitute manager. Having the details of the business at her finger tips as she had, Ethel was quite sure that the superintendent was attending to his additional duties in an exemplary manner.

Ethel checked up much of the work of the other members of the office staff, especially in the correspondence end of the business, and it was in looking over a schedule of stock to be ordered she made a discovery that puzzled her.

Mayberry had now, of course, the ordering of supplies of all kinds; but there was little in the manufacturing line that Ethel Clayton did not know about.

Here were certain grades of stock which she had no idea were called for by any order then on the factory's books already contracted for.

Had Mr. Barton been doing the ordering she would have felt quite free to hold up the schedule until she could speak to him about it. But she feared Mayberry might be touchy in any such matter. He was jealous of his rights, and she hesitated to give him a chance to say she was overstepping the borders of her field of employment.

She went to the files and spent some time in checking off the grades of supplies called for by the orders the factory already had contracted for. And suddenly —it was quite a startling discovery—she came upon the schedule of the Bogata Company's order which she had every reason to believe had been declined.

She had a clear remembrance of the letter she had written Mr. Barton's approval of it, even the reason for the order being refused by the Hapwood-Diller Manufacturing Company. This reason was connected with the very purchase of these special supplies she had noted in the puzzling schedule in her hand.

It could not be overlooked. There was something wrong in what she had discovered.

Fearing she knew not what—a mistake on her own part, perhaps—she waited until she could find Mayberry disengaged. When she knew he was in the manager's office and alone, Ethel ventured to knock upon the door.

CHAPTER VIII

A PUZZLING SITUATION

MAYBERRY glanced up swiftly as she entered the office at his response. He was rolling a cigarette which he finished and lighted, vouchsafing her merely a casual nod. Very different treatment, this, from Frank Barton's unfailing courtesy.

"What's on the docket, Ethel?" Mayberry asked, eyeing her through the smoke that circled from his lips. "Anything wrong?"

"I am not at all sure that there is anything wrong, Mr. Mayberry," she replied, ignoring the chair he twisted about for her to occupy, and standing at the end of the desk. "I have found something which puzzles me so much that I thought it best to have you ratify the order before it is sent."

"What order?"

She placed before him the schedule for supplies which he had given to one of the other girls to copy. "These are the items that puzzle me," she said, pointing to several which, in summing up, amounted to several thousand dollars.

"Well?" he said, his gaze direct and not at all reassuring.

But Ethel Clayton was not to be easily put down. "I was not aware," she said quietly, "that any of our

contracts now under way called for goods of that grade."

"Well?" he said again and in the same sneering tone.

"So I investigated," Ethel pursued, apparently unshaken, "and I found this." She placed before him the papers relating to the Bogata order which she felt so sure Mr. Barton had refused to consider.

"Huh? Why shouldn't you find it?" Mayberry asked in apparent surprise. Yet he flushed slightly, too.

"I have every reason to suppose that order refused. You know it, too. You remember that Mr. Barton asked me to write a letter to that end. I did so."

"I remember there was something said about it," Mayberry reflected. "But I heard nothing more about it. Frank said nothing further to me."

"No. Because it was settled, Mr. Mayberry," the girl said more confidently. "We cannot fill this order."

"Indeed? Are you sure about that?" he asked, eyeing her with perfect composure now.

"Why shouldn't I be sure?" she retorted.

"Well—I don't know," he drawled. "If you wrote a letter refusing this order, Frank saw it, of course?"

"He O. K.'d it," she said.

"And it was sent?"

"So I presume."

"It looks to me as though Frank must have changed

his mind," the superintendent said with a sly little smile. "He said nothing more to me about it. He would, it seems to me, if the order was finally refused. Having once discussed the matter with me, seems to me he would have done that."

"But he thought you understood," cried the girl, both puzzled and alarmed. "You know he said the Bogata Company's credit was involved. It was not whether the order should be accepted or not that was under discussion, Mr. Mayberry. It was merely how the refusal should be couched—in what terms. Don't you remember?"

"I admit you seem to have a clearer remembrance of the circumstances than I," said Mayberry. "But it looks to me as though Frank had changed his mind about it without referring to the matter again to either of us. He probably found out that his fears regarding the Bogata Company's credit were unfounded. Otherwise how would I have found the order on file? We have got to get right to work on it, too. That is why I am ordering these particular supplies."

"But, Mr. Mayberry!" she gasped, "I am quite sure a mistake has been made. Mr. Barton never intended this order to be filled."

"How do you know?"

"The letter I wrote——

"Pooh! I suppose Frank was trying you out—seeing what you could do in an emergency," and the

superintendent laughed. "He never sent your letter. The Bogata people are old customers. It would not do to offend them."

"That is just it, Mr. Mayberry," she cried. "It was a serious matter. I feel sure—Why! I put the letter in the mail myself."

Mayberry sat up straighter in his chair and his gaze became more intent. He dropped the butt of his cigarette in the ash tray that was never on the desk when the general manager was there.

"You mean to tell me," he asked, "that you posted that letter after Barton signed it?"

"No. It was after John made his last trip to the post-office. When Mr. Barton had signed the letter I sealed it in the envelope, affixed the stamp, and placed it in the letter basket on my desk with other late mail."

"Humph! Did those letters go out that evening?" Mayberry asked.

"No. John always takes them when he goes to early post—before I arrive at my desk."

"Then Frank could have regained [illegible]ter without your knowing it."

"But, Mr. Mayberry! surely he [illegible]ave said something."

"Are you sure? He was not in the habit of taking you—or even me—into his confidence in most matters, was he?" and Mayberry looked at the girl keenly. "Where's the carbon copy of that letter?"

"I'll get it," she said, turning swiftly to the door.

"And I say, Ethel!" he said. "Bring the Bogata Company's letter as well, will you?"

She resented his familiar way of speaking; but never had she been able to break Jim Mayberry of calling her by her given name. And he had, after all, known her when she was still a child. She was gone some minutes from the private office—long enough for Mayberry to smoke a second cigarette. She appeared with the proper drawer of the file cabinet and her countenance had fallen. She had run hastily through the Bogata correspondence. Here was the letter which had accompanied the order from the Bogata Company. The copy of the answer she had written at Frank Barton's behest, and which he had approved, was not to be found.

"I do not understand it, Mr. Mayberry," the girl declared in a worried tone.

"Pshaw! easily enough understood," the superintendent rejoined. "He probably conferred with somebody who knew the Bogata people are as safe as a stone church. So he withdrew the letter from your mail basket after you went home."

"Oh, Mr. Mayberry!"

"Sure." Mayberry laughed. "You've stirred up a mare's nest. Don't worry."

"But I can't accept your assertion as at all plausible," the girl said earnestly. "He surely would have spoken to me about it. The next day——"

"His mind was full of army stuff. He did not know half the time what he was doing here for a week before he went."

Ethel knew that was not at all true. But she was not here to quarrel with the superintendent. However, she said:

"I remember clearly that Mr. Barton did not remain here later than I did that evening, Mr. Mayberry. I saw him on the street after I left the factory by the side gate."

"Huh!" Mayberry's cheeks suddenly burned again and his eyes glittered as he gazed loweringly upon her. "You seem to remember mighty well what happened. I remember that evening, too, come to think of it. I was waiting out in front for you in my car. You stood me up."

Scorn leaped suddenly into the girl's eyes. "I do not understand you, Mr. Mayberry," she said tartly.

"Oh! you don't, hey?"

"We are not discussing personalities," she said, dropping her gaze and ignoring his ugly look. "This is business. I fear there has been a serious mistake made."

"Nothing of the kind, that *I* can see," Mayberry rejoined. "Barton changed his mind. Why should you bother *your* head about it further?"

His sneer bit like acid in a fresh wound; but Ethel checked her temper.

"I do not mean to interfere in the slightest wit'

your work, Mr. Mayberry. Mr. Barton brought me into the affair himself. I feel that all is not right. Let us communicate with Mr. Barton before this order for stock is sent. It may save the Hapwood-Diller Company several thousand dollars."

"It won't save us a cent."

"But—"

"I've got it all figured out. You see, I've had this on my mind a long time."

"Yes, that may be true, still—"

"It won't save us a cent, Ethel," the superintendent drawled again, having recovered his own temper. "This Bogata order's got to be filled. It will do no good to delay the purchase of supplies. It's Friday now. If we wrote to-night we could not expect an answer before Tuesday or Wednesday from Barton. And I can point out to you why even he cannot change matters now."

"Why?" she demanded sharply.

He picked up the letter which had accompanied the schedule of the order from the Bogata Company of Norville. If he smiled Ethel did not see it, for she was eagerly scanning the paragraph to which Mayberry's finger pointed:

"Prices and terms as agreed upon in our last two orders. If we hear nothing to the contrary within ten days shall consider the order and terms accepted and will look for delivery of first quota of goods within ninety days."

"Actually," drawled Mayberry, "this order was accepted by us more than a month ago. It was evident that Barton did not send the letter you wrote, and removed the copy of it from the file. The schedule came to me in the usual way. There is nothing more to be said about it, Ethel. I believe that Frank himself said something about The Hapwood-Diller Company never reneging on a job. It would be a bad precedent to do so when he is absent from his post."

He said it so that the girl actually winced. To think of Jim Mayberry pointing out to her the ethics of the matter!

"The fact is," he pursued, coolly, "I have got to get a hustle on to make the first delivery within the specified time. I have already arranged to increase the output of Shop Number Two in order to do this. We shall run four or five hours overtime five days a week, beginning Monday. We're crowded with work as it is; and this Bogata order is a big one."

Ethel listened to him in silence. She realized that it was useless to say anything more. Her heart pounded in her ears, but her countenance remained pale. She felt the approach of disaster when she turned away from his desk with the letter file-drawer in her arms.

"Don't trouble your head about it, Ethel," he called after her. "You take everything too blamed

seriously—just as I told you before. It won't get you anywhere——"

But she had closed the door between them. And she turned to answer she realized very clearly that she would have said something for which she might be sorry afterward.

CHAPTER IX

THE DUTY DEVOLVES

ETHEL CLAYTON felt the assurance of wrongdoing on the part of the superintendent of the Hapwood-Diller Company. Yet she could not tell why nor how.

That the concern had been drawn into the Bogata affair by some trick was without question. Mayberry's look and words alone would have proved that to her satisfaction.

She had a clear and particular remembrance of the circumstances surrounding the receipt of the order from the Norville company, Barton's decision to refuse to fill it, his reason for so doing, and all. The way in which she had shown the general manager how to refuse the order without giving offence could not easily be forgotten.

Mr. Barton had said that the running of the factory on double time, or crowding the shops with extra workmen, meant a distinct loss of profit rather than a gain for the Hapwood-Diller Company. The factory was not arranged for such increase of output. More than one concern has been ruined by such false prosperity.

Here Mayberry was planning to put into execution exactly the plan vetoed by the absent general manager's good sense. Yet, knowing how the contracts for their product stood, Ethel believed that such increase in working hours would be necessary if the Bogata order was to be filled on time.

There was a catch there. She felt it. She was convinced that the superintendent had more knowledge of the subject than he was willing to admit.

It all puzzled the girl. Why should Jim Mayberry be so determined to balk Mr. Barton's will? And in this particular instance?

As far as she had been able to see the superintendent had done nothing in his conduct of the factory's affairs which would have either displeased Barton or was contrary to the latter's methods. Why was the superintendent so determined to favor the Bogata Company?

She remembered clearly that the general manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company was positive of the irresponsibility of the Bogata people. There was no gainsaying that. She was positive he had not changed his mind, involving the destruction of the letter she had written and Barton had signed, the removal of the carbon copy from the files, and the filing of the schedule of the Bogata Company's order.

No! she would not believe Frank Barton had done all that and said nothing about it to either Mayberry

or herself. Yet, if the manager had not done it, *who had?*

Who would be benefited by such a favor to the Bogata people? It might be actually disastrous to the Hapwood-Diller Company—and that thought frightened Ethel.

She did not know what to do. That is, what to do to halt the line of conduct Mayberry had plainly determined to follow. She figured up the schedule for factory stock again. Between four and five thousand dollars for special grade raw material, useless except to the Bogata people, was included in it.

Knowing well how carefully Barton had watched the outlay for stock for months—how narrow the line was between profit and loss in every department indeed—Ethel quite realized that this single purchase would make a very bad showing upon the books of the Hapwood-Diller Company, unless the Bogata order was finished and was paid for.

If that contract was filled and was not paid for, a ruinous deficit in supplies and labor cost would face the factory at the end of the fiscal year. And in addition the general manager had assured her he figured overtime work or an increase of help in the shops as positively detrimental.

This order for stock and factory supplies was supposed to go out at once. It was nearly time for John Murphy to make his last trip for the day to the post-office. There was absolutely nothing to hold the

order back, and Mayberry, she knew, would take offence if the matter was retarded.

It was true that five days must be wasted if Mr Barton was communicated with by mail. And that joker in the Bogata Company's letter seemed to be a barrier to any attempt to get out of fulfilling the contract at this late day. Would it do any good to disturb Barton about the matter at all now?

If she could only see him! If she could discuss the point with him—tell him of her suspicions and fears. At least, some of her suspicions. Ethel scarcely admitted to herself that she positively identified the person guilty of juggling the letters and the Bogata order sheets. Merely she felt certain that Frank Barton knew nothing about it.

He should know. He must know before more harm was done.

The order for supplies was before her. She reached across the desk for the envelope in which to enclose it and her stiff linen cuff caught in the filigree work of the inkstand the office staff had presented to her.

It tottered. In another moment the catastrophe had occurred—a deluge of blue fluid rolled across the desk and the papers on it.

Ethel sprang up to escape the drip from the top of the desk.

"Man overboard!" ejaculated Benway Chase, starting for the lavatory for a towel with which to mop up the ink.

Little Skinner held the blotted order sheets gingerly by their corners, to drip over Ethel's wastebasket.

"Gee!" she said, hoarsely, "all them papers!"

"Those papers, Mabel," admonished Ethel involuntarily.

For Mabel Skinner was like an actor afflicted with stammering in his natural character; when once in his part and on the stage he never stutters. So Mabel, nimble of wit, who was studying stenography at a night school, hoping to work up to a better position with the Hapwood-Diller Company, could take the small amount of dictation that fell to her reasonably well and could transcribe it into fair English: but she usually talked like a street gamin.

"They will have to be recopied, Mabel," Ethel said quietly. "Josephine has her hands full; will you do it for me?"

"Sure," agreed Miss Skinner, shifting her gum. Then she cocked an apprehensive eye at the clock. "I—I got a date to-night, Miss Clayton; but I can go without supper——"

"I don't wish you to finish it to-night, Mabel. Let me have it completed sometime to-morrow forenoon."

"I'm on," said the girl, and bore away the streaked and blotted papers to her machine.

John was called in to clean up the muss, and after a while Ethel could resume her seat. Nothing of importance upon her desk had been spoiled by the

ink but the supply order sheets, and fortunately Jim Mayberry did not come out of the private office until it was all over. It was Ethel's business to see that the order was promptly sent. It was her fault that it was delayed.

Never before in her business experience had Ethel Clayton deliberately done such a thing. She was acting upon her own initiative and in a way that scarcely measured up to her ethical standards. Yet how should she meet guile save with guile?

On the way home that evening Benway was bewailing the fact that Mr. Barton was not in the office so that he could see how well he, Benway, was fitting into the routine of the office.

"Even Mr. Mayberry admits I can do the work all right," the boy said hopefully. "He said as much yesterday. But I don't like the fellow, Ethel. I don't like the way he looks at you."

"'A cat may look at a king', Bennie," she said lightly.

"But no dog like him should look at a queen, Ethel," Benway Chase retorted with a smile and a little sigh. "They are all tarred with the same brush, Ethel. Every man that comes into the offices wants to hang over your desk and palaver."

"Hush, Ben! How you talk!" she exclaimed, a little flushed and annoyed. "I de[illegible]e I'll have you sent out into the shipping room to work if you watch me like that."

"Pooh!" he laughed. "Is the honey at fault because the bees buzz around it?"

"How poetical!" she scoffed. Yet she was secretly displeased. She did not like to think that the men she met in business hours gave her more attention than matters relating to business called for. The one man whose admiration she would have been glad to secure had never, while he was with them, shown any particular interest in her.

Ethel was too introspective for her own comfort. She wondered all the evening if the thought that was budding in her mind was germinated by her desire to see Frank Barton. Was it for business reasons that she determined on her course? Or did she have another and more personal desire to speak with the general manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company, face to face?

However, she considered that the duty had devolved upon her to take a drastic course. The order for new stock for the store could be delayed only forty-eight hours through the accident to the first draft of the schedule. Instead of its reaching its destination on Saturday, Ethel saw to it that it was not mailed until after noon on Saturday. Therefore it would not be received by the dealer to whom it was assigned until Monday. Meantime——

She astonished her mother on Saturday evening by announcing that she proposed to go to Quehasset on the early train Sunday morning. By this time the

railroad was running excursion trains to the officers' training camp on Saturdays and Sundays. Quehasset was becoming a popular week-end resort.

"Not alone!" gasped Mrs. Clayton. "Never!"

"I'd like to know why not?" her daughter asked, rather tartly. "I've been to Boston alone, and that's farther."

"But it won't look right—all those men, Ethel. You know some of them, too. There's Mr. Barton!"

"I expect to see him," declared the girl composedly.

"It—it doesn't look right," objected her mother more faintly.

"I'd like to know why not? I should hope I was old enough to go about without a chaperon, or——"

"Let Benway go with you," urged Mrs. Clayton, hurriedly.

But that was exactly what Ethel did not wish to do. Indeed, if possible, she should have liked to keep the knowledge of her trip to Quehasset from her mother. She hurried away early in the morning, before most of the folk at that end of Burnaby Street were astir, and boarded the train which stopped but a minute at the Mailsburg Station at eight o'clock.

She noted, as she passed along the High Street to the station, that more than the usual number of automobiles were abroad and most of them headed for the Creek Road which was the first lap of the driving highway to the training camp.

The Fuller car was one of these she saw. Helen was driving and her mother and father sat in the tonneau. Her cousins gave Ethel Clayton not the slightest notice, but she could not help being somewhat disturbed by the thought that they were likewise bound for the training camp and that they would see her there with Frank Barton. At any rate, she hoped to arrive at the army camp first.

CHAPTER X

LOVE AND BUSINESS

FRANK BARTON had been thinking but little of love and not much about business. His entire time from the bugle-blown:

"I can't get 'em up!
I can't get 'em up!
I can't get 'em up in the mor-r-rning!"

to tattoo at night was filled with thoughts military. In addition to the regular course in tactics, he was studying special branches, such as the science of gun-fire, range finding, signaling, and the like, for he wished to be assigned to the Field Artillery branch of the service.

His former experience in the Guard was of vast assistance to him, yet he found that even the brief campaign on the Mexican Border had greatly changed the drill and the training of both officers and men. New methods were being adopted all the time. He soon realized that a military formula based upon the experience gained by our War Department in the Civil War, and upon which basis the National Guard had been drilled in the past, was almost as old-fashioned as the rules for conducting a Field of Honor in the time of the Crusaders.

The Great War has flung into the discard most established measures of warfare. Fancy, so many years after the tilting with spears, a fighting man wearing an iron pot on his head!

Barton had little time for the social life of the camp nor interest in it. He was only interested in those men about him who were as sturdily in earnest as himself in learning and getting ahead. Some were getting into "this army thing," as they called it, as a profession; some out of pure patriotism, even if they did not talk about it. In either case those who were not thoroughly in earnest did not last long.

He was mildly surprised when Morry Copley and his friend Bradley arrived in camp—the former arrayed in a uniform cut by a fashionable tailor, Bradley slouching behind in his heavy way, and with a scowl. Why either of these fellows had come it was hard for Barton to understand.

Reports from the factory encouraged Barton to believe that he might safely continue his training. Mayberry had driven over in his car once to see him and they had talked things over. Business seemed running on well-oiled gears. There had been nothing in Ethel Clayton's brief letters to make him apprehensive. The factory and its affairs seemed far afield from him.

The camp interests were so manifold that when even a short furlough was due him Barton did not go home to Mailsburg. Instead he went to New York

to confer with certain high officers of the Department of the East who he felt sure would bear him in mind if chance arose for an early assignment to the Front. If business matters remained as they seemed to be, he was determined to get "over there" as soon as possible. Pershing's hundred thousand were on the scene; the engineers had marched through London and had arrived in France; now it was the Rainbow Division that was talked of as being almost ready to sail, and Frank Barton was eager to be assigned to duty with them.

"Rest your mind easy, Barton," Grandon Fuller assured him the first time he came over to Camp Quehasset with his daughter. "We stockholders appreciate all that you have done; the Board is more than pleased with your work. But you have trained a good assistant in Mayberry. He'll do very well."

"I believe he will," Frank Barton said heartily. He would rather, however, have had a reassuring word from Macon Hammerly upon this point. But Hammerly neither wrote to him nor came near the camp.

Helen was full of her own plans, although she did not forget to show some interest in Barton's affairs. She had become an active member of the Red Cross forces. Being amply able to pay her own expenses, and with health and freedom, she had the more easily secured permission to join the very next quota of Red Cross workers sailing from "an Atlantic sea-

port"—that in about six weeks. Her mother was to go with her and establish herself in Paris.

"Really," Barton thought, "it is brave o. Helen, and wonderfully unselfish as well." That the girl made a display of everything she did was not seen by his blinded eyes.

Barton was expecting the Fullers over again in their car on this Sunday, and had accordingly polished his accoutrements and made his quarters presentable. He shared these last with three other men; but they were all off for the day, and he himself was duty-free until taps.

So he was not at all surprised when he heard the rustle of crisp skirts and a light tapping on his open door. Before he could reply to the summons he heard Morry Copley's high voice advising:

"He must be there, Miss—ah—Really, I'm suah he's not gone out of the street this morning. I'll look around for him if I may?"

"Thank you," said a very cool voice. Morry was evid tly not being encouraged. And it was not Helen Fuller who spoke.

"Miss Clayton!"

Barton appeared with hand outstretched and a real welcome in his eyes. But Copley was not to be easily ignored.

"I say, Barton," he drawled, "I showed her over here from the camp entrance, knowing you were at home, don't you know."

"Thanks, old fellow," Barton said. "This is Miss Clayton's first visit to the camp."

"Oh, I knew that," Copley agreed, boldly eyeing the girl and showing no desire to relieve them of his presence. One of Barton's Western brother-rookies would have accused the young exquisite of "horning in." "I'm suah if I'd ever seen—er—the lady here before I should have remembered her."

