

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO JULIE

She never lived, maybe, but it is truer to say that she never dies. Nor shall she ever die. One may believe in God, though He is hard to find, and in Women, though such as Julie are far to seek.

THE AUTHOR TO THE READER

The glamour of no other evil thing is stronger than the glamour of war. It would seem as if the cup of the world's sorrow as a result of war had been filled to the brim again and again, but still a new generation has always been found to forget. A new generation has always been found to talk of the heroisms that the divine in us can manifest in the mouth of hell and to forget that so great a miracle does not justify our creation of the circumstance.

Yet if ever war came near to its final condemnation it was in 1914-1918. Our comrades died bravely, and we had been willing to die, to put an end to it once and for all. Indeed war-weary men heard the noise of conflict die away on November 11, 1918, thinking that that end had been attained. It is not yet three years ago; a little time, but long enough for betrayal.

Long enough, too, for the making of many books about it all, wherein has been recorded such heroisms as might make God proud and such horror as might make the Devil weep. Yet has the truth been told, after all? Has the world realized that in a modern war a nation but moves in uniform to perform its ordinary tasks in a new intoxicating atmosphere? Now and again a small percentage of the whole is flung into the pit, and, for them, where one in ten was heavy slaughter, now one in ten is reasonable escape. The rest, for the greater part of the time, live an unnatural life, death near enough to make them reckless and far enough to make them gay. Commonly men and women more or less restrain themselves because of to-morrow; but what if there be no to-morrow? What if the dice are heavily weighted against it? And what of their already jeopardized restraint when the crisis has thrown the conventions to the winds and there is little to lighten the end of the day?

Thus to lift the veil on life behind the lines in time of war is a thankless task. The stay-at-homes will not believe, and particularly they whose smug respectability and conventional religion has been put to no such fiery trial. Moreover they will do more than disbe-

lieve; they will say that the story is not fit to be told. Nor is it. But then it should never have been lived. That very respectability, that very conventionality, that very contented backboneless religion made it possible—all but made it necessary. For it was those things which allowed the world to drift into the war, and what the war was nine days out of ten ought to be thrust under the eyes of those who will not believe. It is a small thing that men die in battle, for a man has but one life to live and it is good to give it for one's friends; but it is such an evil that it has no like, this drifting of a world into a hell to which men's souls are driven like red maple leaves before the autumn wind.

The old-fashioned pious books made hell stink of brimstone and painted the Devil hideous. But Satan is not such a fool. Champagne and Martinis do not taste like Gregory powder, nor was St. Anthony tempted by shrivelled hags. Paganism can be gay, and passion look like love. Moreover, still more truly, Christ could see the potentiality of virtue in Mary Magdalene and of strength in Simon called Peter. The conventional religious world does not.

A curious feature, too, of that strange life was its lack of consecutiveness. It was like the pages of *La Vie Parisienne*. The friend of to-day was gone for ever to-morrow. A man arrived, weary and dirty and craving for excitement, in some unknown town; in half an hour he had stepped into the gay glitter of wine and women's smiles; in half a dozen he had been whirled away. The days lingered and yet flew; the pages were twirled ever more dazzlingly; only at the end men saw in a blinding flash whither they had been led.

These things, then, are set out in this book. This is its atmosphere. They are truly set out. They are not white-washed; still less are they pictured as men might have seen them in more sober moments, as the Puritan world would see them now. Nor does the book set forth the author's judgment, for that is not his idea of a novel. It sets out what Peter and Julie saw and did, and what it appeared to them to be while they did it. Very probably, then, the average reader had better read no further than this....

But at any rate let him not read further than is written. The last page has been left blank. It has been left blank for a reason, because the curtain falls not on the conclusion of the lives of those who have

stepped upon the boards, but at a psychological moment in their story. The Lord has turned to look upon Peter, and Julie has seen that He has looked. It is enough; they were happy who, going down into the Valley of the Shadow of Death, saw a vision of God's love even there. For the Christ of Calvary moved to His Cross again but a few short years ago; and it is enough in one book to tell how Simon failed to follow, but how Jesus turned to look on Peter.

R.K.

PART I

Ah! is Thy love indeed
A weed, albeit an amaranthine weed,
Suffering no flowers except its own to mount?

Ah! must—

Designer infinite!—

Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn with it?

FRANCIS THOMPSON.

CHAPTER I

London lay as if washed with water-colour that Sunday morning, light blue sky and pale dancing sunlight wooing the begrimed stones of Westminster like a young girl with an old lover. The empty streets, clean-swept, were bathed in the light, and appeared to be transformed from the streets of week-day life. Yet the half of Londoners lay late abed, perhaps because six mornings a week of reality made them care little for one of magic.

Peter, nevertheless, saw little of this beauty. He walked swiftly as always, and he looked about him, but he noticed none of these things. True, a fluttering sheet of newspaper headlines impaled on the railings of St. Margaret's held him for a second, but that was because its message was the one that rang continually in his head, and had nothing at all to do with the beauty of things that he passed by.

He was a perfectly dressed young man, in a frock coat and silk hat of the London clergyman, and he was on his way to preach at St. John's at the morning service. Walking always helped him to prepare his sermons, and this sermon would ordinarily have struck him as one well worth preparing. The pulpit of St. John's marked a rung up in the ladder for him. That great fashionable church of mid-Victorian faith and manners held a congregation on Sunday mornings for which the Rector catered with care. It said a good deal for Peter that he had been invited to preach. He ought to have had his determined scheme plain before him, and a few sentences, carefully polished, at hand for the beginning and the end. He could trust himself in the middle, and was perfectly conscious of that. He frankly liked preaching, liked it not merely as an actor loves to sway his audience, but liked it because he always knew what to say, and was really keen that people should see his argument. And yet this morning, when he should have been prepared for the best he could do, he was not prepared at all.

Strictly, that is not quite true, for he had