Ethel was plainly ruffled; but Frank Barton burst into hearty laughter. He considered Morry quite harmless.

"Miss Clayton, I am sure, will allow me to introduce you, Copley," he said cordially, and then smiled at Ethel. "Mr. Copley comes from our town, Miss Clayton."

"Bah Jove! I saw you before in a tea room once," Morry burst out. "Suah I did! I was with Miss Fuller, you know. I wonder I did not recognize you before. You weren't dressed the same, you know."

"If it was on a working day I am sure she was not dressed the same," Barton said, looking frankly his approval of Ethel's Sunday appearance.

And yet, as she stood bandying light conversation with the two men, Ethel Clayton was secretly hurt. Would Frank Barton have so casually introduced Helen Fuller, for instance, to any companion-in-arms who had forced himself upon them as Morry Copley had? The thought stung her pride.

Really Copley seemed more than a little interested in her. He rattled on boldly, and there was not a chance for her to divert his attention that she might speak seriously and personally to the man she had come to see.

The latter was unfeignedly glad to see her; but he seemed to consider her visit merely a social one. And that did not altogether please Ethel Clayton. She had come strictly on business. At least, so she had been assuring herself. Yet all Barton seemed to care about the factory and its affairs was expressed in a perfunctory:

"Everything going on all right at the works, Miss Clayton? Though of course that is a superfluous question with such capable people as you and Mayberry on the job. I knew it would be that way."

"Really, Mr. Barton, you must not assume too much," she hesitated, unable to approach clearly before Morry Copley the matter that so troubled her and that had brought her to Quehasset.

"I say," drawled the latter, "you don't mean to say Miss Clayton is one of these really industrious people—like yourself, Barton? Is she, too, a prop and support of the Hapwood-Diller Company?"

"She most certainly is!" smiled the general manager. "But I believe she brings me nothing but good news. How about it, Miss Clayton?"

It was her chance—perhaps the best one she would have to get him away from this chattering, inconse-

quential Morry Copley. "I have one puzzle to consult you about, Mr. Barton," she began, when, with a whir and clash of released gears, a big touring car whirled around the corner and halted almost directly before the shack.

"Oh, Jimminy Christmas, see who's here!" ejaculated Copley.

"Miss Fuller! Welcome to our city!" joined in Barton, and hastily descended to the car.

Morry Copley remained lounging beside Ethel, greeting the girl in the car with merely the semaphore sign of good comradeship. Helen was alone, having dropped her mother and father at the Staff Headquarters. As had been said, Grandon Fuller had once borne the title of "Colonel" and played the fact now for all it was worth.

"Don't let me keep you, Mr. Copley," Ethel said significantly.

"No chance!" drawled Morry. "Miss Fuller has no use for me when Barton's around. They talk nothing but war and nursing. Gee! I hate to think of folks getting all mussed up so."

"Why, for pity's, sake did you ever join this camp?" Ethel asked, in astonishment.

"I rawther fancied myself in the uniform, don't you know," he declared, but with twinkling eyes. "I say!" he added, "they're not going for a spin without us?"

Ethel leaped to her feet and anger flashed from her eyes, although Morry did not see it. Miss Fuller was evidently trying to urge Barton to get into the car. She had punched her starter button and the car began to throb.

But Barton turned back to the two on the plank porch of the shack. "Do come, Miss Clayton," he urged. "I promised I would take luncheon with Miss Fuller to-day at the Mannerly Arms, and she has not much time. It will be quite all right, I am sure. If you have something to say to me——"

"My errand is strictly business, Mr. Barton," Ethel replied shortly.

"I am sure Miss Fuller will wait——"

"Oh, bring her along, *do!*" exclaimed Helen from the car and with impatience. "Come on, Morry. I know *you* are dying to take her. You'll excuse me for not getting out and begging you myself, Miss Clayton," she added carelessly. "I suppose it is sometimes necessary to mix business with pleasure. If you really *have* to consult Mr. Barton——"

"I will not detain him long, Miss Fuller," Ethel said, pale but firm. "I have neither time nor inclination to go to lunch with you—and Mr. Copley. She dismissed the latter with a curt nod, and he strolled down to the car, grumbling, while Barton, a little vexed, took his place beside the girl who he acknowledged was so capable an assistant in the factory office.

"I am sorry to interfere in any way with your affairs, Mr. Barton," Ethel hastened to say. "Had I not believed the occasion serious——"

"Serious for me?" he asked quickly, eyeing her curiously.

"Serious to the Hapwood-Diller Company," she replied stiffly. "Of course I have a double interest in the welfare of the company. My mother's income depends upon its profits."

"I know that your mother holds some of our stock," he said patiently.

"Therefore my particular interest may perhaps be excused." Ethel could not help saying this, if it was a mite catty. She could not feel in any angelic mood at the moment. "In addition, Mr. Barton, you asked me to keep a watchful eye on things in the office."

"I did," he said with gentleness.

She flushed more deeply. It was plain that he was quite aware she had been hurt by Miss Fuller's manner; and that but increased Ethel's vexation. As though it really mattered what Helen Fuller did or said!

He noted the flush and looked disturbed.

"Are you not feeling well?" he asked kindly.

"Oh, yes, I am perfectly well," she returned quickly.

"You look as if you might have a headache, or something like that."

"It wouldn't matter if I did have," she replied, not knowing what else to say.

"Oh, yes, it would. I don't want you to work if you are not well."

"Here is the situation," and she rushed on to state the matter of the Bogata order with her usual brisk explicitness.

Barton now gave close attention, and his changing expression betrayed the value he put upon her story. At its conclusion he demanded:

"But what's the matter with Jim? He must know that we all agreed those people were not to be trusted."

"He did not agree to that, it is evident," Ethel said dryly. "In fact, his remembrance seems to be hazy regarding the whole matter. Seems to think you would have spoken to him about it again had you not intended to accept the order."

Barton made an impatient gesture. "That's Jim all over. Stubborn as a mule!" he exclaimed. "And yet that very stubbornness makes him of value in many circumstances."

It was plain he had no real suspicion of Mayberry. And Ethel was determined not to put forward just at that time her own belief in the superintendent's treachery.

"And what have you done about the matter before coming to me?" Barton asked with a curiosity that Ethel thought she understood. He was not

at all sure whether she had the initiative to balk this thing which she believed was all wrong.

"Something wholly feminine, I fear," she replied, and told him of the accident to the order addressed to the factory supply people.

Barton laughed shortly. Evidently he was not displeased.

"I can see you have a very good reason for not quarreling with Mayberry. Quite right. Things would by no means go so smoothly if you two could not work together. You retarded the order so that you could see me to-day?"

"Yes."

"And what do you expect me to do?"

"If that Bogata order is not to be filled, you can telegraph the stock people to hold our order for correction."

"Right! You certainly have a grasp of the situation, as you always have, Miss Clayton," he said promptly. "I will dictate that telegram. You can send it from the railroad station as you go back, if you will."

"Yes, Mr. Barton," she responded, whipping out her book and pencil.

He smiled covertly. She was all business now.

"Your suspicions are quite correct," Barton observed. "Somebody tampered with that letter and order. I did not see the letter or the carbon copy of

it after signing the former. The Bogata people must have a friend in our offices. Have you any idea——"

"No!" she exclaimed almost harshly.

If Barton could not see Jim Mayberry's hand in the affair surely it was not her place to tell him. He seemed to ignore utterly the possibility of the superintendent's being the person guilty.

"The Bogata people cannot hold us to any such terms," Barton went on to say. "We did not accept the order. Business—especially as important a matter as this—is not so easily done. Their letter was a good deal of a bluff as it stood. I should have felt justified in throwing it and the schedule of their order into my wastebasket. Jim Mayberry is green yet. I'll have you take word to him——"

"Oh, Mr. Barton! if you do that you will make my position terribly difficult," she cried.

"True," he admitted. "I suppose that is so. I will communicate with Hammerly. He knows all about the affairs of the Bogata people. We will let him break the news to Jim," and he laughed a little.

"You see, Miss Clayton, we must expect such mistakes as this to creep in when a fellow is like Jim. He has all the knowledge of the business that is necessary, I am sure. But he is likely to make mistakes—at first."

She looked at the manager in wonder. Was it possible that his old-time interest in Jim Mayberry, and the fact that they had been friends for so long,

utterly blinded Barton to the superintendent's faults?

"You have a quicker mind than Jim," went on Barton, easily, "and you haven't his stubbornness. I really would not dare accept my lieutenancy and ask for active duty if Jim had not you at his elbow. I know you will not let him make any serious error."

"But, Mr. Barton!" she cried, under her breath, "you do not expect really to leave the country so quickly?"

"Perhaps. I have offered my services. I have got my commission. Really, my work here has been somewhat like a review of former studies. And officers are needed——"

"Not *over there?*" Ethel gasped.

He did not chance to see her face as he replied quietly: "So we expect. We are not supposed to talk of it. Certain movements of the War Department are kept secret. But whatever happens to me I am confident you and Jim will conduct the affairs of the Hapwood-Diller Company successfully. Why, this proves it! What he overlooks you will not miss. Now, will you take a letter to Mr. Hammerly?"

She held her pencil poised in readiness and nodded. Surely at that moment she could not have uttered a word. He began to dictate, and the letter was couched in such terms as to show his belief that Jim Mayberry was perfectly innocent of all guile in the

matter. However, when it was concluded, Barton said reflectively:

"But there is a traitor in the offices, Miss Clayton. That we know it must put you and Mayberry both on guard. I depend on you particularly to watch for the guilty party."

"And suppose I find him?" she demanded quickly.

"If you cannot reach me," Barton gravely told her, "then—then go to Mr. Hammerly. Cross-grained as he is, he is perfectly honest. Besides," he added, "next to Mr. Grandon Fuller, he owns more stock in the Hapwood-Diller Company than anybody else."

CHAPTER XI

WAR IS DECLARED

"For pity's sake, Mr. Barton, *do* come away," Helen Fuller cried at last. "We'll *never* have time for luncheon."

"Beg pardon. Business must be attended to before we can take our pleasure, always," and Frank Barton laughed.

But Ethel's countenance was quite composed again. She did not even glance in Miss Fuller's direction as she closed the notebook and put it and the pencil into her bag.

"Good-day, Miss Clayton," Barton said, taking her hand. "I will not thank you for coming to me on this business, for I know your deep interest in the company's affairs. That was merely your duty. But to see you again has been a pleasure. Even should I be assigned to foreign duty suddenly, I shall hope to see all my Mailsburg friends at least once before I sail. I send my regards to everybody in the office."

It was like that. He did not consider her call a personal one. Yet that was not altogether Frank Barton's fault, for Ethel had made it plain that she had come only on business. The young manager

of the Hapwood-Diller Company was no more dense than any other man.

Helen's voice, with a tartness in it that could not be mistaken, reached them again:

"*Do* hurry, Mr. Barton! I presume if you were fighting in the trenches it would all have to stop while you gave your attention to some factory matter."

He laughed and ran down the steps to the car. The engine of the latter began to roar again.

"Coming, Morry?" Helen asked, as the wheels began to revolve.

"Two's company, three's a gang," he drawled, waving his hand. "Farewell. I am going to show Miss Clayton around the camp."

This he insisted on doing. After the brusk departure of Barton in the car Ethel was too proud to show any chagrin. Besides, Morry Copley was evidently desirous of pleasing her. She noted that he had assumed quite a military carriage and concluded that his few weeks in camp had done him a world of good.

"Won't you let me call on you when I come back to Mailsburg on furlough, Miss Clayton?" he asked, when he had showed her everything of general interest in the camp.

"Most certainly not!" Ethel exclaimed bluntly. "You know very well Mrs. Copley would be horrified if you visited a working girl, Mr. Copley."

"Aw, fiddle!" returned Morry in disgust, "I'm not half as much tied to her apron strings as you think."

"Perhaps you should be," Ethel laughed. "What will she say if you really are ordered to France?"

"Mothaw really thinks this is all play. She has no idea we'll really go. At least, not such fellows as Bradley and me."

"And—will you?" Ethel wickedly observed.

"If I get my commission I'll be off before she knows it—poor dear lady," he declared. "Don't you people in Mailsburg fret. There are some men in this camp besides Frank Barton."

Ethel sent the telegram holding up the stock order as instructed by Barton, and when she arrived home late in the afternoon she transcribed her notes of the letter to Mr. Macon Hammerly and sent it to that gentleman by special messenger. The latter appeared in the offices of the Hapwood-Diller Company early on Monday morning. For once he seemed to wish to catch Jim Mayberry at his desk.

"Let's see," scowled Macon Hammerly, eyeing the superintendent blackly, "have you managed to find a hat in town big enough for you, Jim?"

"I have 'em made to order—and stretchable," grinned the younger man, never at a loss for an answer when he met Hammerly, whom he just as cordially disliked as Hammerly disliked him. "What's biting you now?"

"A suspicion that you have a swelled head is eat-

ing on me," frankly announced the old grain dealer, his bushy eyebrows meeting again. "I've come to give you a mite of advice."

"Thanks!" returned Mayberry, encouragingly. "I've been expecting this visit ever since Frank went away. It must have pained you to keep away so long."

"Not exactly," returned Hammerly. "It's only surprised me that I haven't had to come around before. I told Barton I'd keep an eye on you."

"Thanks again," growled Mayberry, and this time he did not look so pleasant. Hammerly was quite unmoved.

"Here's the trouble," he said, quietly watching the superintendent. "Barton wrote me to look up the Bogata people again."

The hit was palpable. Mayberry jumped in his chair. He lifted his face to stare at the old man in open surprise.

"Seems there's an order kicking around the office here from them. Barton had his doubts about accepting it. Now there *is* no doubt. You're not to do a stroke of work on those goods."

"Who says so?" snapped Mayberry. "Who's in charge here, I want to know, Mr. Hammerly?"

"*You* won't be," said the other softly, "if you don't take well meant advice."

"Why! that order's been accepted long ago. I've

ordered some of the stock. I've planned to begin the work this week."

"Change your plans, Jim Mayberry. Change your plans," said Hammerly in a more threatening voice. "You're not in power here. Barton may come back any day and polish you off. And this Bogata business is settled—for all time. Don't make a mistake."

"Why, we can't——"

"You're right. You can't fill the order. Pull in your horns. The Bogata Company are going to have a New Year's present of a receivership. And I'm hanged if I'll stand by and see them try to bolster up their rotten credit with the credit of the Hapwood-Diller Company. They don't happen to owe this firm anything, Jim; but they owe everybody else in the world who would give 'em a cent's worth of credit. You kill their order."

"I tell you it can't be done," muttered Mayberry.

"If you don't Barton will come here and do it himself. He's already wired your supply people to hold that order you sent for correction. You're not going to run this factory into debt one penny's worth to aid the Bogata people."

Mayberry sprang up, his heavy face aflame. "If you were a younger man, Mr. Hammerly——"

"Forget my age, Jim. I've never seen the day yet that I couldn't handle a chap of your size and shape," and he let his keen eye run over Mayberry's obese figure. "You're as stubborn as a mule. Perhaps

that's all the matter with you. But you've got your instructions. All you need to do is to follow them. Write to the Bogata people and tell them this factory can't fill their order."

"I don't see by what right——"

"None at all. I'm butting in," said Hammerly turning to the door. "But you'd better think it over." He went out chuckling, and after a while Mayberry cooled down. He knew well enough Hammerly's power on the board. He soon grew calm enough to study the thing out.

Barton had called on Hammerly for advice again. How had Barton heard of the Bogata matter? Just one answer to that question. Ethel Clayton!

Mayberry's expression when he came to this conclusion boded ill for Ethel. He knew just how he stood personally with her. Not that he cared more for Ethel Clayton in the first place than he did for half a dozen other girls. Only it had piqued him that she should have been so disdainful of his advances.

Now he had a real reason, he told himself, for considering Ethel in the light of an enemy. She had thwarted his intention of jamming the Bogata order through the factory before Barton became aware of what he was doing. The success of the scheme meant much in a financial way to the superintendent.

Now he could not do it. It was true that he had got his orders from the old grain merchant. Ham-

merly would surely keep his eye on him hereafter—if he had not already been doing so.

Mayberry knew he had a friend in Grandon Fuller. But he did not know yet just how much of a friend Mr. Fuller was. Nor why he was friendly with him! Mr. Fuller had not yet shown his hand.

Fuller was the heaviest stockholder in the Hapwood-Diller Company and was, of course, on the board of directors. But it was doubtful if he could swing more votes than Macon Hammerly.

Angry as he was, Mayberry felt that it would be the part of wisdom to keep from an open break with the grain dealer. Besides, Barton had not gone to France yet—if he ever did.

A telegram came from the supply house:

"We hold your order as requested subject to correction."

Mayberry sent for Ethel.

"What do you know about this, Ethel?" he demanded, glowering at her as she read the telegram.

"Just as much as you do, Mr. Mayberry," she declared, composedly enough.

He thought that over a bit. Then he dictated a a letter to the Bogata Company bluntly refusing to fill their order and without even explaining or apologizing for the seeming delay in answering their letter. He had managed to do exactly what Barton had

tried to avoid—giving the Bogata people offence. If the miracle happened, and the Bogata people "came back," they would never feel friendly again toward the Hapwood-Diller Company.

As for Mayberry and Ethel, war was declared between them. There could be no further doubt of it.

CHAPTER XII

THE IMAGE HE TOOK AWAY

ALTHOUGH Frank Barton was still manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company, he had turned his salary back into the treasury of the concern ever since joining the training camp at Lake Quehasset.

It was not long after the flurry regarding the Bogata Company order that a suggestion was made in the directors meeting of the Hapwood-Diller Company that Barton be removed and Mayberry be put in his place as manager. The suggestion came from Grandon Fuller. Macon Hammerly opposed it.

"I am told that Barton will sail shortly with a contingent of our brave boys for the other side," Mr. Fuller declared pompously. "I fancy he has merely neglected to resign in the stress of other business. Mr. Mayberry has shown his ability and capacity for management. I do not see why Brother Hammerly should object."

"Patriotic reasons," said the opposing member of the board dryly. "I object to kicking a fellow out of his job because he is going off to fight his country's battles. Let things rest as they are, Fuller."

"Do you mean all through the war?" demanded Mr. Fuller, with some heat.

"Why not? Frank Barton pulled this company out of a slough of despond that pretty near swamped us. If he comes back alive I, for one, want to see him manager again."

"But what about Mr. Mayberry?"

"How is *he* hurt?" snorted the old grain merchant. "He's sitting here, tight enough, while another man is fighting in his place. The least he can do is to hold Barton's job for him."

That killed the suggestion for the time being. The matter leaked out of the board-room, however, and Ethel Clayton heard of it. She wondered if, after all, the Fullers were such good friends of Frank Barton as they seemed to be.

Likewise she began to wonder what would happen to her if Jim Mayberry ever got the full power over the office force that he had in the factory. He might then discharge her on some easily trumped-up pretext. The thought was not a pleasant one.

Of late, on several occasions Mayberry had criticized her work, especially her management of the office staff. He aimed some shafts of his rough wit, too, at Benway Chase, although he could find no complaint to make in the new clerk's work.

For Benway really showed a remarkable aptitude for his position. He was always energetic. When a member of the shipping room force was away for a while, Benway took on the duties of checker in

addition to his usual work, which latter he did not in the least neglect.

When Mayberry noticed this he said:

"So you are out to master the whole business, are you, Chase? Going to be the wheelhorse, driver and spotted dog under the hind axle."

"I told you, Mr. Mayberry, I was out for your job," Benway said coolly. "Every little bit a fellow learns puts him so much farther ahead."

"Think so, do you?" sneered the superintendent.

But Ethel knew Benway was getting a firm grasp on the details of the office work that made him exceedingly useful. He very quietly relieved her of some of the duties which had a way of falling upon her shoulders.

Barton had been in the habit of depending on her bright mind and willingness to a great degree. Mayberry deliberately shirked such of the routine work as he could. And of course it all fell upon Ethel and made her burden the heavier to bear. Some times she was held at her post until long after the others were gone for the day.

Benway Chase would have remained to help or to accompany her home on these occasions had she allowed him to, and she had fairly to drive Little Skinner home. The latter would have done all Ethel's work for her had she been able.

"Take it from me!" the slangy Mabel declared. "That Jim Mayberry lets you slave here while he's

playin' poker down to the Bellevue or runnin' about the country in that flivver of his. I wish't Mr. Barton would come back. He wouldn't see you abused, Miss Clayton—'deed he wouldn't!"

Ethel had not heard from Barton since her visit to the training camp, although she wrote to him briefly each week as she had promised. Nothing special had arisen in the daily affairs of the Hapwood-Diller Company to cause her sufficient worry to bring it to Barton's notice. And with the little trials, of course, she had no intention of troubling him.

Mailsburg's first quota of drafted men marched past the factory one day to the railway station. The streets were lined with silent people for the most part. But the buildings were cheerful with bunting and flags. It was Ethel who insisted that the factory front he decorated in addition to the great silk flag which Barton had raised first with his own hands and which John raised each morning and took in at night.

Mayberry grudgingly shut down the shops for an hour that the hands might cheer more than a hundred of the drafted men who had left the Hapwood-Diller Company to don the army khaki.

Service flags began to appear all over the town after that. Mrs. Trevor, Barton's former landlady, hung out one with a single star on it, and Ethel was told that the grim old woman kept Barton's chair at the table for him and allowed nobody to sit in it.

Almost every day something happened to remind Ethel that the war was coming closer and closer to her. Her mother was knitting for the Red Cross. She did not say much about this work save to mention with a sniff that she hoped she could turn out as good work as those snips of girls she saw knitting in the cars and on the park benches.

"And I expect to see them take those awful looking knitting bags to church with them one of these days," was likewise Mrs. Clayton's tart comment.

One day Ethel saw Morry Copley in town. It was while she was out to lunch and, without seeing her, he bustled past so importantly that she could not escape the thought that there must be something afoot—perhaps some assignment of troops or officers that affected Frank Barton as well. Morry wore the insignia of a second lieutenant.

She hurried back to the office with the expectation of seeing Barton. Surely he would not come to town without looking in upon them! But the afternoon dragged by without his appearance. She said nothing to her office mates regarding her expectations.

Each time the door opened she started and looked up, expecting to see him—tall and handsome in his khaki—enter the office. It made her nervous. There were mistakes in her work that put her back so she had to remain after hours again. When Benway wanted to help her she snapped at him and sent that surprised young man home "with a flea in his ear."

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, Barton had been cooling his heels in the Fullers' reception hall. He had sent up his card to Helen and the maid had come down to say that the young lady was very busy. Would Monsieur wait?

Monsieur would—most assuredly he would! He had not seen or heard from Miss Fuller since the Sunday on which both she and Ethel Clayton had chanced to come to Camp Quehasset. And now, save for a conference with Mr. Hammerly, he had sacrificed most of his time in Mailsburg to speak confidentially to Grandon Fuller's daughter.

He waited her pleasure with such patience as he could master. He had come to think of Helen during most of his waking hours. At least if his military duties and studies were to the fore, the thought of Helen was ever present in the back of his mind.

She was going to France he knew; but he might never see her over there. Just now he was feeling very keenly the fact that he was assigned to the Front and that he might, within a very short period, be in desperate danger of death.

A precious hour and more he waited. Occasionally he saw a soft-footed serving man or a maid pass his lonely alcove. Nobody spoke to him. Finally the noise of a car under the porte-cochère awoke hollow echoes. Immediately the sound of voices came from above. Down the broad staircase tripped Helen.

"Oh, mercy *me*, Mr. Barton! Are *you* here? And waiting *all* this time? That stupid maid! I was so busy with my dressmaker that I could not possibly come. And then—the maid never reminded me."

She might have delivered him a physical blow in the face and he would have felt or shown it no more keenly. She was gorgeous in frock and hat, and she smiled upon him in her old alluring way. But his spirit fell from its heights. A dressmaker had been of more importance! She had depended upon her maid to remind her that he was waiting to see her!

"I hoped to see you for a few minutes, Miss Helen," he said quietly. "I am going away."

"Of course! So am I!" she cried. "But I must be off now to the Northup's dinner. The car is waiting. It's too late for me to refuse, Mr. Barton. And there is a dance afterward that I positively *must* look in at. Dear *me!* I'll really be *glad* to be over there and at work in a hospital. This running around to dinners and dances and what Morry Copley calls 'tea-fights', is just killing me.

"Can't I see you in the morning, Frank?"

He wanted to tell her that in the morning he would already be at sea. But that was forbidden.

"I am afraid not. I have to go back on the eighteen."

"Oh! Not so *soon!* Really?" There was much lacking in her tone—much of warmth that he had expected.

"Well, best of luck! Hope to see you 'over there,' you know. Bye-bye!"

She ran out to the car, turning to wave her hand as she got in. And that after he had waited an hour! Had Macon Hammerly been right after all? He had said:

"The Fullers only want you for what they can get out of you. Grandon Fuller was never known yet to do anything without a purpose behind it. Look how he hung about Israel Diller—was right on the spot when the old chap died. You don't suppose Diller made Grandon Fuller rich because he *deserved* riches, do you?"

His wasted hour caused Barton to miss the office force at the factory; but he went that way to the station, hoping to see Mayberry at least. His mastery of the Hapwood-Diller Company's affairs seemed a long way behind him now. Indeed when a man faces war the past grows small to him in any case. It is what is going to happen to him that completely obsesses his thought.

Barton thrust his head in at the office door, having opened it softly. A single strong light was ablaze over Ethel Clayton's desk. The remainder of the room was in shadow.

The girl had evidently finished the task that had kept her so late, for her desk was cleared up and she sat back in her chair, dreaming. Her gaze was fixed

on the door of the private office; but Frank Barton could not see her face until he spoke.

"Nobody here but you, Miss Clayton? I am certainly glad to see you. All the rest gone?"

She turned her face toward him slowly, appearing not to be startled at all by his coming. "They are all gone, Mr. Barton," she said quietly, and reached up quickly to turn the shade of the electric lamp so that the light no longer fell on her face.

"Mayberry gone, too?" he asked, coming in with his hand held out.

"He is out of town, I believe," Ethel told him, her voice unshaken, rising to meet him.

"I am sorry I missed them all," Barton said, grasping her hand for a moment warmly. "You will have to give them my regards and best wishes."

"Will you not stay over night?"

"I fear that will be impossible. I am on my way to catch the eight-ten."

"You are not going away *now?* Not for *good?*"

Barton laughed. "I hope to come back safely," he said. "But this is good-bye for some time, Miss Clayton——"

He caught her arm and steadied her as she swung against the desk. Her eyes closed and he saw suddenly that she was very pale.

"Are you faint? You're working too hard!" he cried. "Look here, Miss Clayton, you must take better care of yourself. I shouldn't feel half so safe

in going away if you were not right here on the job. You've got to be good to yourself."

"I—I was a little faint. It's all right, Mr. Barton," she murmured. "Nothing serious, I assure you. I'm not one of the fainting kind, as you know."

"No indeed!" he cried admiringly. "I bank on you and your very good sense, Miss Clayton. You are not like other girls. I did not know for a moment but that my announcement startled you. I should have been flattered!" and he laughed.

She was silent. He could not see her face well, for she kept it turned from the lamp. Finally she said: "Naturally I am troubled that you should be going—so far away. Oh, this war is terrible, Mr. Barton!"

"Yes. All wars have been terrible. The one that touches you nearest seems the most terrible. But after all, Miss Clayton, it doesn't matter much how one dies as long as death is inevitable."

"That is fatalism! Perhaps it is the right soldier spirit," she murmured. Then she turned to face him again and her countenance was quietly radiant. "But why should we who stop at home add to your burdens? We should send you away with a smile."

"I wonder!" he exclaimed. "I wonder if we fellows ought not to go away with a smile—to furnish those we leave behind with courage? Those we leave behind must do our work. War is waste, you know, when all is said and done. I leave you, Miss Clayton, to keep things straight here," and he smiled

warmly again as his hand once more sought hers. "Write to me," and he told her how to address him through the War Department. "Good-bye!"

He wheeled swiftly and marched to the door. His upright carriage and squared shoulders made his back look almost strange to her. She stood before the desk leaning against it, her hands clinging tightly to its edge. Her knuckles were perfectly white from the pressure of her hands upon the wood—that grasp which actually kept her from falling.

But her face showed none of her terror and weakness. He turned at the door to smile and nod to her again. The image he took away in his mind was of her perfectly composed, smiling face. And again it was the memory of Ethel Clayton, not of Helen Fuller, that he carried away as the Girl He Left Behind.

CHAPTER XIII

THE AWAKENING

FRANK BARTON had gone to the Front. He would be where there was battle, murder, and sudden death! War had become a horrid, living reality to Ethel Clayton.

She heard that Morrison Copley had been in town to bid his mother good-bye and had gone away, too, bound for the transport. Likewise that Charlie Bradley, that hulking fellow who had been so notorious about town, supposedly had sailed at the same time Barton had gone to France.

Ethel had occasion to pass the Fuller house within the week. It was shuttered and empty looking. The *Clarion* had told, in a column and a half, of the last reception tendered Helen Fuller and her mother before their departure. Grandon Fuller was living at the Bellevue and seemed rather relieved than otherwise, so people said, that his wife and daughter had gone abroad.

But Ethel did not scoff now—she had never done so openly—at the idea of flighty Helen Fuller settling down to Red Cross work. Secretly she wished that she, too, were on the way to France. Suppose Frank Barton should be wounded! Some woman would

attend him in the hospital. It might even fall to Helen's lot. Had Ethel gone to France it might be her fate to nurse Barton.

She felt a sudden and bitter distaste for her work in the offices of the Hapwood-Diller Company. The drab business affairs of every day disgusted her. Although she neglected nothing, Ethel had no satisfaction in what she did.

The war filled more and more space in the daily papers. But there was no news of the Rainbow Division, with which it was believed Barton and the other young officers from Mailsburg had sailed. Everything was so secretly done!

There was the story that sifted back from France to the families of some of the soldiers of the unit from the West, who thought they were bound for New York by train, but who found themselves alighting in New Orleans and going aboard the troop ships there, to sail for southern France by the way of Gibraltar.

The fact that the country was honeycombed by German and Austrian spies, and by those whom the enemy's money could buy, was becoming slowly a settled conviction, even in Mailsburg. Those of German birth and name would in time be ostracised. It could not be helped. It was in the nature of things.

The man who in war time calls himself too broad-minded to hate the enemy is often one who has not

yet awakened to the seriousness of war. The enemy-alien in our midst should tremble for his personal safety. Otherwise he becomes a menace.

Just off Burnaby Street was a little shop where, ever since Ethel was a child, had sat a little old German cobbling shoes. He was a marked character in this part of the town where the residents were mostly of the old, native American stock.

Somebody has said that the trade of tailor breeds socialists and pessimists. So being a cobbler used to breed philosophers of a kindly sort. Gessler had been wont to hand out bits of homely and comfortable philosophy with his mended shoes.

The war had changed his attitude toward life, it seemed. Until the United States had got into it he had talked eagerly with everybody who would listen.

The Kaiser he hated, for he was a "Prussian, arrogant and brutal."

"My father used always to say that there would be war if that bloodhound came to the throne!" he frequently said. But he likewise was proud of his race. "The whole world is fighting them and can't beat them already!" he cried.

Now that his adopted country was arraigned against the fatherland, Gessler was very glum and silent. He did not have so much work as before; but he sat all day on his cobbler's bench. his hammer in his hand, often staring out of the window with empty eyes.

On her way to work one morning Ethel carried a pair of shoes to be mended. But when she reached the corner in sight of which the little German's shop stood, she hesitated. How could she approach Gessler and speak to him with that pleasant familiarity that had been her custom.

She could think of him only now as an enemy. Every German was an enemy! His countrymen in their terrible undersea craft might sink the transport upon which Frank Barton had sailed. The war had come home to Ethel Clayton! It was real to her at last, as it becomes real to everybody who has a personal stake in it.

She took the shoes to another cobbler and went on her way to the office.

These days Ethel was almost vexed with Benway Chase because he continued to be so enthusiastic about his work and interested in it. He never seemed to flag in his tasks; and he might really be, as he had laughingly said, fitting himself for Jim Mayberry's position.

He spent most of his noon hour talking with the foremen of the different shops. He learned much about the practical working of the factory system; yet he never neglected his own particular tasks.

Mabel Skinner still considered Benway the most wonderful young man who had ever crossed her path; but she worshiped from afar. She did not dream of preening her poor plumage to attract his notice;

yet when he smiled at her in good comradeship Little Skinner was secretly in ecstasies.

"Gee!" she confided to Boots, her errant brother, on one occasion, "when Mr. Chase asked me did I like flowers, an' give me some of them late asters from his mother's garden, I almost swallowed my gum!"

"Cracky!" scoffed Boots. "That poor fish? Why, he ain't got but one good wing!"

"An' he can put over a spitter with that that *you* can't hit, Smartie," retorted his sister vigorously. "And he's a gentleman, Mr. Chase is!"

"Cracky!" repeated Boots. "Seems to me, if I was a girl I'd fall for a feller that could gimme something besides a flower an' a sweet smile. Like that Jim Mayberry. He's got a flivver and could take you ridin'."

"He only took me once," said Mabel complacently. "And I guess he must have give you a ride in his buzz-cart, too, that time, or you wouldn't have give me that dream about Jim and Sam Blaisdell of Norville workin' in cahoots against Mr. Barton."

"Huh! That warn't no dream," grumbled Boots. "You think you're allus so smart, Mab Skinner. I heard 'em talkin' all right 'bout how to do Mr. Barton. And it had something to do with the Bogata works down to Norville, just as I told you."

"Well, that egg never hatched, then," declared his dubious sister.

They might have suspected the incubation of an-

other egg had she known how often Jim Mayberry was in consultation with Mr. Grandon Fuller these days at the Bellevue, although Mabel Skinner of course knew little about the inside affairs of the Hapwood-Diller Company. It might have aroused any person's suspicions to mark the superintendent's intimacy with the largest stockholder of the concern.

Mr. Fuller had not again suggested the removal of Barton and the appointment of Mayberry as manager. Indeed, with the former already out of the country and in the Service, that change did not seem necessary to the carrying to conclusion of any schemes Mr. Fuller might have.

Not that there was anything wrong showing on the surface of affairs. The factory seemed to be running quite as usual. But as the end of the business year approached Ethel could not fail to note that the reports on output were not so favorable as they had been earlier in the year. As, of course, it was not really within the compass of her work she could not discover why this should be.

From the very day Mayberry had been balked in his endeavor to put the Bogata order through, the tide of fortune for the Hapwood-Diller Manufacturing Company seemed to have turned. The superintendent never spoke again about the Bogata Company to Ethel. The latter knew, however, that Hammerly's prophecy regarding a receivership for that concern had come true—and that before the new year.

In the matter of the shop reports the girl was puzzled and alarmed. It did not seem to be anybody's fault; certainly Mayberry did not neglect his supervision of the factory, and most of the foremen were old and faithful employees.

The report of the corporation compared unfavorably with the last report. A good deal of money was tied up in raw material. Contracts unfilled and bills not yet collectible were items that bulked big on the wrong side of the ledger.

The board voted the usual dividend; but the surplus was much reduced thereby. And then, suddenly and like the bursting of a bomb, trouble came.

The Hapwood-Diller Company stock was listed in the market; that is, it was traded in by the curb brokers both in State and Broad Streets. One morning Hammerly came raging into the offices, his *Financial Gazette* in his hand, his spectacles pushed up to the line of his grizzled hair, and his eyes fairly snapping.

"What's the meaning of this, I want to know?" he cried, shaking the financial sheet under Jim Mayberry's nose as that young man appeared from the manager's office. "Do you know anything about this?"

"About what, Mr. Hammerly?"

"This trading in Hapwood-Diller shares? It's been going on for a week, I understand. Yesterday three hundred shares was sold for eighty-nine—eleven

points off. Never heard of such a thing! Who's selling?"

"Why, bless your heart, Mr. Hammerly," said the superintendent, "I don't know. I own only fifty shares and I haven't sold them, I can assure you."

"Some tarnal fool is dumping his shares on the market, and at a bad time. Right after such a poor showing as was made by our last report. If Frank Barton was on the job such a report would never have been made."

Mayberry flushed. "No man can make bricks without straw, Mr. Hammerly," he said.

"Huh?" snorted the grain dealer. "Who ever told you they made bricks of straw? That's about all you know, Jim Mayberry. They make bricks with clay around these parts. You ain't in Egypt. But that ain't neither here nor there. This here selling of shares—and maybe these were only wash sales?" added the suspicious old man. "Here! let me see the stock book, Mayberry."

"Ask Ethel for that," returned the superintendent sharply, and, turning on his heel, walked away.

Mr. Hammerly looked after him with lowering brow. "Ha!" he muttered, "mighty independent of a sudden. Now, I wonder what that means?"

But he was as pleasant as usual with Ethel. Macon Hammerly approved of her. He retired to a corner seat to study the list of names to whom stock, at the reorganization after Israel's Diller's death, had been

issued. Most of the local owners of the shares had clung to all their original allotment, even through the depression at the beginning of the war before Frank Barton had been elevated to the management of the concern's affairs.

The Hapwood-Diller Manufacturing Company had always been a very close corporation. There were some Diller and Hapwood heirs in the West and South who had traded off their shares in the corporation; but nobody knew better than Mr. Macon Hammerly just where those shares lay. At least, up to this date he thought he knew where the bulk of them were.

The next shock to the working force of the Company, as well as to the board, was the turning back of the entire order billed to the Kimberly Binding Company. The order amounted to twelve thousand dollars. The goods were not according to specifications.

Jim Mayberry denied all responsibility for this error. The Kimberly order had been received and the contract signed by Barton. Mayberry showed that the shop sheets covering the contract had been followed exactly by the workmen. The duplicates of these papers in the office were the same as the working plans in every particular.

But the Kimberly Company produced its copy of the specifications with two differences in it, one of dimension and the other of quality, changes which made the finished product absolutely useless to the

Kimberly people. Or for anybody else, for that matter! The product could merely go into the scrap heap.

There was a live tilt in the board meeting that day between Mr. Grandon Fuller and his followers, and Mr. Macon Hammerly. Ethel was in and out of the room to take dictation, and to furnish books and figures when required, so she heard much of the wrangle.

Jim Mayberry sat sullenly in his place at the table and had only one declaration to repeat: It was not up to him! Mr. Fuller did most of the talking.

Barton's name was signed to the Kimberly schedule. He had O. K.'d it. Two bad errors had crept into the specifications and the now absent manager had overlooked them.

"And he was *absent*, all right, before ever he left here," Fuller scoffed. "Absent in his mind if not in body. And his absent-mindedness has cost us a pretty penny. I can see right now that this board will have to pass the next dividend."

The very next day a block of five thousand shares sold in Boston for eighty-seven and a half and two hundred in the New York market for eight-seven flat.

One evening Ethel came home from work to be greeted by her mother in a flurried state of mind.

"Good land, Ethel! What's the matter with the Hapwood-Diller Company now? I feared how it would be if Frank Barton went away."

Ethel keenly remembered her mother's expressed

doubt of Mr. Barton's having much to do with the prosperity of the concern. Now she asked Mrs. Clayton:

"What do you think is the matter at the factory? I don't know what you mean."

"Well, I want to know! And you working right there, too. Here this little lawyer comes around and offers me a ridiculous price for our shares——"

"What lawyer?"

"I don't know him. He says he's from New York. Here's his card," and she handed to Ethel a card on which was engraved "A. Schuster, Atty." and an address in a Wall Street building.

"Anyway, he seems to think he can buy our stock for sixty-five dollars. That's all he'll offer and he just laughed and laughed when I told him the shares of the Hapwood-Diller Company had never been worth less than a hundred dollars apiece since they were printed."

"What did he say to that?" asked her more than curious daughter.

"He declared sixty-five was better than it would sell in the market in a month, unless the company was reorganized and put on a paying basis. I wonder what Grandon Fuller or Hammerly would say to that? And you ought to know the truth, Ethel," added the worried woman. "Aren't things going right in the office now that Frank Barton's gone away?"

"There is nothing to worry over," her daughter said stoutly.

"Well, that's what I told that little lawyer," Mrs. Clayton declared. "I said we'd just got our dividend check same's usual, and he said—What do you suppose he said?"

"I have no idea," confessed Ethel.

"That it would be the last one we'd get for many a long day. Can that be so, Ethel? I don't know what we should do if our income from those shares your great-uncle Diller left us should be cut off."

"I shouldn't worry, Mother," Ethel said composedly.

Yet this was only one of the many things she began to hear which suggested a coming catastrophe to the Hapwood-Diller Company.

CHAPTER XIV

BENWAY'S DISCOVERY

BENWAY CHASE was to prepare a copy of the faulty specification sheet of the Kimberly Binding Company's order, to be attached to the report on that unfortunate affair filed in the records of the board's proceedings.

Ethel had not discussed the unfortunate matter with Benway, or with anybody else. That Frank Barton could have allowed such an error—two such errors, indeed—to escape his notice was scarcely in accord with her belief in the general manager's perspicacity. Her lips merely tightened when anybody mentioned the tragic happening within her hearing.

For it was indeed tragic. Rumors that the factory output was falling behind and that the Hapwood-Diller Company was facing a situation similar to that which had threatened it when Frank Barton had first taken hold as manager, reached Ethel's ears from all sides.

Although she could not understand how this mistake in the Kimberly order could have happened, she accepted the claim of the ordering company as honestly made, and that without question. The Kimberly Company was not a second Bogata con-

cern. They wanted the goods ordered and were amply able to pay for them. The mistakes in the specifications made much trouble for the purchasing corporation as well as for the Hapwood-Diller Company.

This schedule from the Kimberly Binding Company had been copied in duplicate in the Hapwood-Diller Company's office, one copy with Frank Barton's name upon it being returned to the ordering firm, the other filed where only properly accredited members of the Hapwood-Diller Company's office force supposedly were able to get at it.

The question as to how the two items on the schedule came to be different from those on the sheet sent back to the Kimberly Company bulked just as big in Ethel's mind as the similar question regarding the Bogata Company's order. She felt that the same treacherous hand was to be suspected.

It was not Frank Barton's fault. Of this she was confident. But she could not put an accusing finger on any person. That there was a traitor in the Hapwood-Diller office went without saying. This time Mr. Barton was too far away for her to discuss the point with him, and Hammerly gave her no opportunity of speaking her mind.

Benway came with the copy he was making of the faulty schedule and placed it before her. He was transcribing the paper in his own very exact, upright handwriting. But he had made a mistake.

"Do you think that will be noticed, Ethel?" he asked with a measure of suppressed excitement that she did not at first notice. "See where I made a bull—and used the acid to take the ink out?"

"Why, yes, Benway; I see it—now that you call my attention to it. But really you have made the correction very neatly. I think it will be all right. The paper only shines a little on the surface where you erased the ink marks with the acid."

"That's just it, Ethel," he hissed, close to her ear. The erasing fluid leaves the surface of this sort of paper glossy. Now look at this!"

He plumped the document he was copying—the schedule in which the two errors had been found—under her eye.

"Why, what is it?"

"See anything wrong about those two mysterious lines?" he demanded, and now she marked his excitement.

"Oh, Benway! That's been all gone over. You can see there have been no changes made in this original paper. There is no more shine to the surface where those two errors stand than elsewhere. *That* was taken up in board meeting. I heard them discuss it. And I studied it myself. No. There have surely been no erasures."

"Sure?"

"You are very obstinate, Benway!" exclaimed Ethel impatiently.

"But look," he whispered. "Here!" He snapped on the electric light over her desk. "Look at those places on the slant—with the glare of the light on them. Don't you see that the paper has been roughened under those two faulty lines—and nowhere else on the sheet? And see again! Under the electric light the surface of the paper seems bluer at those places than anywhere else. That is a good quality of paper, too."

"Is—isn't it a chance discoloration?" murmured the girl.

"Don't you think that's far-fetched?" demanded Benway. "Two blue blots—and just where those wrong items are written?"

"Could they have been caused by drops of water?"

"Huh! Drops of something!" growled Benway. "I own to that belief. But never water. Here! Use this reading glass. Don't you see the raw fibre of the paper? The surface has been scratched just where those wrong items stand. Not by the sort of erasing fluid we use in this office; but by some means. What do you think?"

Ethel passed the sensitive tips of her fingers lightly over the indicated spots on the sheet. It seemed to her that she could feel the slight roughness of the paper that Benway indicated so assuredly.

"You go back and finish your job, Benway," she told him finally. "Then bring me this original. Understand? Say nothing to anybody else about it."

"Sure!" he returned, his eyes snapping.

"Then if you are asked about it," she added quietly, "you may say that you gave me the paper and know nothing at all about it."

He looked at her with more seriousness.

"Say, are you figuring on getting into trouble with——"

Ethel held up her hand. "You are not supposed to figure on this at all. Just do as I say, Benway."

"Oh! All right, Ma'am," he said with a mocking little smile and a twinkle in his eye.

Even he did not wholly understand the seriousness of the discovery; but Ethel appreciated it fully. When he brought the original sheet of specifications back to her she hid it in her dress and at noon instead of going to lunch she caught a southbound car and rode to the Stone Bridge.

On either side of the creek there were docks and warehouses; but Macon Hammerly's general store and row of storehouses for feed and grain and such other things as he dealt in were beyond the bridge and some distance along what was called the Creek Road. The Creek Road debouched into the farming country that adjoined Mailsburg somewhat abruptly, at the south end of the town.

Really, Mr. Hammerly was a country merchant, always had been such, and always would be. He had come into possession of his father's store when he was a young man, and it was said that his grand-

father had first engaged in business—the trading of general merchandise for pelts and farm produce—on this very spot. However, the Macon Hammerly store and warehouses were well known over a large area.

Being on the edge of the city the farming people were likely to trade with him largely. And yet he was not considered a "good fellow." He was too sharp and severe in his business methods.

To his docks the sluggishly moving canal-boats came bringing grain and feed and coal and other merchandise that he dealt in more largely. And he was a wholesale dealer in many articles that other merchants in Mailsburg sold at retail. For one thing, his was the largest seed house in the county.

Ethel hurried over the arch of the Stone Bridge and down the narrow, bricked walk across from the head of the several docks and the doors of the warehouses upon them. This was an old, old part of the town; indeed, it had been known as Stone Bridge once, but Mailsburg had grown out to it and had all but enveloped it with new buildings and better streets. Only down the Creek Road the land still was checkered with open fields and patches of wood.

Before the weather-beaten building in which was Macon Hammerly's general store, was a wide, roofed porch. Several bewhittled armchairs, just "wabbly" enough to be comfortable, stood about upon the platform. Sometimes these were filled with Ham-

merly's ancient cronies—cynics of a former generation who had been in this world so long that they seemed to believe they knew better how to run it than Omnipotence!

Mr. Hammerly was alone at one end of the porch. This was egg-buying day, and as he dealt largely in eggs—shipping quantities to the larger cities—the old man usually looked after the buying while his clerks packed the boxes inside.

Hammerly believed if a thing was worth doing at all it was worth doing well. Likewise he believed in that other old saw relative to a man's doing anything himself if he wanted to be sure it was done right. He could not do everything of importance about his store and warehouses; but he could—and did—buy eggs.

He watched the farmers and their wives cannily as they brought their baskets up to the platform. He handled many of the eggs himself. It was his inflexible rule to refuse all pullet eggs, and he had always in his pocket a wooden curtain-pole ring of a certain size. If an egg would slip through that, it was discarded.

Ethel chanced to arrive at a moment when there was a let-up in the activities of egg buying. The grain dealer pushed up his spectacles with that familiar gesture of his and grinned at the girl.

"You ain't come away down here on no party call, Ethel?" he said questioningly. "You know I

ain't in the swagger set, and I don't serve pink tea here."

"No, sir," she said, smiling in spite of her serious mood. "I know you are a perfect barbarian."

The man chuckled, but said only:

"Heard from Frank Barton yet?"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"I got you beat, then," he said, with twinkling eye. "Not direct; but from Washington. Got a friend there and he's kept me posted. The troop ship *Tecumseh* got over safely—as they all did, in fact. Them German undersea boats seem to have been too far under the sea to catch 'em. Frank's safe in France."

"Until he gets into the trenches," said the girl bitterly.

"Don't you be like these other folks, Ethel. Grouchers, every one! Knocking the war, and looking on the black side of every cloud instead of on the silver. The good Lord knows I'm no optimist by nature; but these are the times when every one of us should stretch our cheerfulness to the breaking point.

"Frank's going to be all right. He's going to do his duty, and he's going through with it all and come back to us. That's my belief, Ethel."

"Oh, Mr. Hammerly! I hope you are right."

"If things go as smooth here with us as they do over there with him," he added, with twinkling eyes, "I reckon all will be well."

"Oh, Mr. Hammerly!" she exclaimed again, "things are not going smoothly here. At least, not with the Hapwood-Diller Company."

"So that's what brings you down here? I ain't so flattered as I was, Ethel," he said good-naturedly. "Let's hear your trouble."

"Oh, you mustn't think I'm not glad to see you," she said, hurriedly.

"O' course you're glad," he said, with something of a grin on his wrinkled face. He stroked his chin reflectively. "Great times these, an' no mistake. If I was only younger——"

"You'd get into the war, I suppose."

"Certain sure, I would. An' you would, too, if you was a young man."

"Perhaps—I really don't know—it's all so horrible."

"So 'tis, an' that German Kaiser has got a pile to answer for, believe me. But now to business. Tell me what's wrong."

"I'm not sure that it's really wrong. But it looks queer to me."

"I see. Got some papers, eh?"

"Yes."

"Let's see 'em."

She displayed the specification sheet and explained hurriedly Benway's discovery. The appearance of erasure in two places on the document seemed plainer to Ethel each time she looked at it.

"I dunno," drawled Hammerly, at first doubtful. But the longer he looked at the two bluish marks the more deeply he was impressed with the significance of them. "Can it be that we've got him at last?" he finally questioned vigorously.

"*Him?*" repeated Ethel, curiously.

"There's a dirty traitor in this business, Ethel," declared the grain dealer.

"Who do you think it is? Jim Mayberry?" she asked outright.

"He never did this," declared Hammerly with emphasis. "He wouldn't have brains enough. That's scarcely seeable, that rubbing out. And see how close the handwriting has been copied.

"I see. That is Josephine Durand's work—the original writing of the sheet, I mean. We never use the typewriter on these specification papers, because of the uneven ruling. She wrote both this and the copy that went back to the Kimberly people with Mr. Barton's name on it."

"I know," growled Hammerly, still staring closely at the paper.

"And Josephine is perfectly trustworthy, I am sure. Besides, it does not seem possible that Mr. Barton did not closely compare the two papers. Those figures were changed, I am sure, after Mr. Barton left."

"Not a doubt on it! Not a doubt on it!" agreed Hammerly. "I've seen something like this afore,"

he added, more to himself than to the girl. "You let me keep this paper, Ethel. We'll see. How's your ma?"

"Worried a good deal, Mr. Hammerly. That lawyer who came around to buy her shares in the Hapwood-Diller Company really scared mother."

"What lawyer?" snapped Macon Hammerly, instantly interested.

Ethel told of the incident and gave Mr. Hammerly the name and address of the attorney, Mr. Schuster. "I believe he did secure a few shares from some of the small stockholders," Ethel said. "You know Abel Rawlins had seven shares and Mrs. Henry Cutt a dozen. They sold, mother says, and she is worried for fear the company is going to smash and we may lose everything."

"How many's she got, Ethel?" asked the old man, a heavy frown on his brow. And when Ethel told him, he added: "So? Israel Diller ought to've done better by her than that. She was just as close't kin to the old man as Grandon Fuller's wife."

"Oh, we won't talk about that," said Ethel, with a gesture of dismissal. "What is done, is done."

"Humph! Mebbe! If it stays done!" grunted Macon Hammerly. "But it's been ten years and more now, ain't it? Well! Howsomever, you let me keep this paper a spell and see if I can make anything out of it. I want to compare it with something I saw once-an' had suspicions about."

He bought no more eggs personally that day—and probably some of pullet size slipped by. Instead, when Ethel left him, he walked up into the business section of High Street and there, near the court-house, went into the office of Alfred Gainor, who, as Mr. Mestinger's chief clerk, had fallen heir to most of his clients and their business when the older attorney died.

Mr. Mestinger had been the legal adviser of Israel Diller and had drawn the latter's will.

CHAPTER XV

FROM "OVER THERE"

ETHEL CLAYTON went away from her interview with Macon Hammerly cheered upon one particular point at least. His outlook upon the chance for Frank Barton's continued safety, even if he was in France, was helpful. And she knew the old grain merchant had Barton's well-being at heart.

Crabbed as he was with most people, Macon Hammerly had always betrayed his interest in the general manager of the Hapwood-Diller Manufacturing Company and his regard for him. He sometimes said, in his rough way, that he kept Frank's welfare in mind because the young fellow did not know enough to look out for himself. Ethel knew, however, that Hammerly had not been speaking carelessly about the absent Barton.

The latter was over the sea in safety, and the girl was devoutly thankful for it. Indeed she added that thanksgiving to her prayers before retiring. But she longed to hear personally from Barton. She had already written him three letters since she had last seen him, all addressed as he had told her; but they had brought no replies.

As before, while he was in the training camp, her letters were mostly regarding office incidents which she knew he would be interested in. But she had said nothing about the threatened trouble and loss to the company through the mistake in the Kimberly Binding Company order. Let somebody else tell the absent soldier that misfortune. Ethel was determined to put nothing in her letters that was not cheerful.

She learned very quickly, as thousands of other people were learning just at that time, how particularly hard it is to write cheerfully to the men at war. The very fact of sitting down to write to a soldier on active duty calls up before the mind a picture too terrible to be ignored.

How do we know the letter will ever reach the one addressed? What peril may he not face before our written words reach France and be delivered to him?

In Ethel Clayton's case, too, the pang of jealousy was not lacking She realized that her feeling for Frank Barton was not reciprocated. He had never given her the least cause to believe that he had other than the merest feeling of comradeship for her. Whereas it was plain that for Grandon Fuller's daughter he experienced a much deeper regard. Nevertheless Ethel was jealous of Helen Fuller.

Mrs. Clayton thought her daughter was working too hard, and that business worries depressed her.

Benway Chase, too, noted her wan look and increasing pallor.

"You're overdoing it, Ethel," he said one bleak evening when they were walking home together.

"Overdoing *what?*" and her tone of voice admonished him that she did not welcome his interference. Yet he persevered:

"You needn't get mad. You shoulder too much responsibility—and for that oaf, Jim Mayberry. Let him do some of his own work."

She became gentler at once. Ben did not suspect why she so willingly took upon herself the extra tasks. It was for the absent Barton that she worked so hard, not for the manager *pro tem*. If he was spared to come back to Mailsburg and the Hapwood-Diller Company, Ethel was going to do all she could to hold his job for him!

"Somebody must do these things, Benway," she said quietly. "I am in a responsible position. From the very fact I am a woman, more is expected of me if I would hold up my end of the work and satisfy everybody. And if I do not look after the tags of work in the office, who will?"

" 'Tags of work!' " quoted Benway with emphatic disgust. "If *that* were only it! Oh, Ethel! I wish I could do it for you."

"Thanks, Benway."

"And you won't even let me help," he complained. "You don't even talk to me about your troubles.

Why Ethel! I seem even less your friend now that I am in the office with you than I used to be."

"Goodness, Benway!" she exclaimed with renewed impatience, "you can't expect to take my personal troubles or my work on your shoulders."

"Why not?" he demanded tenderly. "You know it's what I'd love to do. Oh, I wish I had a million and could take you out of all this! That's what I wish, Ethel."

"Why, I don't want to give up my work, Benway. Nor do I want to be rich. At least, I never have thought of being wealthy. And a million— —"

"Well, I'd get along with even less," he admitted drolly. "All I really long for is a loaf, a jug of wine, a flivver, and thou."

"My dear boy," she declared briskly, "you'll get your first three wishes much easier than you will your fourth. Leave me out of the category, please.

"I don't want to go off in a flivver with any man and a loaf of bread and a wine jug. I am wedded to my work. I love it. It's just as much my life as it is yours. I have never looked upon my work as a mere stop-gap between high school or college and the wedded state—as is so often the case with girls. *This is my job*, and I have no right to expect you, or anybody else, Benway, to ease it for me."

He looked at her aggrieved. "Is it always going to be so, Ethel?"

"I expect it will be always so," she returned with

less vehemence. "I am not a marrying girl, Bennie. I wish you'd get that into your handsome head. Get interested in some other girl—do!"

"Pshaw! Who told you you were not a marrying girl?" he demanded, chuckling. "Wait till the right knock comes on the door."

"I shan't hear it. I shall be too busy."

He was more serious for a moment.

"Perhaps there is danger of that. I've been knocking myself ever since I can remember, and I get mighty little response."

"Don't waste your time, Bennie," she said bruskly. "I tell you frankly: Marriage is the last thing I expect to accomplish."

"You're wrong. It's death that is the last thing for us all. But you can't break down my hopes, Ethel. I shall continue to knock."

Somehow this insistence of Benway's irritated Ethel more than usual. She was almost sorry she had ever urged Mr. Barton to take him into the offices, for the young fellow too plainly betrayed his interest in her.

It was bad enough for Sydney and the others to note the fact that Benway was always ready to run her errands or otherwise be at her beck and call; but Jim Mayberry made his uncouth comments upon it too.

"You have him trained like a little curly dog, haven't you?" the superintendent sneered one day,

when Benway had anticipated some need of Ethel's. "He fetches and carries better than a retriever. Is he good for anything else?"

"You had better ask Sydney if he does his work if you are afflicted with blindness yourself, Mr. Mayberry," she said tartly.

"Oh, I'm not too blind to see there are a good many things going dead wrong in this office," Mayberry growled. "But I'm not having my way here. We are under petticoat rule, it seems."

Such hints as this had previously warned Ethel to keep still. Being unable to have his way with her, Jim Mayberry would be glad to find cause for bringing her before the Board of Directors for dismissal. She felt all the time that if he ever did have the backing of the Board members he would make quick changes in the office.

She knew herself to be in an uncertain situation. Really, she would have done better for her future perhaps if she had looked about for another position. Her record with the Hapwood-Diller Company, if she left of her own volition, would obtain her work elsewhere.

But she could not do this. Tacitly she had promised to remain "on the job." Barton expected it of her. He had frankly said he felt secure in leaving the company and going away because she would be there. She was "the girl he left behind." He depended upon her to keep things straight. And perhaps,

more than Frank Barton suspected, it was Ethel who could hold his position for him until he returned from France.

If he ever did return! This thought scarified her mind continually. It seemed just as though every German gun and every German bayonet were pointed straight at the general manager of the Hapwood Diller Company. How could he escape with his life?

And then the letter came—the letter she had longed for. When John tumbled it out of his bag upon her desk with the others, Ethel could not suppress a little scream, for she saw it first of all. Little Skinner and Josephine heard her and came running.

"What is it, Ethel?" demanded the latter.

"It's a mouse, I bet!" said Skinner. "Some o' them boys been playing a joke on you, Miss Clayton?"

"Why, is it only a letter?" queried the other stenographer. "How you startled me."

"It's enough to startle anybody," declared Ethel, making the best of a bad matter. "It's from Mr. Barton."

At that announcement even Sydney left his desk to draw near. Ethel's heart beat a warm alarm, but she could not get out of opening and reading the missive there and then. Of course he would say nothing in it that the office force could not safely hear. She knew it would be merely a kindly message for all. She wished—oh, how deeply!—that it might

be of so intimate a nature that she could not read it aloud to them.

He was within sound of the guns at the Front already. No locality was particularized, for that would have been censored, but if he could hear the heavy cannonade from his training camp it would not be long before his battalion would be marching into the trenches.

No fear for the future was breathed through Barton's chatty, friendly letter. He gave such a picture of the camp, and the boys in khaki, and the people about them, that even Sydney—his face working spasmodically—clenched his fist and muttered:

"By heaven! how I wish I was over there with him."

Benway's eyes shone, too; and Mabel Skinner expressed for the hundredth time the desire she had to be a boy.

"Why, I tell Boots that if I was him I'd run away and swear I was nineteen and enlist."

"It's tough on you, Skinner," drawled Jim Mayberry, who chanced to be passing through and heard this outbreak. "Nothing but a pair of trousers between you and glory."

Little Skinner remembered that it was in office hours, so she made no retort. Otherwise Mayberry would never have got away with it, as she declared afterward.

However, she was really trying to eschew rudeness, especially within the hearing of Benway Chase. Once or twice, as Ethel would not let him hang around for her after hours, Benway had walked along with Mabel. The girl had been delighted by these attentions. She began to dress more quietly and gradually the startled expression left her face, for she learned to arrange her hair more tastefully. Her improvement was marked enough for others besides Ethel to notice it.

"By jove!" ejaculated Sydney, "our Skinner is coming into her own. She looks more like a girl should and less like a boy dressed up in girl's togs."

It was only Ethel, however, who suspected why Mabel was changing both in manner and in appearance. That the girl worshiped Benway Chase from afar Ethel did not doubt; but at first she was not sure that she approved. Little Skinner came from such a very poor and "shiftless" family. Should Benway look on Mabel with favor, Ethel feared that his mother would be horror-stricken. Yet Ethel had told Benway she would be glad to see him interested in some other girl.

If Barton's letter did not cheer Ethel in large measure it linked her more closely to the war and its activities. Hard as she had to work in the offices, she found time to be active in the local Red Cross chapter to which she belonged.

She insisted, too, in buying several of the second issue of Liberty Bonds, although Mrs. Clayton was not in favor of her so doing.

"We have all the stocks and bonds and such things we can afford," the troubled woman declared. "If the Hapwood-Diller stock is going downhill (and they tell me the Board will really pass the next dividend) we'll have to dig right into our little bank account, or else live as poor as church mice."

"Oh, it's not as bad as that, Mother," the girl declared. "I have a steady income, you must remember—and that's a good deal."

"Yes, but not as much as it ought to be. I declare, in these times, with prices of everything going up, wages should be about doubled."

"If we doubled on the wages, we'd have to close down."

"But you didn't have to take more bonds."

"I thought it was our patriotic duty to do that."

"Let them do it that have more than we have, Ethel."

"I think everybody ought to do all he or she can."

"Well, maybe. But it's hard on poor folks. And there's another thing," added Mrs. Clayton suddenly.

"What is that?"

"I never did see such times! I couldn't get sugar at all to-day; though that trouble's 'most over, they say. And if we didn't have coal in our cellar we'd

go without a fire, I guess. You'd better hang on to what money you've got, Ethel."

"I'd like to know who's been talking to you again about the company being in difficulties!" her daughter said sharply. "It's not so."

"They tell me the shares are selling as low as seventy-five in Boston. Flory Diller's all of a twitter about selling. She wants to buy a piano player, anyway; and if she sells her shares the money will belong to her and never mind what John says, she'll have that player."

"It is such foolish people as Flory that make all the troube," grumbled Ethel. "I wish you would not listen to them, Mother."

CHAPTER XVI

THE CLOUDS THICKEN

NEWS of the first raid against American troops in the trenches appeared in the newspapers. There were but three deaths and a few captured and missing; but the fact that a part of the American contingent had been really in action could not fail to fire the imagination and swell patriotic hearts on this side of the ocean.

But to Ethel, when she read, the three stark bodies laid to rest on November the fourth in a little French village far back of the lines loomed a more important thing than all else. To her troubled mind it was only pitiful—not great—that a French general should, standing at salute beside those graves, say: "In the name of France, I thank you. God receive your souls. Farewell!" Nor did it bring aught but tears to her eyes to read the translation of the inscription put at the foot of these graves:

"Here lie the first soldiers of the great Republic of the United States who died on the soil of France for Justice and Liberty, November 3, 1917."

No. She could not yet feel the exaltation of spirit that had seized Frank Barton and thousands of

others in these early months of the war. She had begun to feel her duty toward it, but she deplored the fact of war and could not yet believe in the necessity for it.

It was all a horrid nightmare. The shocking fact that men were being shot down, killed or maimed, still usurped all other thought regarding it in her mind. Even Frank Barton's letter, in which he pictured the conditions in France and something of what he had already seen of the effect of the German invasion, inspired Ethel with nothing but fear for his safety.

He should be back in Mailsburg and at his desk in the Hapwood-Diller Company offices. That is the way she saw it. And especially now, for Ethel felt that there was some underhand work going on that she could not fathom.

Since taking the Kimberly Binding Company schedule to Mr. Hammerly she had heard nothing from the grain merchant. Nor had she seen him. But Mr. Grandon Fuller came to confer with Jim Mayberry one day, and when the latter sent out for Ethel to come into the private office the girl intuitively knew that immediate trouble was brewing.

But she entered the room with perfect composure. Fuller, lounging in his chair, looked at her with heavily lidded eyes. He left the talking at first to Mayberry, and the latter was brusk indeed.

"Where's that specification sheet of the Kimberly order, Ethel?"

"There is a copy of it attached to the report made for the Board, Mr. Mayberry," she said quietly.

"I want the original. I can't find it on file," snapped Mayberry.

"I do not know where it is," she told him quite promptly.

"What! You don't know whether it is in the office or not?"

"It is not in the office at present. Where it is I do not know. But the copy is exact. Isn't that sufficient?"

"You know well enough it isn't what I want," said the superintendent roughly. "You are taking too much upon yourself, Ethel. You gave that paper to Hammerly."

"Why shouldn't I?" she asked.

"Let me tell you that he isn't manager here——'

"Nor are you, Mr. Mayberry. I prefer not to be spoken to in this manner. I saw no reason to refuse Mr. Hammerly permission to examine the paper. If Mr. Fuller had asked for it I should have considered it quite proper to hand it to him."

She knew well enough by the expression upon the stockholder's countenance that she had hit the bull's-eye. But Mayberry, red-faced and blustering, declared:

"You usurp too much power here, Ethel. It has annoyed me before. I may not be manager in name; but if I can't be boss of the works without a girl's interference, I'll throw up the job entirely."

"No! Don't say that, Mayberry!" interposed Fuller significantly. "Wait until the Board meets again. We will see then."

"You get that paper—get it at once!" ordered Mayberry in his very ugliest tone. "And don't let another private paper of this company go out of the office—do you hear?"

"I am not deaf, Mr. Mayberry," she said tartly. "You need not roar at me."

"Who are you working for, young woman?" Grandon Fuller asked, but in a moderate voice. "The Hapwood-Diller Company, or Macon Hammerly?"

"*I* am working for the company," she said with significance.

"You will not be for long," growled Mayberry. "Get that schedule back from old Hammerly——"

"You will have to ask him for it, Mr. Mayberry," she said. "If that is all you called me in for, I have plenty to do outside," and she walked out of the private office.

Ethel was quite sure that she could make herself no more disliked than she was already by both the superintendent and the principal stockholder. But whatever came of the incident she proposed to keep

her self-respect. She would not allow any one to bully her.

It was open war now, however, between Jim Mayberry and herself. When Mr. Fuller had gone the angry superintendent strode out to her desk. He took no pains to smother his rage or his voice when he spoke to her.

"You'll learn mighty soon, Ethel, that Frank Barton has lost his influence in this concern—and there'll be no come back, either. He's gone for good, whether the fool dodges a bullet or a bit of schrapnel or not. He's through here.

"And so you will be, and that very soon, if you don't take a different tone here. I may lack power to discharge you right now, but I shan't lack that power long. Then we'll have a house cleaning," and he glared over the office as though he felt the enmity of Ethel's desk-mates.

"Going to clean up for fair, are you, Jim?" asked Sydney, who felt secure in his position, for he had been bookkeeper for the Hapwood-Diller Company when the present superintendent was merely a boy in one of the shops. "You'll have your hands full if you intend to run both the offices and the shops, won't you?"

"I'll show you as well as this blame girl——"

Benway Chase slipped down from his stool and started toward the superintendent. Ethel stood up, her own hands clenched and her eyes aflame.

"As long as I *am* at work here, Mr. Mayberry, I refuse to be insulted and browbeaten by you. If you have any instructions for me, let me hear them. I don't wish to hear anything else."

Mayberry stamped out of the room. Mabel Skinner gave three cheers under her breath.

"Oh, Miss Clayton! Ain't you lovely! I'd have slapped his face!" she added in approval.

This brought a laugh, and the office quickly simmered down. But Ethel knew the matter was not ended. She could not help feeling worried about the future. If Jim Mayberry had his way she would soon be out of a situation.

Then at home her mother was for ever talking about the decreasing value of the Hapwood-Diller shares. She heard of other friends selling out their stock at low prices.

She set her lips more firmly and refused to believe that disaster threatened the concern that Frank Barton had all but sweated blood to put on a paying basis. Yet there were signs enough that affairs were not as they should be. There were little breakdowns in the machinery that never happened before. One shop was closed for two days and the work fell behind thereby. The profit was sliced completely from one job, she knew, because of these handicaps.

And she was helpless to avert these crippling accidents, nor could she point out who was at fault. Certainly there was no happening wherein she could

honestly accuse Mayberry of guiltiness, no matter how much she may have believed him to be at the bottom of the trouble.

He had a good and valid excuse to offer the Board of Directors when that body should investigate these petty affairs. Naturally he could not give his attention so closely to the workmen as before. The foremen ran their several departments more to suit themselves than when Mayberry did not have to do two men's work. It began to be remarked by high and low alike that Jim Mayberry could not be expected to be both superintendent and manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company!

And these whispers pointed to but one thing: The appointment of another superintendent and the establishment of Mayberry in Frank Barton's place. The situation grew more and more difficult.

The possible end of these things troubled Ethel daily and hourly. Not so much that she feared losing her own position. That would be sad, but not a catastrophe.

Her main thought was for the future of the Hapwood-Diller Company. There was a conspiracy against the concern. Who fathered the traitorous design, and the object of it, she did not know. Jim Mayberry might be only a tool, for, with Macon Hammerly, Ethel considered the superintendent a weakling after all.

She doubted and feared Grandon Fuller. Yet he

was the largest stockholder in the concern—or his wife was, and he managed his wife's affairs. Surely it could not be pleasing to him to see the shares of the company falling in the open market.

These matters were really outside of Ethel Clayton's province. Yet they would have been vitally troubling to Frank Barton were he at home and in charge of affairs. And Ethel felt herself to be on watch for him.

If she might only confer with him! If she could tell him her suspicions and reveal to him her worry over the Hapwood-Diller Company! This longing obsessed her.

Arriving at home one evening rather early she saw, before reaching the gate, a stranger leaving the premises. He was a small, black-haired man who walked briskly away from the Clayton cottage. Her mother met her at the door.

"He's been here again, Ethel!" she exclaimed tragically when her daughter ran up the steps.

"Who has been here?"

"That Schuster. The lawyer who wants to buy our shares of stock. But he won't give us but sixty now. My dear! I am afraid something dreadful is going to happen."

"There's something going to happen to him!" ejaculated the girl with emphasis. "Is that he yonder—that little runt?"

"Yes. And he said—"

But Ethel was down the steps and out of the gate without listening to further particulars. She saw the man turn the corner and walk quickly toward the car line. There was a path across the open fields past Benway Chase's house that brought one more quickly to the car tracks. Ethel went this way.

"It's the only thing to do," she told herself. "The only thing to do."

She was much disturbed in mind, and her course of action was by no means exactly clear to her, just yet. But she was doing some quick thinking.

Ordinarily she would not have minded had she met Benway, but now she did not want to stop to talk, and so watched her chance to slip past the house unobserved.

"Perhaps he'd try to help me, but I guess I don't want his assistance," she reasoned.

She almost ran the distance. While yet some rods from the car line, she saw a car bowling along but a short block away. She waved her hand frantically.

The motorman was not looking her way, and consequently did not see her. Then she called to him, and he braked up in a hurry.

"Always willing to accommodate the ladies," he remarked with a grin.

She was already aboard the car, therefore, when the lawyer swung himself up the step and entered. There were several passengers and he gave nobody

more than a cursory glance. Therefore (and Ethel was glad of the fact) he did not know her or suspect her identity.

There was a scheme afoot either to ruin the Hapwood-Diller Company, or, more probably, to "freeze out" the smaller stockholders. Of this the girl was confident. She believed A. Schuster was doing the secret work for the plotters, and it might be that, if she trailed him, she could learn just who it was who was at the bottom of this dastardly conspiracy.

If Frank Barton were here, and possessed her knowledge of affairs and her suspicions, would he not do the same? She believed so, and she believed the situation called her to the task.

CHAPTER XVII

A RENDEZVOUS WITH DEATH

At just this point in Ethel Clayton's business troubles, when she wished so heartily that she could have the benefit of Barton's advice, the general manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company was thinking very little indeed of such tame affairs as those relating to the factory in Mailsburg.

Like those other thousands who have a rendezvous with death on the battleline, the intensive training and preparation for that event was filling his whole thought, as well as taking up all his time. The regiment to which Frank Barton was attached had plunged immediately into such grilling work as many of the men had never in their lives experienced.

In the first place, Barton's detachment was billeted in a little village which had before that day on which the American soldiery marched in, escaped all contact with the Yankees, or, indeed, any one outside its local confines. It was but a tiny collection of farm cottages and stables builded together far back in feudal times for protective reasons. Sanitation was an unknown word to the inhabitants.

Barton's captain was taken down with pleuropneumonia almost at his landing from the troop ship

Tecumseh, and was in a hospital. Barton as ranking lieutenant was in charge of the company of nearly two hundred men. With the medical major he had the well-being, both mental and physical, of these men upon his hands. It was a situation of responsibility.

His second in command appeared before him on the first morning, saluted, and said:

"Lieutenant Barton, I have to report, sir, that this place—er—really, Lieutenant, *it stinks*."

"So my nose tells me, Lieutenant Copley. The doctor likewise agrees with us."

"Bah jove!" groaned Morrison Copley, who could not altogether cast his drawl on such sort notice. "What is to be done about it?"

"Clean up!" announced Barton vigorously.

And that was their first job. Precious piles of stable scrapings that had occupied the little court-yards before the farmers' cots, or had been heaped in stable penthouses since time immemorial, were forked into carts and spread upon the fallow ground outside the village.

It was a shock to the villagers, and at first they raised a great clamor, for custom was being vastly disturbed. But when they were made to see that the mules and horses of the American forces were adding daily to the fertilizer piles and that the Yankee boys in removing the manure to the fields were doing the farmers' work, and that for nothing, objections died among the French population of the village, if not

entirely among the soldiers themselves. But they made that village clean and kept it clean.

Once Frank Barton burst out laughing and had to retreat to his quarters to recover. The thought had struck him suddenly that if Madam Copley—the haughty, somewhat snobbish Madam Copley—could see her son bossing a gang forking over steaming manure piles, she would probably swoon.

It was rather startling, too, when one considered what a metamorphosis had come over Morry Copley. Even his voice had changed. Its shrillness had been modified and when he gave an order now it was with the snap of a whiplash in his tone.

Morry was diplomatic, too. In the cleaning up of the village this ranked high, for he managed such French as he possessed most adroitly and made the peasants who first thought they were being robbed agree with him that it might be a good thing, once in a hundred years, to scrape the manure platforms—and even the cobbled village street—right down to the bone.

From that first week of o[illegible], when effectual sanitary measures were p[illegible] practice, right through the long season of trench training that followed, Barton and his detachment were never idle enough to suffer from homesickness.

Although the training field and trenches for this American division were near enough to the battle-front for the big guns to be heard, they were well

hidden, and were defended from the enemy aircraft by a special squadron of French flying machines and sentinel airplanes.

The plan of the German military leaders to bring some great disaster upon the first American troops to arrive back of the battlelines, was not yet accomplished. That the attempt would be made again and again until the catastrophe was assured was well understood by the Americans as well as by the allied training officers working with the divison.

"The Boche will get you if you don't watch out," became a byword in the Yankee camps. Perhaps the frequent cry of "wolf! wolf!" made the Americans at last somewhat careless. Men who have always joked about the lack of intelligence of German saloon-keepers and delicatessen shopmen are not likely to be easily impressed by stories of Fritz's super-powers under the sea, on the earth, or in the air.

Working with his men all day and studying at night made up the round of Barton's existence during these first weeks in France. It was not often he gave much attention to outside matters, or thought upon anything but military tactics.

It was true there was a desire in the back of his mind at first to learn how Helen Fuller was and where she was stationed in France—if she really had come over. He wrote a friendly note to her addressed in care of the Red Cross headquarters in Paris, but received no reply.

Then arrived Ethel's first three letters, all in one mail. The picture in them of Mailsburg and the affairs of the Hapwood-Diller Manufacturing Company, pleased Barton greatly. He had not realized before how hungry he was for news.

Jim Mayberry seemed to have forgotten him altogether. He was not so dense that he did not understand Mayberry's character in a measure. Barton had never expected gratitude from the boyhood friend he had made superintendent of the factory. Ethel's letters, however, hinted at none of the trouble Mayberry was making in Barton's absence.

They were just cheerful narratives of the daily happenings that she knew would interest the absent manager. He had already written one general missive addressed to her; but now he sat down and replied particularly to Ethel Clayton—a warm and friendly letter inspired by a feeling that he had not before realized he held for the girl whom he had always considered so "capable."

He remembered how she had looked at him from her desk on the evening of his final departure from Mailsburg. Actually he had never forgotten this picture of the girl he had left behind to watch over the affairs of the concern he had done so much for and which had meant so much to him. She seemed to mean a deal more in his thought, too, than merely a capable office assistant.

And she was a pretty girl. That Sunday she had

visited the camp at Lake Quehasset! There was no girl he knew who could look more attractive. Why had he never noticed it before that day? Hers was a less glowing, a less striking beauty than Helen Fuller's, but it was a beauty that once noted never ost its attraction for the appreciative eye.

The lonely man in camp or barracks is sure to contemplate the memory of his friends and acquaintances among womankind, and Barton's mind dwelt as never before on the girls and women he knew in Mailsburg.

"Why," he thought, as he closed the long letter to Ethel, "I might have tried to make a friend of her. I wonder why I did not try? Miss Clayton is very much worth while."

The wound caused by Helen Fuller's treatment of him at the last, was still raw. He felt that she had deliberately cultivated his acquaintance, had made him believe she had more than a passing interest in him, only to make the fall of his hopes seem the greater.

He wondered if Helen had really had for him exactly the same feeling that she had for Morrison Copley or Charlie Bradley. Was she merely a coquette, playing with men as a fisherman plays a trout—and for the same reason? Was it merely for sport that she had exerted herself to charm him?

Frank Barton felt all the hurt that a ma[illegible] i his kind does when he awakes to the fact that he has

been made a fool of by a guileful woman. But he did not feel that pique which often turns a man from one woman to accept the salve of another's sympathy. In thinking of Ethel Clayton and writing to her he had no such thought as this in mind.

No. Instead he threw himself with all his strength into his work. He was acting ranking officer of his company, and he felt all the responsibility which that implies. He desired to have his boys show at inspection a higher degree of training than any other company in the regiment. He kept his brother officers, as well as the non-commissioned officers, up to the scratch by both example and precept.

"Barton's a shark for work," they all said. "He just eats it up!"

The notice of staff officers was drawn to his command and it brought Lieutenant Barton some special attentions. He was taken with a group of other advanced officers to the front line trenches and there learned much of the actual work of modern warfare—much that would help him when his brave boys "went in."

And then, back with his detachment once more, the men of which were "fit as a fiddle" and ready for any work, Frank Barton saw that day for which he had been preparing all these long weeks and months.

It did not come just as he expected. He and his men were not moved to some sector of the front where they would slip into the places of wearied and mud-

encrusted poilus at night. They did not go to the Hun in fact; the Hun came to them.

The day began early indeed for Lieutenant Barton. He was up long before reveille, for there was a line of motor-lorries stalled in the mud just outside the village, that had been there half the night. Barton's company was called on for help.

For several days there had been a thaw and each night a thick and penetrating fog arose from the saturated earth, wiping out the stars completely and hanging a thick pall over the countryside.

Under the oversight of the non-commissioned officers, the men began building miniature corduroy roads over the miry spots, and prying the lorries' wheels out of the mud so that they could get a start, one by one, and go on through the village street.

Barton strode along the line of stalled trucks and their trailers to the very last one in the procession. Beyond, the forelights of a smaller motor-car showed in the mist. In curiosity he drew near to this.

"Any chance of getting by the jam, Lieutenant?" demanded an unmistakably American voice.

"Not, now," Barton responded, drawing nearer. "You will have to wait for those trucks to get through the town."

"And how long will that be?"

"I cannot say. By the way, perhaps you had better let me see your passes. Save time. I happen to be in command here."

"Oh, sure! Here you are, Lieutenant."

The driver of the car stepped out, pulling several papers from an inner pocket as he did so. Barton flashed the spotlight of his torch on them. At the same moment a clear and well remembered voice spoke from the tonneau:

"Why, it's Frank Barton! How very odd!"

"Miss Fuller! Helen!" ejaculated the officer in equal amazement.

He turned his flashlight upon the occupants of the car. Two women in nurse's cloaks and an elderly French citizen were Helen's companions. She, too, was garbed as a Red Cross nurse.

"Oh, we shall be all right now!" the American girl cried.

She explained to her companions in French, but spoke so rapidly that Barton could not follow her observations. The chauffeur, a keen-faced American lad, evidently college-bred, chuckled and returned the papers to his pocket.

"You see, Mr. Barton," she said to the lieutenant, "we are going to the base hospital on ahead—these ladies and I. Monsieur Renau goes to the village there on business. I engaged Johnny Gear and his machine to take us around this way because the railroad accommodations for civilians, as you know, are dreadful. And here you find us stuck in the mud," she concluded dramatically.

"I fear you will be stuck in the mud more than

once if you follow this lorry train," Barton said. "It has right of way and will leave an almost impassable mire behind it."

"Now you've said something, Lieutenant," agreed Johnny Gear.

"But you can get us around it, of course, Frank," said Helen confidently, and in the tone of an American girl to whom nothing is impossible if she has once made up her mind to get it.

"Not by any near road, Miss Helen," he responded.

"Why! *there* is a track," the girl cried, for through a sudden rift in the fog she could see a few yards. "Doesn't that go around this village you say is just ahead of us?"

"It leads into our training encampment. Nobody is allowed there without special permit."

"Oh, now, *Frank*——"

"But there is a road," he hastened to add. "You must turn back. Half a mile back you will find a road that encircles the whole field, and on which you will not be challenged. I'll go with you if you can back and turn your car."

"You bet I can," agreed Gear. "Look out for the mud, Lieutenant."

"Come and sit beside me, Frank," the American girl said, quickly opening the tonneau door on her side. "How are you—and the other Mailsburg heroes? I've just lots and *lots* to tell you!"

He slipped into the seat indicated and was intro-

duced—after a fashion—to the French girls and to Monsieur Renau. Gear got his car turned about and they went lubbering on over the heavy road.

It was daybreak now but still very dark, with the world completely smothered in fog. Almost by chance Barton discovered the entrance to the encircling track he had spoken of. It was a twenty-mile trip around the training field; but if he continued with them he was sure the party would make it all right.

"And you *must* see that we get through, Frank," Helen Fuller urged. "Really, you know, we've *got* to get to our destination to-day."

Barton smiled at her reassuringly. Her eyes were as bright as ever, her smile as alluring. He quite forgot how cavalierly she had treated him at their last meeting in Mailsburg.

"Drive right ahead, Mr. Gear," he told the chauffeur. "There is almost no heavy trucking over this road, and I think you will be able to get ahead of the lorry train."

Then he gave his attention to the girl beside him. She chattered in her usual magpie fashion; yet Barton loved to hear her. Naturally of a serious trend himself, Helen Fuller's inconsequential talk had always amused him. And much that she told him now about her experience since coming to France was interesting.

That she was quite as sure as ever that her interests

and her activities were of more importance than anything else in the world, a listener could not fail to understand. When she asked him of his adventures she gave him no time for reply, but went on with her own story. Nobody in the world mattered so much as Helen Fuller. It began to irritate him after a while. It never had before.

The car plowed on for some time; it was Barton himself who stopped it.

"Wait!" he commanded. "What is that I hear? Shut off your engine, Mr. Gear."

Then they all heard it—the unmistakable roaring of a powerful motor. Moreover it was not on the road before or behind them. It was in the air.

"An aeroplane!" cried Helen.

"A very heavy aero—*hein?*" queried one of her fellow nurses.

"And that's right!" exclaimed the driver. "Foggy as it is I suppose there are plenty of flying men up yonder."

"I have never heard a machine just like that," Barton said, in a puzzled tone. "I thought I had identified the sound of all these French machines—Great heavens!"

A series of explosions interrupted his speech. Off to the left they were, in the direction of the village and the cantonments. Through the thick mist a flash or two was visible.

"Shells!" yelled Gear.

"An enemy plane dropping bombs!" ejaculated Barton. "Must have got past the French escadrille in this fog."

A nearer explosion followed and the roar of the aeroplane's engine seemed almost over their heads.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WRATH OF THE HUN

"Oh! Oh!" cried Helen, clinging tightly to Barton's arm. 'Let us turn back!"

"What good'll that do!" growled Gear, who heard her.

One of the French nurses crossed herself and murmured a prayer as Barton could see by her whispering lips. He could not fail to note how much better the French girls were taking it than Helen. She had quite lost her self-control and was fairly hysterical.

He could not afford to show any trepidation himself, even if he felt it. He was in the uniform of an officer of the American forces and there were French eyes upon him. In any case he must not show the white feather, and it stabbed his pride that Helen, an American Red Cross nurse, should do so.

An aerial bomb fell nearer and almost deafened them with its explosion. Barton sprang out of the motor-car and aided Helen to alight.

"Into the ditch—everybody!" he shouted. "Lie down!"

He saw Renau and Gear spring to the help of the other women, then in a moment Barton was rushing toward the muddy sluiceway with Helen Fuller.

"Oh, *don't* drag me around so, Frank! I'm wet to my *knees*. Isn't there some place——"

The roaring of the powerful motor overhead drowned her further complaint. It was then that another shell fell.

Had Barton not dragged the girl down with him—both falling flat into the bottom of the ditch—they must have suffered the fate of those who had not yet got away from the motor-car—the two nurses, Monsieur Renau, and poor smiling, reckless Johnny Gear, Johnny, who had run away from home to "see what the blooming war was like."

Overhead the aero engine moaned into the distance. Barton got to his knees and pulled the girl up beside him. It was light enough for them to see each other.

"Oh! Oh! Take me away! I must go somewhere. Oh, Frank! I—I'm all *muddy*," Helen, poor shallow, selfish Helen, wailed.

"Oh!" gasped Barton unheeding. "They're dead—dead!"

He stood up and tossed back the thick hair from his brow. He had not his cap. He found his army pistol gripped in his right hand. His left was holding up the girl whom he clutched by the shoulder as carelessly as he might have held a half-filled sack of flour.

"You're not *listening!*" cried Helen. "Don't you *hear?* Take me somewhere—take me where it is *safe.*"

He was listening, but not to her cries. That terrible thing in the air was coming back.

The moan of the powerful engine was increasing again. A few guns in the distance began to pop. The Field Artillery was getting into action—*and he was not there.*

What carnage might not have already been accomplished! This terrible thing in the air, swooping through the fog, might have brought havoc and disaster to the American forces.

"Take me away! Take me away!" the girl cried over and over again, fairly clawing at his arm to attract his attention.

"Where shall I take you? One place is as safe as another—until this raid is over."

It was growing lighter all the time. The fog was rapidly thinning. Suddenly Helen shrieked:

"Where is our car?"

There was nothing but a hole in the road where it had stood. Not a shred of it remained within their straining vision. Wiped out—like that!

"Here it comes again!" shouted Barton.

Through the dissipating mist the great sausage-like body of the German air-raider appeared. It was one of the newest and largest airships yet conceived and built. It drifted low—not two hundred yards from the earth.

"Down on the ground!" commanded Barton. "If they spy us——"

He did fire—futilely, perhaps—as the great car circled clumsily above the spot.

(See page 201)

The huge flying car swooped lower. It seemed to be heading directly for the two Americans in the muddy road. The lieutenant flung the girl down again, but stood erect himself, his legs astride, his head back, eyes glaring through the shreds of fog at the airship. He had involuntarily assumed an attitude of defiance and his pistol was raised at firing angle.

He did fire—futilely, perhaps—as the great car circled clumsily above the spot. He emptied the weapon at the flying foe.

Suddenly—whether a chance bullet had hit some vital spot or not—a red flame leaped to life in the envelope of the huge bag. So low sailed the machine that Barton could see a man run along a narrow platform and shoot the spray of a chemical fire extinguisher up at the spreading flame.

Only for a moment was this attempt continued. Then a second man appeared, and the usual high, staccato voice of a Prussian officer uttering a command sounded sharply through the rumble of the dying motor.

The efforts of the man with the fire extinguisher ceased. Some catastrophe had overtaken the huge war machine. Her engine had lost its stroke. She was coming to earth—and that in enemy territory. The crew would destroy the ship as they always do in such instances.

A wild cheer burst from Barton's lips. Swiftly he

reloaded his automatic pistol. The nose of th wabbly, creaking machine, so clumsy looking tha Barton half wondered how it was ever lifted fron the ground, plunged toward the earth.

It passed directly over the road. The balloon envelope was afire in a dozen places. Barton could see the flash of an axe in the officer's hands as he wrecked the mechanism of the still flying airship.

There was a deafening crash when the car hit the ground. The American saw one man, turning over and over in the air, dashed forty feet at least by the force of the impact Other figures climbed down from the crushed car on to which the balloon collapsed slowly, all afire.

"Come on!" shouted the excited lieutenant, waving his weapon. "Now we've got 'em!"

"Frank! Stop! Don't you *dare* leave me!" wailed Helen Fuller.

"Wait for me here, Helen——"

"I tell you I *won't!*" cried the girl. She stamped her foot in rage. "You take me right away from here!"

"But I must round those fellows up. We've got 'em—don't you see? Wait here for me if you are afraid."

"I'll *never* forgive you, Frank Barton, if you leave me! And I *won't* go over there! Those—those men will kill us. Oh, Frank! Come back!"

He hesitated but a moment to answer her. "I'm

sure you wouldn't want me to be a quitter, Helen," he declared, and leaped the ditch to get into the field upon which the wrecked German airship had fallen.

With a scream she followed him. She ran faster than he, and caught his right arm again just as he was rounding the rear of the wreckage. Before them stood fourteen men in the gray olive of the German uniform. The man thrown when the ship came down never moved.

Barton saw instantly that the crew of the airship —even the commander himself—were unarmed. Good reason for that. Deep in the enemy's country, without a possible chance of escape through the lines, a peaceful demeanor and appearance spelled safety for them.

Barton raised his pistol, Helen still clinging to his arm. The Germans, or, at least, those in the front of the group, raised their hands in token of surrender. Even the commander called out: "*Kamerad!*"

"Frank Barton! Take me away! Save me!" shrieked the hysterical girl.

She hung, a dead weight, upon his arm and pulled down the weapon. One of the men in the back of the group had been stooping down, his hands on the ground. Now he stood up, stepped clear of his companions, and swung his right hand back.

With the accuracy of a baseball player he flung the sharp stone he had picked up. Barton tried to fire and dodge, but Helen's interference made both at-

tempts impossible. The stone struck him just above the right temple and glanced off, cutting such a gash that the blood poured down his face, blinding him.

With a shout the Germans started for Barton and the girl. The lieutenant, feeling himself helpless, thrust his weapon into Helen's hand.

"Defend yourself!" he gasped, and then slipped slowly to the ground, crumpling in a senseless heap at her feet.

CHAPTER XIX

UNCERTAINTIES

HAD Ethel Clayton known how deep in wild adventure Barton was as she rode down town in the surface car watching the little lawyer, she would have been utterly disgruntled at the tameness of her quest.

Yet it was with thought of Barton in her mind, as well as of her own personal interest and that of her mother's, that the girl forged on. She believed that a conspiracy was on foot the intent of which was the ruining of the business structure Frank Barton had labored so hard to build and make secure. He had made the Hapwood-Diller Company a going concern. Somebody was now determined to make abortive all the general manger's work and, as well, to ruin the smaller stockholders.

Who that somebody was Ethel was not certain, although she had strong suspicions. She believed A. Schuster to be the link connecting her suspicions with the truth. She sat quietly in the car and did not even glance his way after her first hasty appreciation of the man when he had entered.

In front of the Bellevue he left the car, but Ethel went on to the next crossing before alighting. She hurried back. Under the bunch of electric lights

before the main door of the hotel she saw A. Schust pass in.

She had expected this. Both Mr. Grandon Full and Jim Mayberry she knew to be habitués of tl hotel. There was ublic dining-room at one side the front door and the lobby and office were on tl other, with the smoking-room and café back of tl clerk's desk.

Ethel had already made up her mind what sh would do in this emergency. She mounted the broa steps briskly and crossed the lobby toward the sma ladies' parlor behind the stairway. A glance to th right showed her the black-haired lawyer approacl ing the desk.

In one chair lounged the pursy Mr. Fuller. H vouchsafed Schuster no more than a glance. Bu Jim Mayberry, coming from the smoking-room, haile the lawyer affably:

"Hi, old man! going to have supper with me Come on upstairs while I get into my best bib an tucker for the evening."

He clapped Schuster heartily on the shoulder an led him away toward the little elevator that wheeze upward asthmatically the next moment. Neithe had looked at Grandon Fuller nor he at them.

This fact was sufficient to have made Ethel Clay ton suspicious had she not been so before. Jim May berry was always so very polite and deferential t Mr. Fuller when the latter appeared at the factory

offices. It seemed now as though the superintendent of the Hapwood-Diller Company had ignored the presence of the chief stockholder too obviously.

Ethel passed hastily on to the parlor; but nothing of this had escaped her quick eye and understanding. In the parlor she found a girl in cap and apron whom she knew. It was Eliza Boling, who presided over the linen room of the hotel and acted as a sort of floor clerk on the third floor. Ethel had gone to school with the girl.

"Oh, Ethel! come up to my desk so we can talk," cried Miss Boling, when she caught sight of Miss Clayton. "I haven't seen you in a dog's age."

Ethel was nothing loath under the circumstances, and ran upstairs with her. The slowly moving elevator had scarcely more than deposited Jim Mayberry and the lawyer on the third floor. Ethel saw them approaching one of the doors.

"Isn't that Mr. Mayberry?" she asked her acquaintance.

"Oh, I suppose it is," replied the other girl without looking up. "Don't let him speak to you. He's so awfully fresh!"

"Is that his room?" Ethel asked.

"Number Eighty? Yes. And I wish it was on another floor."

Eliza Boling was a somewhat attractive girl, and Ethel could understand easily that the suprintendent

of the Hapwood-Diller Company would have mad himself objectionable to her.

The two girls talked of mutual friends and affai of mutual interest for some time. Then the elevat door clanged again. Ethel looked quickly. Th heavy figure of Mr. Grandon Fuller stepped out int the corridor. He did not glance toward the two girl

Mr. Fuller walked straight to the door of Numb Eighty. He rapped once and then entered the roon It was plain his coming was expected.

Ethel had seen enough to assure her that Fulle Jim Mayberry, and the sly looking Schuster were e gaged in something that they wished to keep secr from people in general.

She believed she had traced the conspirators. Th reason for the largest stockholder of the Hapwoo Diller Company seeking to wreck that concern wa however, beyond Ethel Clayton's powers of divinatio

For that was exactly the threat of circumstances the girl saw it. The forcing down of the price Hapwood-Diller stock must in the end ruin the cred of the corporation. She went home vastly puzzle by the whole situation.

Her mother was utterly unstrung.

"Oh, Ethel, I feel terribly condemned!" she crie "Where have you been? I wish you had come earlier so as to hear that Mr. Schuster talk."

"I don't want to hear him talk," declared h daughter.

"It seems to me, Ethel," complained Mrs. Clayton, "that you are siding against me—against your own interests. I suppose you call that loyalty to your employer. But Frank Barton isn't there at the offices any more. He never ought to have gone away. I am convinced of that now. The business is on its last legs. You know it is, but you won't admit it."

"I know nothing of the kind, Mother!" cried Ethel with exasperation. "Why, you talk about the Hapwood-Diller Company as these pro-Germans do about the war! And just as unreasonably."

"What do you mean—calling your own mother a pro-German?" demanded Mrs. Clayton. "I guess I'm just as good a patriot as the next one—and I knit as many socks and sweaters, too!

"But about our shares of stock—that's different. Since you've been away Amy Hopper's been in and she's sold her shares—she had ten—and has bought a Ford car. At least, she's got something for her money, while we are likely to lose everything."

Ethel was just completing her warmed-over supper, and under a steady dropping of her mother's complaints, when the porch door banged open and Benway Chase rushed in.

"Goodness, Bennie, how you scared me!" Mrs. Clayton ejaculated. "Sit down and have a piece of pie—do!"

"No. But I'll stand up and eat it—many thanks, Mrs. Clayton!" responded the young fellow, whip-

ping the piece of pie off the plate she offered him and inserting it like a wedge into his mouth for the first bite. Somehow he managed to utter: "Fire at the factory, Ethel. Get on your hat and coat."

"No! Benway?" she gasped, starting up.

"Surest thing you know! You can see the smoke from the street. I telephoned. It's confined to Shop Four. The firemen are there. But let's go down and see that nothing's damaged around the offices."

She ran for her coat and hat and they sallied forth, Benway swallowing the last of the pie as they cleared the gate. "Gee! but your mother does make good pie crust, Ethel," he said.

His boyishness somehow troubled her more than it usually did just then. Perhaps because her own thoughts were so serious. He would make a good match for Mabel Skinner. He would never grow up enough for Ethel to consider him for a moment as a partner in life.

The fire was under control when the two young people reached the factory. Nor had it done much damage. Moreover, it was well covered with insurance; but the delay in work under way would be considerable.

"By jove!" said Benway, "the old H-D Company is up against it for fair. Everything is going wrong with it. You'd think the place was bewitched, wouldn't you?"

"Hush! Let us not talk about such things. John says it was faulty insulation. But how came there to be faulty insulation in that shop? Somebody is guilty of criminal carelessness. Oh, I wish Frank Barton were here!"

This last wish she did not let Benway hear. And, indeed, what could Barton have done had he been on the spot? The Board of Directors met the next day and even Mr. Hammerly could find nobody to "jack up."

The grain dealer was in a fine rage, however. The meeting was as acrimonious a session as had ever been held since the reorganization of the corporation. Ethel was only called into the room once and then Hammerly did not speak to her. And after the meeting he pulled his hat down over his ears and stamped out of the offices without a word.

She wondered what he had done with the paper she had given him—the specification sheet of the Kimberly Binding Company order. It seemed strange that he had never taken her into his confidence at all about that matter.

It leaked out in some way, however, after this meeting, that the old grain merchant was beaten by Grandon Fuller and his friends and that Jim Mayberry was likely to be made manager in Barton's place at the next quarterly meeting. She had noticed that the superintendent left the Board meeting with a smile. He had given Ethel a hard look, and

she was well aware of what awaited her in the near future if Mayberry had his way.

There was a streak of fair weather for her in a day or two, however. Another letter arrived from France, and this time it was not merely an impersonal narrative of the absent's manager's adventures in uniform. There was an intimate note to the missive that warmed Ethel's heart to a glow. Yet she realized that not a phrase went beyond proper friendliness.

She read it all to the others in the office, although it was not just the same as his first letter had been. She did not let the sheets go out of her own hands, however. There was a personal atmosphere to it which made her fold the letter finally and hide it in her blouse. This betrayed a softness that would have angered Ethel had anybody accused her of it.

Other people heard about the letter, however, and she was stopped for several days upon the street by friends of Barton asking after him. Secretly she was proud that it was she whom he had selected as a correspondent among all those who knew and were interested in him here in Mailsburg.

Then Mrs. Trevor came to the office to see her. The boarding-house mistress who had housed and fed Frank Barton so long was a rather grim woman in an old fashioned Paisley shawl and arctics. Her hands were red and gnarled and her back was as curveless as a ramrod.

When she strode into the Hapwood-Diller offices

she was as stern as a grenadier. Her mere appearance quelled even Mabel Skinner. But when she came close to Ethel Clayton's desk the girl saw that her eyelids were red-rimmed and that she had difficulty in keeping her lips from trembling.

"Miss Clayton—you're Miss Clayton, ain't you?" she began. "Ethel Clayton?"

"Yes," agreed Ethel. "You are Mrs. Trevor?"

The woman nodded. Then said: "What do you know about Frank Barton? I hear you got a letter from him?"

"Yes, Mrs. Trevor."

"When was it writ?"

Ethel told her, understanding too well to consider Mrs. Trevor at all impertinent. She told her most of what was in the letter, too, for it was burned into her memory too clearly for her to forget what Frank Barton had said.

"Well," said the woman, with a sigh, "I had to know. I expect I'm an old fool. But that boy was with me long, Miss Clayton."

"I think I understand," the girl said gently.

"You see, I got to dreaming of him. Night afore last I had a terrible dream. I saw him with his face all bloody, his empty hands in the air—sort of clutching like—and him talling down just like he was dead. And there was smoke and fire all about, just as though he was in battle. It's worried me a lot."

"I should think it would, Mrs. Trevor," Ethel said.

"But you know, they say dreams go by contraries."

"So they say, but I don't know as it is always true. I've had dreams——"

"Oh, you mustn't let dreams get on your nerves," broke in Ethel hastily.

"Well, the dear boy meant so much to me. You can't imagine what a good boarder he was—no trouble at all—leas'wise not alongside o' some of 'em. Lordy! what a lot of trouble some of 'em do make, to be sure. But Frank Barton—he's one boy out of a thousand, yes, he is;" and the old boarding-house mistress bobbed her head vigorously.

"You mustn't worry. It will be all right, I'm sure," answered the girl, but rather weakly.

"You feel sure, Miss Clayton?"

"You must look on the bright side. It will be all right."

"Well, I hope so!" The woman then tramped out of the office. She was plainly relieved and comforted. But Ethel was not.

Of course she did not believe in dreams. But what Mrs. Trevor had said remained in the girl's mind—stuck to her memory like a burr. She was constantly seeing Frank Barton falling down, his face masked in blood. She almost accepted Mrs. Trevor's vision as prophetic.

Then came the day when the Mailsburg *Clarion* printed an afternoon extra edition. Those in the office heard the boys shouting it under the windows

and Benway Chase ran out to buy a paper. Across the sheet was the headline:

GERMAN AIR RAID ON AMERICAN CAMP!
METEOR DIVISION BOMBED!

The Field Artillery with which Frank Barton served was a part of the so-styled Meteor Division.

Ethel Clayton realized this while the paper was still across the room from her. She sat perfectly still at her desk, clutching the edge of it to keep down the cry that rose to her lips.

CHAPTER XX

SO FAR AWAY!

BENWAY CHASE was looking at her and Ethel realized that in the boy's eyes there was an expression of pain and despair that gave almost a tragic cast to his countenance. He had suddenly become aware that his old-time friend, the girl he had always worshiped, was given to the very last fibre of her being to another.

His lips moved stiffly as he came nearer to her desk.

"Is it Mr. Barton's division!" he questioned, brokenly. "Oh, Ethel!"

"His Field Artillery is a part of the Meteor Division," she said, and was surprised that her voice was unshaken.

"And you—" He did not finish the speech. His gaze dropped. The others gathered around to read the startling news in the *Clarion*.

Besides the headlines emblazoned across the page, there was not much to read. The War Department merely announced that it was reported—a report as yet unverified—that the Germans had raided the American camp. No casualties were announced. As previously declared, the Department would make all particulars public as soon as the undisputed facts

were received from the officer commanding the division.

Mayberry must have heard the buzz of conversation from the private office. He appeared, an ominous scowl on his brow.

"What's going on here?" he demanded. "Is this all you people have to do? I believe the Hapwood-Diller Company could get along just as well with half the office force we have."

"Let you and me enlist, Mayberry," suggested Sydney. "They could get along without us, that's sure."

Little Skinner giggled. The superintendent, who had some fear of Sydney, strode forward without replying to the bookkeeper and took the paper out of Josephine Durand's hand. He held some papers in a sheaf in his left hand and when he caught sight of the headlines he put his papers on the desk the better to handle the smutted newspaper.

Ethel had not risen. In flapping open the *Clarion* Mayberry started a circulation of air that scattered his sheaf of papers. Ethel gathered them together and stacked them into a neat packet. But this time a different paper was on top of the pile. She saw that the top sheet was headed: "A. Schuster."

"What's all this about?" Mayberry was saying. "Murder! Was Barton in it?"

"His battalion is attached to that division, Mr. Mayberry," Benway said.

"Well, maybe he's seen some real fighting, then," the superintendent said cheerfully. "That's what he went over there for, I suppose."

He dropped the *Clarion* upon Ethel's desk and picked up his papers. Seeing what lay on top he flashed the girl a sudden suspicious glance. But Ethel seemed oblivious of it.

Indeed, it seemed as though all save the phlegmatic superintendent were too thoroughly disturbed to set their minds on office matters. Ethel betrayed less emotion than most of them, perhaps; but then it was her nature to hide her keener feelings.

The few following days she found hard to live through. The strain upon her patience was great. The papers were filled with frothings and imaginations about the raid on the American camp. Then came the truth with the list of casualties.

The list was small. One enlisted man killed, seven wounded and one missing. The huge German flying machine had been brought down, one of its crew losing his life, the other fourteen being captured by Second-Lieutenant Charles Bradley with a part of his company.

With hungry eyes Ethel Clayton read the list of casualties. The last line yielded the news which she had feared all along:

"*Lieutenant F. Barton, Field Artillery, missing.*"

There was a full account in the papers of the raid and the bringing down of the German raider. But

the single statement, that Frank Barton was missing, added a spice of mystery to the affair that created a good deal of excitement in Mailsburg.

It could not be possible, if all the German raiders were captured or killed, that Frank Barton was himself captured and taken into the German lines. That seemed improbable. Yet the sinister report stood.

What had happened to him? Would Ethel ever hear from him again? Was his fate to be one of those mysteries of war that are never satisfactorily explained? Of the three lurid headings of the casualty list, killed, wounded, missing, the last is always the most nerve-breaking.

Just at this time, however, Ethel Clayton's mind was scarified by other and serious troubles. She had decided that at last the evidence of conspiracy was sufficient to lay before Mr. Hammerly; and as the latter seemed to make no move the girl went to him.

"The quarterly meeting is near. I understand that Mr. Mayberry is to be advanced to Mr. Barton's position," she said to the old grain dealer. "To me it looks like ruin for us all. My mother has some interest in it, Mr. Hammerly, so I am speaking for her, not for myself as an employee."

"Humph! No! You'd best keep out of it, Ethel," said the old man. "Leave this to me. I've learned something about this Schuster, though I never saw him. If I need your evidence I'll call on you in the board meeting. But I reckon I can link up A.

Schuster with the proper parties without your verbal testimony."

Meanwhile Jim Mayberry made himself as unpleasant around the offices as he could. He felt, it seemed, that he would soon have all the force at his mercy, unless it were Sydney. He would scarcely dare discharge the bookkeeper, who had been so long with the corporation.

"Mayberry hangs the sword of Damocles over our heads," Benway growled one evening to Ethel. "I can feel the breath of it on the back of my neck, at least. I might as well be looking around for another job."

Ethel had no word of comfort for him. She did not see herself just how it was coming out. It seemed probable that Frank Barton would never come back now; so why should the stockholders keep his situation for him?

The day for the quarterly board meeting arrived, and the board room buzzed like a hive of disturbed bees. Thoroughly in touch as she was with the reports from all departments, Ethel knew very well that the expected blow must fall.

The usual dividend must be passed. The circumstances of the corporation would not allow anything else to be done. The last two quarterly reports showed a decline in profits, in production, and in value of plant, which fairly staggered most of the board members.

"It stands to reason," Grandon Fuller stated in his decided way, "that before he went away, Mr. Barton was covering up a good many things that he would better have given us notice of. We can excuse the enthusiasm and anxiety of the young, perhaps; he was very desirous of getting out of it all and putting on the army khaki. But now we have suffered enough—this corporation I mean—because of his mistakes. We must get back on a stable foundation. Somebody must get a firm grip upon the Hapwood-Diller Company."

"Suppose Brother Fuller tells us just wherein Frank Barton is to be blamed for our present situation?" suggested Macon Hammerly, with surprising gentleness for him. "We want facts, not allegations."

"You know very well how be bungled that Kimberly order."

"I have affidavits of a chemist and two handwriting experts here," interposed Hammerly, shuffling the papers before him, "which state that [illegible]nes in the Kimberly Company's schedule sh[illegible]were erased, and in the two interpolated lines an attempt made by somebody to copy the writing of the young woman who made the schedule. In other words a deliberate and successful attempt to change the substance of the Kimberly order was made after it passed out of Mr. Barton's hands."

There was immediate uproar—denial by Fuller and angry talk by some of the other members of the b[illegible]ard.

Hammerly grimly displayed his affidavits and proved his case to the satisfaction of most of the board of directors.

"The fact remains," cried Grandon Fuller, "that our shares are selling in the open market as low as sixty. The news has got out that the business is tottering for want of a strong hand to manage it."

"We'll take that up, too," interposed Hammerly. "I have here a list of shares and whom they were bought from by a man named A. Schuster. These shares have been thrown on the market by various brokers at ridiculous prices. They were all bought up again by A. Schuster! And this same tricky legal light has been the representative of a certain member of this board in New York for the past three years."

This remarkable statement produced a profound sensation. For a brief instant there was intense silence as the members of the board looked at each other. Then—

"What are you saying?"

"That's a grave accusation!"

"Can you prove your words?"

"It's a crime to do what you're hinting at, Hammerly."

"He can't prove a thing!"

"He don't know what he's talking about!"

"Shut him up!"

"He ought to be put out of the meeting!"

"That's the talk. He is going too far. This is a meeting of gentlemen."

Thus came the chorus of objections, not alone from Grandon Fuller. But Macon Hammerly's scowl quelled the riot.

"I know whereof I speak," he said solemnly. "I have papers and witnesses to prove it. And I have reason to suppose, in addition, that Mr. Grandon Fuller has made some wash sales of his own shares of the Hapwood-Diller Company that in the first place bore down the price. Let him deny it if he dares!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE BURDEN

THE game of "freeze out" fathered by the heaviest stockholder in the Hapwood-Diller Company betrayed by Macon Hammerly's confident statements was but an incident of that stormy meeting of the board. The latter was thoroughly reorganized before the end of the session. And that spelled utter defeat for Mr. Fuller's plans.

He held some of his friends on the board; but Hammerly was a shrewd politician. He voted more proxies than Fuller could assemble. The latter found himself ousted from the chairmanship; the grain merchant was voted into the vacant place by a satisfactory majority. The smoke of battle cleared away, leaving Grandon Fuller slumped down in his chair with a sour face and Jim Mayberry looking glum and at the same time half-frightened and half-dazed.

"Send for Ethel Clayton," ordered the new chairman. "We want stenographic notes of what goes on here. If any of our stockholders question what we do we must be able to spread before them an exact report of our actions. Under the old régime this was impossible. There was too much secret diplomacy here," and he grinned.

Ethel realized the tenseness of the situation when she came into the board room, book and pencil in hand. She was given a seat at Hammerly's right hand.

"Now," said the grim looking grain dealer, "you have something to say, I presume, Jim?" and he looked at the superintendent.

"I say what I said before, Mr. Hammerly," grumbled Mayberry. "If I can't have a free hand I can't undertake to manage the concern, and that's all there is to it."

"But you can continue as superintendent, I presume?" softly asked Hammerly. "That job isn't too big for you, is it?"

The younger man's face flamed and he answered angrily: "I don't know what you mean. Nobody ever conplained of my work before."

"While Barton was on the job to overlook you—no," admitted the old man, his sarcasm biting. "True. But things have been going badly in the various shops. That fire in Number Four the other day, for instance."

"By thunder!" exploded Mayberry, "you can't blame me for that! I can't be in a dozen places at once."

"There have been quite unnecessary breakdowns, and work has been retarded. How do you explain these things?" demanded Mr. Hammerly.

"I—I——"

"I don't mean to say you are not a good man in your place, Jim," said the grain merchant. "But Barton's job is too big for you. I did not believe you could begin to fill his shoes at the start."

"Yet you agreed that Barton should go away?" questioned Grandon Fuller.

"Yes. He wanted to go. For patriotic reasons I could not thwart his desire. And in addition I knew that if Jim here fell down—as he has—we would not be helpless."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Seville Baker, who owned a drug store and had several thousand dollars invested in the Hapwood-Diller Company stock.

Jim Mayberry's face was fiery again. Even Grandon Fuller sat up to stare at Hammerly. The others seemed as much amazed.

The old grain dealer grinned for a moment rather sheepishly. Then a new expression came into his face, for he turned to look at the girl beside him. His gnarled right hand crept over her white and well shaped left. She glanced up from her book, startled.

"I tell you what 'tis," said Hammerly in his homely way; "if I was as blind as you other fellers are this board would be about as much good as an old women's sewing bee! That's what!

"There's been just one person that's kept things going half smoothly in the Hapwood-Diller Company since Frank Barton cleared out to be a soldier. And

"I nominate her as assistant manager, to hold the job till Frank Barton comes back."

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that person had a good deal to do toward helping Frank when he was on the job.

"Don't you fellers know that Miss Clayton here was Frank's right hand man? She knows all the ins and outs of things. It was her caught this poor fish, Jim Mayberry, selling us out to the Bogata Company. She's been of much more importance lately, I can tell you. If we pull out of this hole we are in and pay a dividend again, it will be because of what she has done."

Grandon Fuller dragged himself to his feet. He had a power of repression scarcely second to Hammerly himself. But this was too much.

"You old fool!" he shouted at the grain dealer. "You don't mean to try to put a woman in charge of this business? It's suicidal!"

"I mean just that. I mean Miss Clayton's able to fill the job, and Jim Mayberry ain't. She's a better man when it comes to business sense than any of us. I nominate her for the place of assistant manager, to hold the job till Frank Barton comes back to us—if the poor feller ever does come back."

"I won't vote on such a fool proposition," cried Fuller wrathfully, starting for the door.

"Don't bother to, Grandon," drawled Hammerly. "You'd be beat if you did—and you know it. I've got more proxies than you have."

The door of the board room banged. Ethel Clayton had turned to speak, but Hammerly was scowl-

ing at Jim Mayberry, who had risen as though to follow his fellow-conspirator. "Spit it out, Jim. Tell us what's on your chest."

"I—I——You old fool!" exclaimed the superintendent, "do you think I am going to work here under a *girl?* To be set aside for her?"

"No; I don't guess you will," responded Hammerly. "We'll give you a chance to resign if that's what you want. And I guess your resignation will be accepted pretty nigh unanimous."

"But Mr. Hammerly," begged Seville Baker, feebly, "what will happen to the works? Mr. Mayberry has been superintendent so long——"

"There's a good foreman in every shop who has been on his job longer than Jim Mayberry has voted. They've only been hampered by Jim—that's the truth of the matter.

"I will be through at the end of the month, gentlemen," said Mayberry, recovering his dignity. "The high hand Mr. Hammerly takes in this matter——"

"Shoo!" exclaimed the grain merchant with grim pleasantry. "You'll get through right here and now. I for one wouldn't trust you to go out into the shops again. You go to Sydney and draw your salary to the end of next month. You broke your contract when you accepted the assistant managership and extra salary. Your dear friend, Fuller, or his legal henchman, Schuster, didn't point that out to you, did they? Sydney's got the money all in an envelope

for you. Scat!" and he waved both hands at the angry Mayberry.

"Now," the old man added, turning to his conferees, "maybe you fellows think I've taken a high hand in these proceedings; but to tell you honestly, we ought to have both Mayberry and Grandon Fuller arrested. Only it would have created a scandal that the Hapwood-Diller Company couldn't afford at this time."

"We don't want any scandal," came from the corner of the room.

"We've had enough trouble as it is," came from the other side of the place.

"Let us get right down to a working basis—and let it go at that."

"What we want to do is to pull up and make some money."

At this last remark, Macon Hammerly turned to the speaker and smiled grimly. Then he went on:

"There ain't no use in denying that we're in a bad hole. We've run behind for two quarters, and our credit's hurt by those stock sales. It's going to be a heavy burden upon this girl's shoulders—as it was upon Frank Barton's—to pull us out. But she'll do it! Won't you, Ethel?" he demanded heartily.

"Oh, Mr. Hammerly," the girl murmured.

"Louder! Tell them 'Yes,'" cried the grain merchant.

"I can only follow in Mr. Barton's footsteps," she stammered.

"And good enough!" declared Mr. Baker.

"If you can do half as well as Barton, Miss Clayton," said another of the revivified board, "we shall have no complaint."

"We'll be behind you, girl," said Macon Hammerly. "Keep the wheels turning, speed up the output, and watch the outgoes as well as the incomes. That's the secret of success in this business. And the Lord help you!" he added under his breath, but the excited girl herself did not hear his less jubilant tone.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FIGHT

WITH a reunited board behind her and canny Macon Hammerly to advise with, it might seem at the rising of the curtain on Ethel Clayton's régime as *de facto* manager of the Hapwood-Diller Manufacturing Company that her course would be along pleasant paths.

Instead she very soon found that she was walking over burning plowshares.

That Grandon Fuller was beaten in his control of the board of directors did not make him amenable to the new policies of the Hapwood-Diller Company and the reign of a girl as manager of the business.

He boldly stated that he considered the knell of the company had rung because of the situation in the offices. If a full-grown man like Jim Mayberry could not handle the business so as to make a profit, how could a girl be expected to do so?

That Mr. Fuller's intention was still to discourage the small stockholders so that he could buy up their holdings at a low price and finally control the corporation, could not be overlooked. Yet he was careful to do nothing now that would give Hammerly a legal hold on him.

Mayberry was out of it, or so it seemed. He went to work for the Mailsburg Addition Real Estate Company, of which Mr. Fuller was known to be the backer. It was a good deal of a come-down for Jim Mayberry.

On that wonderful day when Hammerly had carried his point and had given the welfare of the business into Ethel's hands, the foremen of the shops had been called in before the board and the situation explained to them.

They were not asked to express their opinion of Jim Mayberry's oversight of the factory, nor to explain their own apparent shortcomings and the failure of their several shops to keep up to the standard of output established by Mr. Barton.

Merely they were asked if they would be loyal to the corporation, and if they were willing to work in harmony with Ethel Clayton until such time as a general superintendent could be found to take Mayberry's place. These questions brought enthusiastic and unanimous affirmative responses.

But a willingness upon the part of all the hands was not all that was needed. When a manufacturing plant, either in its mechanical part or in its working force, has been allowed to deteriorate, it is uphill work to get it back on a firm foundation.

Ethel felt that with the good teamwork of the office force which she could depend upon, her burden

at that end would be light. In the factory administration lay her difficult problem.

She depended on Benway Chase in no inconsiderable degree, as she knew he had gained a working knowledge of the factory affairs. Benway had continued to make himself acquainted with practical things and much shoplore. The foremen liked him, too, and would discuss things with the young fellow that they might have been chary of talking over with "the lady boss," as they began to call her.

There was not an ounce of business jealousy in Ethel Clayton's makeup. She gave Benway all the encouragement possible, and after the first two weeks she reported to the board that she could not possibly carry on the work at all were it not for Benway, or somebody equally efficient and willing in his stead.

Since the news of the air raid on the American camp in France, Benway had been even gentler and more considerate of Ethel than before; but there was, too, a certain aloofness in his manner which the girl quite understood.

He had captured Ethel's secret. His own love for her had given him an immediate key to her emotion when she first saw the headlines spread over the news sheet. Frank Barton's peril had caused her to betray her feeling for him to the love-sharpened vision of Benway.

Since that time no news save that he was still missing had come of Frank Barton. It was well

Ethel's mind was so filled with business matters and that her every waking hour was occupied by the affairs of the Hapwood-Diller Company. She had no opportunity of dwelling in thought upon that line in the casualty list that had not been explained: "*Lieut. F. Barton, Field Artillery, missing.*"

When the clergyman prayed on Sunday for those who had gone "over there" to fight in their country's cause, Ethel thought of but one person. It seemed to her as though the whole war—the fate of a world-wide democracy—was as nothing compared to the mystery of what had happened to Frank Barton.

She was not alone in this desire to know the fate of the general manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company. Mrs. Trevor came more than once to discuss the mystery with her. She began to learn how many friends Frank Barton really had in Mailsburg. His cheerful, kindly spirit had won him a following of which any man might feel proud.

Mr. Macon Hammerly had used his influence to make inquiry. But the War Department, like most large bodies, moves slowly. The questions from Lieutenant Barton's friends were not the only fear-fraught queries that must be answered.

Nobody in Mailsburg, it seemed, had heard from any of the town's sons who had gone to France when Barton went. The boys drafted from the town were still in the training camps on this side of the water. As far as Ethel could learn no one had heard directly

from Morrison Copley or Charles Bradley since that tragic happening.

Ethel's pillow was often wet at night because of Frank Barton's fate; but by day the business difficulties that faced her held her mind in thrall. She began to appreciate more than ever before what Barton himself had gone through when he had first taken hold of the job of putting the Hapwood-Diller Company on a paying basis.

And she had problems to solve that Barton had not been obliged to consider. In two years and a half circumstances had greatly changed. The labor situation was one of the hardest of Ethel's enigmas.

Besides the hundred or more men who had been drafted from the shops, and others who had enlisted, many of the best mechanics had gone away to work in munition plants where the wages were vastly higher than the Hapwood-Diller Company could afford to pay.

This had brought into the shops a class of workmen who were not, to say the least, high grade. There was unrest among them, too. Having no feeling of loyalty for the corporation, these new workmen were really a menace to the peaceful conduct of the business.

Little troubles rose almost daily, many of which could not be settled by the shop foremen. After all, the absence of a strong hand over the factory as

a whole, began to be felt. And Ethel realized this lack quite as soon as anybody.

With the old hands she would have had some personal influence. With the new workmen—many of them foreigners—she could do little.

Jim Mayberry was a burly man, and not afraid to "bawl a man out" if occasion arose. If he threatened to knock a man down he looked as though he could do it. That may not be the most approved way of keeping a lot of unruly workmen in order; but it is often efficacious.

Benway Chase could merely be Ethel's errand boy. Benway felt his limitations keenly. "If I only had a good right arm!" he groaned more than once.

"No use worrying about that, Bennie," she said. "We must find some way to manage besides knocking their heads together. There are only a few who make trouble. Don't you think we can get rid of them?"

But labor was so scarce and the factory was so crowded with orders that she shrank from such a drastic course. She had an intuitive feeling, too, that the discharge of certain trouble-makers would bring other trouble-makers to the surface.

More than once she was stopped in front of the office or on her way home by some worker grown bold by the changed condition of affairs.

"What about more wages, Miss?" one burly man

asked her, quite abruptly. "If wages don't go up soon, I quit."

"Everything is so high, my wife says I've got to earn more," was what a tall, thin workman told her right in front of her own home. And two days later both of these men demanded their time and left.

"It sure is getting worse every day," was the way Benway Chase put it. "I don't see how it's going to end."

"Maybe we'll have to shut down," Ethel answered.

"Oh, you don't mean that!"

"No, I don't. But there is no telling what will happen," said the girl, soberly.

She felt that poison was seeping into the working force from without. Nothing she could say or do would stop it. The foremen admitted that the tone of the shops had entirely changed. If they were able to get a fair day's work turned out they were doing well. And many of the men did their stint grudgingly.

The wages of all the hands had been advanced twice since Frank Barton had first taken hold of the corporation. Had business remained good and profits increased, it had been his intention, Ethel knew, to ask the board of directors for another advance at the end of the third year.

But with affairs in the mess they were—a quarterly dividend passed and the output decreased—there

would be no hope of following out this intention of the absent general manager.

Many factories in neighboring towns had turned to war work of one kind or another. But the machinery of the Hapwood-Diller Company, built for special need, could not be used on any war work that Ethel had ever yet heard of.

The factory of the defunct Bogata Company was being used for munition work. People from Mailsburg were flocking to Norville, attracted by the high wages. One by one the Hapwood-Diller Company's best workmen left and went to work at the Norville plant.

Ethel's report to the board was sure to be a report of failure. She realized that she did not measure up to the demands of her position. To claim she was helpless would not absolve her from the fact she was a failure. That could not be cloaked.

This was her job. She had accepted it. If she could not make good she should give it up. She began to feel that Ethel Clayton might be a good enough hack; but she lacked the ability necessary to carry her to the front in the business race. She was away back in the ruck.

These were her feelings and meditations one evening when, after the others had gone, she still remained in the office, as she often did.

Her work for the day was done. Hours of consideration, it seemed, would not aid her in making

the figures on the credit side of the ledger add up to a larger sum than the figures on the debit side.

She stood with her back to her desk, hands gripping its edge, her eyes emptily staring at the wall. Her mental vision was alert, not her physical.

If Frank Barton could only return! If he would only walk in at that door—just to advise with her, to hearten her, to suggest to her agitated mind some scheme by which she might put life into this business.

Would she ever see him again now that he had marched away? Her mind pictured the marching past of that host of high-hearted men and boys, bound for a foreign shore from which many necessarily would never return. And it seemed Frank Barton was one of the very first to be lost to the knowledge of his friends—lost to those who loved him!

The outer door banged open heavily. She knew John Murphy had not yet gone home, and she looked up expecting to see his grizzled visage.

Instead it was the sharp and eager features of Mabel Skinner. The younger girl came in like a whirlwind.

"Oh, Ethel! Miss Clayton!" she gasped. "Guess!"

"Guess what?"

"Guess what I just heard down at Rhyncamp's store! That Marble girl was there! You know—the Marbles who live right next to the Fuller house."

"I know. What of it?" asked Ethel, excited though she did not know why she should be.

"She's chums with that Fuller girl. You know—Grandon Fuller's daughter Helen. She went t France to join the Red Cross."

Ethel's clasped hands showed her interest. She could not speak. Her eyes searched the vivid face of Little Skinner pleadingly.

"The Marble girl's just got a letter from Helen Fuller. I heard her tell Mr. Rhyncamp. Miss Fuller is nursing in a hospital over there somewhere She says her very first patient was Mr. Barton. He ain't dead, then, Miss Clayton! He ain't dead! He's only wounded! Oh, Miss Clayton!"

CHAPTER XXIII

COMPARISONS

MABEL SKINNER'S news was true. The letter Miss Marble had received told the story from Helen Fuller's standpoint. But let the heroics in it be the nine days' wonder of Mailsburg. Here are the facts:

Frank Barton came to his senses slowly and found himself upon a cot, one of a long line, in a ward of the base hospital at Lovin, as the place may be called, without the first idea of how he got there. His last memory was of facing the crew of the German air raider with Helen Fuller clinging to his arm and making it impossible to defend her or himself or to deal effectively with the enemy before them.

"Where—where am I?" he stammered. "What happened?"

"Oh, Frank!" squealed a voice, and some one in correct nurse's garb stood beside him. "You're not going to die, are you? Isn't that just *dear!*"

"Oh, heavens!" groaned Lieutenant Barton, in something like despair. "*You* here?"

Were Frank Barton's eyes at last seeing truly? It was, perhaps, the most impolite speech he had ever made. But he was very weak and still a little light-headed.

Had the quiet-faced French matron of the ward understood much English, she surely would have removed Miss Fuller from attendance on the lieutenant almost at once. As it was he had to listen to the girl's fulsome praises and silly ejaculations.

It was not until some time later that Barton learned just what had happened after he had been hit with the sharp stone and had handed his weapon to the distracted Helen.

"Why, that Heinie used to pitch in one of the bush leagues," Morrison Copley told Barton, when he came to see his lieutenant. "Lived ten years in America and then went back to fight for Kultur. Something's going to happen to him, for the lieutenant in command of the airship declares all bets off. He had warned his men not to fight."

"I wonder what they had in their mind when they started for me. Going to kiss me, I suppose," Barton suggested weakly.

"Bah jove! that's a good one," said Morry. "I must tell that to Brad. Say, that lad got 'mention' in general orders for capturing the gang. But he walks right up to the colonel, and says: 'Colonel, it wasn't much to capture fourteen men that were not armed. How about Lieutenant Barton who tackled them single handed and perhaps helped bring the old Zep down anyway?' "

"That's all right," commented Barton. "Good of Bradley. But, really, I did no more than another

man would have done. Those poor people in the car that were blown to bits——"

"And it was a car that followed on behind that one that picked you and Mam'zelle Hélène up," grinned Morry, "and brought you cross country to Lovin. That's how you were lost trace of. Guess the folks at home must think you evaporated into thin air, Lieutenant. But they'll know the truth very soon now. I've written home about you."

But that was not entirely satisfactory to Frank Barton. He wanted to write himself. He had a strong and particular reason for writing, and to a particular girl.

Aside from the wound in his head—a wound which would always leave a scar—his right arm was strapped tightly to his side. He had a fracture of the shoulder that made a cast necessary and would entail a long convalescence. Frank Barton's active military career was halted before it was much more than begun.

The delayed report of his wounds did not officially reach Mailsburg until after both Helen's letter to Miss Marble and Morrison Copley's "open letter" to the Mailsburg *Clarion* were received. Barton was the first of the town's boys reported under fire and the first to suffer injury in the war.

A delayed letter from Ethel had reached Barton soon after he found himself established in the hospital ward with Helen Fuller hovering about him a good part of every day.

"Business, I suppose, Frank?" she observed when she saw the name and address on the back of the envelope. "*Can't* those factory people let you alone, you poor dear boy, even when you are *wounded* so?"

Barton felt like speaking impolitely again. But he had command of himself now. Nevertheless Helen continued to rasp his nerves on more than one subject. Had he been blessed with another nurse he would have dictated an answer to Ethel's letter. There was a tone to it—a wistfulness which the girl had been unable to hide—that deeply moved the wounded lieutenant.

The missive was written before Ethel had been made assistant manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company; yet even then she felt the burden of her position and would have been glad of any bit of kindly advice he might have sent her. But for three weeks, at least, he must remain silent. He had never learned to write with his left hand like Benway Chase.

He proved to be a patient *blessé*, and both the physicians and nurses praised him. That he had come to a French hospital was rather unfortunate, for Barton's knowledge of French was slight. He had to make most of his desires known through Helen and therfore was at a disadvantage.

She frankly encouraged the appearance of a closer association between them than was the case. A few months before Frank Barton would have been de-

lighted at such intimacy with Helen Fuller. But he was quite aware now of her shortcomings.

Even her association with the Red Cross was a play. It was a part of her unquenchable desire to show off all the time. Had Barton been really left to her small mercies he realized that it would have gone hard with him. She kept her interest in him as a patient only because of the romance of their adventure together at the time of the air raid.

He could not forget how small and light a part she had played at that time. He hoped that no other American girl in France would prove herself so great a coward as Helen Fuller had on that momentous occasion.

He began to feel a distaste for her glowing beauty —a beauty of coloring and feature and texture of skin and hair only, without character or intelligence looking out of the eyes or showing in the face.

In the warmth of the first few days of their sojourn at the hospital even so modest a man as Frank Barton saw plainly that he was being given the opportunity to declare himself. Helen was waiting for him to respond to her advances.

When he did not respond she began finally to be piqued, then angry. She had herself transferred to another ward. Her absence did not increase Barton's temperature, the chart at the head of his cot remained normal.

This rift between them was noted and remarked on by some of the other nurses. At last Helen took offence, had her mother telegraph her from Paris, and obtained a furlough and departed from Lovin without bidding Frank good-bye.

He did not miss her, save in a relieved way. He had compared her with another girl—another of whom he had never thought before as other than a business associate—and found that Helen Fuller was dwarfed in the comparison.

Thinking of Ethel as he lay in his hospital cot, he was amazed to discover how much that was really worth while he knew about her. Important things, too—individualities and phases of character that now revealed Ethel Clayton as a girl eminently worthy of consideration.

The girl he had left behind was all that Helen Fuller proved not to be. He was confident that Ethel would not have shown the white feather as Helen had at the time of the German air raid. No girl who had so courageously taken up the additional burden of responsibility in the Hapwood-Diller Company offices could be a coward in any particular.

The vision of Ethel Clayton grew in his mind. His thoughts centered about her. He began to wonder what her attitude would be toward him if he should go back home and see her again.

It was not interest in the Hapwood-Diller Company that was drawing his heart to Mailsburg during these days. He did not give a fig for business. His heartstrings were attuned to a much tenderer emotion. He was gradually beginning to see things in their proper light.

CHAPTER XXIV

OPENING THE WAY

ETHEL heard of Barton in several ways during the next few weeks, but never by personal letter. She understood the reason for that, however, for Morrison Copley had quite freely explained the lieutenant's wounds and his helpless condition in the *Clarion*.

"Thank the good Lord 'tain't his legs nor his eyes," Mrs. Trevor said. "When a man can't see to read and he can't get about on his own pins he ain't no use to himself, nor to nobody else."

Ethel did not fail to write to the wounded man, and that frequently. When these letters should reach Barton he would learn the particulars of the important changes in the Hapwood-Diller offices, and something, too, of Ethel's troubles and perplexities.

But she had no idea that it was something entirely different from office news that the hungry-hearted absentee wished for.

The explanation of the mystery touching Frank Barton's wounds and his confinement in the hospital relieved Ethel's anxiety to a certain degree. But there was one thing that seriously pricked her thought

at all times. Helen Fuller was with the wounded man!

Miss Marble had made Helen's letter broadly public. Other people in Mailsburg noted the fact that Helen's first patient was the general manager of the Hapwood-Diller Company. It is the easiest thing in the world for gossip to put such a two and two together and make four.

It was remarked that before Barton had gone to the officers' training camp at Quehasset he had been seen much with Helen Fuller. His interest in her had been noted.

Now the gossips declared their association on the other side could lead to but one conclusion. Somebody offered a bet in Ethel's hearing, two to one, that there would be a wedding at the American Embassy in Paris just as soon as Lieutenant Barton was allowed to leave the base hospital at Lovin.

However, relieved by her knowledge of Barton's safety, Ethel Clayton tried to give all her attention to the task she had accepted when she was practically hoisted into Barton's place.

Hammerly and a few of the other directors cheered her; Grandon Fuller sneered and continued to acclaim openly that a girl at the head of the business spelled ruin for the Hapwood-Diller Company.

"Don't mind that grouch, Ethel," Macon Hammerly said. "We've put a ring in his nose, and like

any other hog he squeals over the operation. But such squealing never yet did any hurt."

"It gets on one's nerves most awfully, just the same, Mr. Hammerly," the girl said with a sigh.

She had not, however, come to the old man with any empty complaint. The labor situation at the factory was in a critical condition. The spoiled work being turned back by the inspectors and foremen had increased twenty per cent. Still the malcontents complained of low wages.

"To protect the corporation and to answer the low wage complaint," Ethel told Hammerly, "I have certain drastic changes to suggest. I admit they are diametrically opposed to the system inaugurated by Mr. Barton; but Mr. Barton did not have the same difficulties to deal with that we have now."

"Ain't it so?" agreed the old man. "In those times, Grandon Fuller was trying to rope Frank, just as he afterward noosed Mayberry. Go on, Ethel. You've got good sense, I know."

"Thank you. At least, I have the interests of the corporation at heart. If I fail as manager I lose more than your good opinion, Mr. Hammerly."

"By Henry! you ain't goin' to fail, girl," cried the man.

"But I am desperate. Desperate enough to change the entire system of the factory if the board of directors will back me. Look at this, Mr. Hammerly.

She displayed her carefully drawn up plans. The important change was the shifting from a flat payment of labor at so much per hour, graduated according to the skill of the workmen, to a piecework scale of wages which she had scheduled with the assistance of Benway Chase.

"I believe it will answer the complaint of low pay. Our best men will be encouraged to remain with us instead of going to the munition factories. The dissatisfied workmen will be those less skilled and we can the more easily replace them if they leave," Ethel explained.

Macon Hammerly's approval was instant, and with his backing Ethel's scheme was sure to be agreed to by the board. But to put it into force without opposition was more than could be expected.

The better class of workmen in the factory when consulted quietly before the posting of the notices, were eager to give the plan a trial. Many of them owned their own homes in Mailsburg and had hesitated to leave their employment at the Hapwood-Diller factory despite the temptation of higher wages elsewhere. The chance to increase voluntarily their incomes by speeding up found favor.

There were incendiary fellows, however, ready instantly to decry the change. They could see no good in it. It was a trick on the part of the corporation to underpay the bulk of the laboring force employed in the factory.

This cauldron of trouble continued to bubble and steam up to the very Saturday before the installation of the new system of payment. At closing time that afternoon it was already dark; but many of the workmen left the factory gate only to remain in the side street where they milled like cattle on the verge of a stampede. They talked in noisy groups. There was something on foot and whether or not they knew just what it was to be, both the satisfied workmen and the dissatisfied remained.

An automobile with two sputtering gasoline torches in it appeared at last and drove slowly through the noisy crowd to the corner, where it stopped in view of both the door of the factory offices and of the workmen's entrance gate. A burly figure in a great coat and goggles was behind the steering wheel of the car. In the tonneau was a little, black-haired, foreign looking man who stood on the seat to speak to the crowd that at once surged near.

"That is Mr. Schuster!" Ethel .Clayton ejaculated, looking from the office window that best overlooked the corner. She had remained after the bulk of the office force had gone; but Mabel Skinner was with her.

"I don't know who that one may be," said the younger girl, "but it's Jim Mayberry's car and that's Jim himself all camouflaged up with goggles and a long coat. Le's go down there, Miss Clayton, and listen to what that crazy man's saying. He waves

his arms around like they was unhinged—just the same as his brain is."

The girls were about to leave the offices in John's care when the street-corner forum convened. Ethel was worried.

"Is the side gate locked, John?" she asked the porter.

"I don't s'pose it is yet, ma'am," he replied.

"Go out and bar it and warn the night watchmen to be on their guard. Nobody must be allowed to enter the gate to-night—not even a foreman if one should return. And be sure the main door is locked after us."

"Yes, ma'am," grinned John. "And will you call out the military?"

Ethel feared, however, that it might be no laughing matter. Mabel Skinner was eager to go to the corner and hear what the man had to say; Ethel accompanied her, fearing the sharp tongue of the younger girl would get her into trouble in the rough crowd.

Schuster was Mr. Grandon Fuller's personal representative, Ethel was sure. And Jim Mayberry's presence made certain the identity of the influence which was seeking to stir up trouble for the Hapwood-Diller Company and its girl manager.

Jim Mayberry caught sight of Ethel almost as soon as the two girls reached the corner. He turned and called Schuster's attention to Ethel. The fox-feat-

ured little lawyer instantly seized the opportunity for making a point in his speech.

"Here you are, men! You fellows under petticoat government! Here's your lady boss come out to laugh at you. You big, brawny, husky fellows ought to be proud of yourselves—bossed by a girl! Tied to her apron strings!"

He added something more vulgar that drew a laugh from a certain portion of the throng. Jim Mayberry turned and pushed up his dust goggles, leering into Ethel's white and disgusted face. Mabel Skinner quite lost her self-control.

"You're in nice work now, ain't you, Jim Mayberry?" she scoffed at the former superintendent of the factory. Then she screamed at the crowding men: "You big galoots! You goin' to let that little fice up there insult a lady like Miss Clayton? And don't you see who's egging him on—and egging *you* on to riot and trouble? He's asking you to pull his chestnuts out of the fire. It's Jim Mayberry—Mayberry, the man that's sore because the board kicked him out as superintendent and put Miss Clayton into his place. Aw, say! You all know Jim Mayberry!"

This raised a laugh which drowned out the lawyer's vitriolic words. Mayberry reached for Little Skinner, his face inflamed and ugly.

"You brat!" he growled. "I'll teach you——"

He did not finish the remark. As his clutching hand descended upon the girl's shoulder a figure

jumped upon the running board of the automobile on the other side.

"Beating up a girl would be about your size, Jim Mayberry!" exclaimed Benway Chase, and with all the force of his good left arm he struck the former superintendent of the factory in the face.

Mayberry uttered an oath and swung around. Benway met him with a second blow—this time landing on the nose. In a moment the victim's face was covered with blood.

"Go it, Bennie! Hit him again!" shrieked Mabel, jumping up and down in her excitement.

Ethel was horrified; but Little Skinner became the primitive woman cheering on her particular hero.

Mayberry got up from behind the steering wheel and cast himself blindly upon the striking Benway. The latter gave ground, leaping back off the car. Mayberry plunged after him. In a moment they had clinched and were down in the street, striking at each other, Benway silent but Mayberry swearing and threatening.

It was at this moment that Macon Hammerly appeared with a policeman. The latter refused to observe the incipient riot around the two men on the ground, but stepped up and tapped Schuster on the arm.

"Hey, you!" he said to the little lawyer, "where's your permit?"

"'Permit?'"

"Permit to speak on the street 'cordin' to the city ord'nance made an' pervided. Ain't got none?" went on the officer. "Come along with me, then," and he jerked Schuster off the automobile seat as though he were a child and started at once down town with him.

"I reckon," Hammerly said to Ethel with a grin, "that Grandon forgot that small point. There almost always is some vital point, Ethel, that a villain overlooks.

"Now, you come on with me, girl. There's something I want you to be in on. I was coming up after you when I saw this gang here and sicked the policeman on to that little Schuster. Come on."

The whirl of events had quite taken Ethel's mind off of Benway Chase and his fight with Mayberry. But Mabel Skinner had darted around the car, vitally determined to lend her hero aid if he needed it.

Benway needed no help. Had it been so, there seemed to be quite a number in the crowd disposed to be his friends.

"Let the young boss alone," one said. "It ain't beef that counts. The young boss has got the spirit to lick his weight in wildcats."

"Oh, Bennie! Oh, Bennie!" burst forth Mabel Skinner. "Don't you let that big loafer hurt you!"

"I won't," promised Benway, rising quite self-possessed and scarcely marred by the scrimmage. "He doesn't want to fight."

This seemed quite true. At least, Jim Mayberry had very quickly got enough. He stood up painfully, climbed into his car awkwardly, and drove away, amid the jeers of the onlookers, without even an additional threat.

The bubble of his reputation as a fighter was pricked. Some of the older workmen lingering near mentioned the fact that the ex-superintendent of the factory had been but a bag of wind after all. "The young boss," as they had come to call Benway Chase, had "licked him with one hand."

The latter slipped out of the crowd as quickly as possible. Mabel Skinner was clinging to his good arm and it was not until they were a full dark block away from the scene of the disturbance that he discovered the girl was crying.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Benway, utterly aghast at the idea of self-possessed Little Skinner giving way to tears. "Are you hurt?"

"No—no, sir, Mr. Chase. I ain't hurt."

"Then why are you crying?" he demanded, snuggling the girl closer to his side.

"I—I was afraid you might be," she confessed.

"But, I'm not! That big chump never hurt me a mite!"

"Then I—I guess I'm crying for joy," sobbed Mabel. "If he'd hurt you, Mr. Chase, I guess I'd have *died!*"

"Huh! Why the 'Mr. Chase?' Wasn't I 'Bennie' a while back when you were rooting for me? Why,

Mabel, I couldn't have lost out with you yelling your head off that way on the side lines!"

"Oh, Bennie!" she gasped.

It was a very dark corner. When they strolled out into the next circle of lamp light, Benway's arm was around the girl's shoulders and she was looking up into his face with such an ecstatic expression on her own that had Boots Skinner seen it he certainly would have been held fast in his tracks.

CHAPTER XXV

COMPENSATION

MACON HAMMERLY offered no explanation at all as he led Ethel in the direction of High Street, quite in the opposite way from her usual walk at this hour of the evening. But he was pleasantly chatty just the same.

In spite of his gruffness and homely speech, if he liked the grain dealer could show a less prickly side to his character, and he always showed that glossed side to Ethel Clayton.

"Don't you make no mistake, girl," he now observed. "Your plan is going to have a fair trial, and we'll have no such riot scene staged again as that to-night. Maybe I ain't got all the political influence Grandon Fuller blows about; but I've got him about sewed up in a bag and he ain't going to trouble you—he nor his hirelings—much more.

"He was trying to pull the wool over Barton's eyes when Barton went away, I believe. I trusted to Frank's natural horse sense to keep him out of any scrape with Grandon. But they do say he's gone and fallen for that flibbertigibbet daughter of the Fullers. I expect those nurses have a great advantage over a

man. Like enough every one of 'em'll be married to some poor sinner before this war's over," and he grinned.

"Oh, Mr. Hammerly!" Ethel gasped. "Maybe I'd better go as a nurse," she added, smiling.

"*You?*" Shucks! There ain't no need for you to fish. The fellers will all be after you. I'm going to live ten years longer and dandle two or three of your babies on my knee. Come on! Here's where we turn in."

He led her into the law office of Alfred Gainor. The attorney had a visitor who rose hastily to go when Hammerly, with Ethel behind him, entered the private office.

"No, don't run away, Grandon," said the grain merchant in his very harshest tone. "I told Gainor to get you here for just this purpose."

"What do you mean, Hammerly?" growled the other. "I have nothing to say to you at present."

"No, I don't expect you have. But I've got something to say to you, and you'd best listen."

"If you've come to me to plead for my favor on this girl's behalf——"

"Nothing of the kind! Nothing of the kind!" reiterated Hammerly. "There won't be no pleading on our side, I assure you, Grandon. And Ethel's here because she's got a vital interest in what's going to be done."

"I don't understand you."

"You will," observed Hammerly grimly.

"What do you expect to interest me in, man?" demanded Grandon Fuller with a less ruffled demeanor.

"I'm going to interest you in two or three things, Grandon," said the old man composedly, while the lawyer looked on as though he quite understood. "I'm going to interest you first of all in the specification sheet of the Kimberly Binding Company order. And then I'm going to link that up with a much more important paper that you ain't seen for ten years, but that's been on file here all that time since it was probated and recorded. I mean Israel Diller's will."

At this statement Grandon Fuller leaped to his feet and advanced upon the old grain merchant with inflamed countenance.

"What do you mean, you hoary-headed old scoundrel?" he shouted. "Do you mean to tell me——"

He halted, licked his thick lips, and his flabby pomposity began to shrink. Hammerly nodded.

"That's it. Give a calf rope enough and it'll hang itself. I could sit here and bandy words with you long enough to make you give yourself clean away. For you ain't a very brainy villain. Otherwise you wouldn't have used a trick the second time that served you once—and that you had got away with, it seemed, without raising suspicion."

"I don't understand you," snarled Fuller. "What are you talking about anyway?"

"I'm talking about forgery, Grandon—forgery and substitution. The chemists and handwriting experts are not alone able to swear to changes made on that Kimberly schedule; they will swear to changes made in the same way—and by the same hand—in Israel Diller's will!

"Sit down, Grandon! Don't fall down," advised Hammerly. "Mr. Mestinger, who drew Israel's will, being dead, you substitute your wife's name for that of Lorreta Clayton's all through that instrument and made Niece Mehitable instead of Niece Lorreta, the principal legatee under the will.

"I always had suspicions, but no proof. Not till Ethel, here, showed me that Kimberly company schedule and pointed out what that boy, Benway Chase, first saw in it.

"You're caught, Grandon! You're caught just as hard and fast as I caught Boots Skinner the other night setting hooks in the creek against the law. I'm going to let Boots go this time, for he ain't an all around bad boy. Boots' testimony is all I needed to link up your principal henchman with your blackguarding of the Hapwood-Diller Company. Jim Mayberry's a proved scoundrel as far back as that Bogata Company matter, and I'm going to run him out of town.

"What I do with you, Grandon, depends entirely on how much restitution you are willing to make to the

Widow Clayton and her daughter here. If we go to law about this it will cost a lot of money—and a lot of scandal. You've made a heap of money one way and another since you got those shares of the Hapwood-Diller Company that was meant for Mrs. Clayton. I'll give you a chance.

"You'll give those shares your wife got from the Israel Diller estate to Mrs. Clayton, with dividends and accrued interest to date. You'll sell all your other holdings of the corporation's shares to me, *and at the low price which you've hammered them down to!*"

"W—What! Never!" groaned Grandon Fuller.

"That will automatically put you out of the Hapwood-Diller Company's affairs," went on Macon Hammerly, not heeding the interruption. "And I guess that will help some; eh, Ethel?" he continued, turning to the much interested girl.

"Oh, is it true? Did he tamper with that will?" cried the girl.

"He did."

"It's false! I never——

"Don't try to deny it, Grandon. It's true." The old grain merchant strode forward and towered sternly over the other man. "Come, what is it to be, a peaceful settlement or war?"

"Gi—give me time to—to think."

"Time to play another trick, you mean. No, you've got to decide now, at once, right here."

"You—you are hard. I can explain——"

"No explanation is necessary. I've got you just where I want you. Will you settle or not?"

Grandon Fuller arose to his feet. He was panting hard.

"I won't do it!" he began and then he shrank back before the steady gaze of Hammerly and Ethel. "I—I—" He suddenly dropped into his seat, his face a stricken gray. "Well, have your own way," he mumbled. "You've got me cornered."

CHAPTER XXVI

HIS AWAKENING

ONE evening, some weeks later, Ethel found herself alone in the office. It was after working hours and the others had gone home. She had still to work late at times; but her plan of wage payment was already proving successful.

There was a new spirit in the shops. Some of the old help were coming back for safety, and the possibility of an increased income with the Hapwood-Diller Company looked better to the married men, at least, than a bulky pay envelope and the danger of sudden death.

In fact, for several weeks, since Grandon Fuller had been eliminated from the affairs of the corporation, Ethel had been able to prove her worth to the board of directors. The business was running smoothly. The girl had proved that sex was not an insuperable barrier in the conduct of such a complicated business as this of which she had charge.

With the help of Benway Chase, who had been advanced to a minor governing position in the factory, Ethel was making good. She thought of this

cheerfully on this evening as she turned to snap out the electric light above her desk, the last thing before going out.

Her hand was stayed by the quiet opening of the office door. In the half-shadow of the entrance stood a tall figure, the face of which she could not see. Nor did she see but one hand when the visitor advanced into the room and closed the door. Was it a man with only one arm?

Then she saw that the right arm was bandaged to his side by a black silk scarf. He was in uniform.

"Mr. Barton!"

"Ethel!"

She was half way to him on flying feet when she realized what he had called her and how he had spoken. She halted.

"Mr. Barton! How you startled me! How glad I am to see you!" she declared. "When did you arrive?"

"Just now. You are the first person I have seen to speak to in Mailsburg," he said, and strode forward to greet her.

"Your poor arm!" she murmured when she took his offered left hand. Then she looked up and saw the grim scar on his brow. It gave an entirely different expression to his countenance. Indeed he seemed to be an entirely different man from the Frank Barton of old. He clung to her hand.

"You—are you back for good? We have needed

you so! Now I can give the Hapwood-Diller Company back into your hands," she said.

"I am afraid not yet," Frank Barton replied gently. "I have only a short furlough—till my shoulder completely heals. I came across hoping to be of some small help in recruiting or in Red Cross work while I am debarred from more active service."

"Oh, Mr. Barton! you will not really go back again?" she cried, looking down at her hand still crushed within his own.

"Unless the war ends very soon," he laughed. "I know that you have been more than successful in my job. Mr. Hammerly wrote me all about Jim Mayberry and Grandon Fuller. I would not have believed it of Jim. You have had a hard fight here, Ethel; but you have overcome, you have succeeded."

She did not seek to draw away her hand, but still looked down, refusing to meet his gaze.

"How did you leave the other Mailsburg boys? Mr. Copley, for instance?"

"Fine!" he declared heartily.

"And Miss Fuller?"

"She and her mother returned on the *Lorraine* with me. They were called home, it seems, by Mr. Fuller's business troubles. They have lost money, they tell me, and will have to give up their big house on the Hill."

"But that makes no difference to *you*, of course, Mr. Barton?"

"Not the least," he returned composedly. "I am afraid I shall never become a favorite of Miss Fuller's. I could not stand petting while I was in the hospital at Lovin, and it rather piqued my nurse."

Ethel looked up at him quickly. There was that in his eyes she had never seen before. It held her gaze captive.

His single good hand released her hand. But gently he drew her toward him, his hand behind her shoulder. Her form yielded hesitatingly to his urging.

"I cannot claim that patriotism brought me back for these few weeks that I may remain, Ethel," he went on in a voice that suddenly became strangely husky. "I wanted to see you—face to face."

There was an awkward pause. She felt his hand on her shoulder tremble.

"I can't understand why it is that I never saw you in just the same light that I have since I've been away. But you have been in my thoughts continually—the girl I left behind!"

"Oh, of course—the business—" she began flutteringly.

"No, it wasn't the business, Ethel. It was you!" he cried.

"Me?' Her breast began to heave and her face glowed. He bent low that he might catch her eyes.

"Yes, you! I guess I was asleep, but I'm awake now. We were so close day after day—and I was so

"You have been in my thoughts continually—the girl I left behind."

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wrapped up in business—that I didn't realize how much you really meant to me."

"Oh!" It was the faintest kind of an exclamation. She wanted to speak, but for once the "perfectly capable person" could not say a word. Her heart was pounding.

"But it came to me all of a sudden, while I was in the hospital and while that very fluttery Helen Fuller was trying to wait on me. Then I realized what a big difference there was in girls—and I realized that you were the only girl in the world for me—the only one!"

Again there was a silence. But now she raised her eyes to meet his and they were full of glorious tenderness. He clutched her close to him with his one good arm.

"I love you—oh, how I love you!" he murmured. "How I love you!"

"Oh, Mr. Bar——"

"Ethel!"

"Frank, then."

She spoke his name with such sweetness that it almost overpowered him. It was as if she had suddenly lifted the veil and was letting him look into her very soul. He still held her close. Now he suddenly kissed her, once, twice and again.

"Thank God!" he said reverently. "Thank God!"

In her soul she also thanked God for His goodness

in bringing this man to her. But she could not speak
She could only cling tightly to him—and for a long
while he felt her heart beating close to his own.

Mrs. Trevor sat in a front seat in her shabby little
hat and Paisley shawl and frankly cried outright
during the ceremony.

"But they'll make a grand couple," she sobbed
"A grand couple—both of 'em so smart!"

Macon Hammerly occupied a seat further back
He sat with an expression of grim pride on his face
as though he considered himself in some way the
father of this little romance.

"My young folks—both of 'em," he whispered to
a neighbor. "Sweetest gal in the world, barrin' none
—an' a fine fellow, too, believe me!"

Mrs. Clayton was there, of course, dressed in the
best she had ever possessed. She felt like weeping
but she did not, for was she not a Diller, and had she
not a family pride to maintain? Especially now
when their financial affairs were so greatly changed!

"Not that I do not consider Mr. Barton a very
fine man," she confessed. "But I feel that Ethel
might do so much better in a social way if she would
only try. And really a soldier under orders has no
right to marry—especially when he has to go away
so soon. Worst of all, Ethel insists upon retaining
her position as manager of the Hapwood-Diller Com-

pany. Well, now that we have such a large amount in the business perhaps that is as well. The shares are already at par again."

Benway Chase was there too and sat close beside Mabel Skinner—a new Mabel, full of ambition and who no longer chewed gum.

"Some day we'll do it too, Mabel," he whispered.

"Oh, you go on!" she answered, but looked immensely pleased nevertheless.

The organ pealed forth and slowly the procession moved down the aisle of the church, the bride leaning lightly on the groom's good arm. They came out into the sunshine of the late winter day and both Ethel in her veil and Barton in his khaki were glorified by it. The automobile that was to take them to the Clayton home was in readiness and they entered it.

"Mine—mine at last!" he breathed, when they were safe from the eyes of the curious crowd.

"It's like a dream—it doesn't seem real!" she murmured, with eyes that spoke volumes as she beamed on him.

"Only a week before I have to go to the front again!" he groaned.

"Let's not think about that, Frank—let's think only about how happy we are."

"Just as you say, Ethel." He drew her closer, glanced hastily around to make sure they were not observed, and kissed her. "Wonderful, this getting

married, isn't it? Beats business all hollow!" he smiled.

She looked at him fondly, and suddenly a chievous dimple showed in each cheek. "W don't know. If you have a perfectly capable p for an assis——"

"Ethel! You've sprung that on me twice sinc became engaged! Now as my wife you've g cut it out."

"What? Cut out being capable? And yet re manager while you are away?" And then, as saw he was really hurt she added swiftly and tend "Forgive me, Frank, that's a dear! I'm so happ so furiously happy—I don't know what I am sa or doing!"

He held her as close as he dared in such a pu place. "Mine! mine! mine!" he murmured over over again.

Very softly she patted the free hand of the wou ed arm. Then she suddenly pressed it to her and kissed it.

THE END

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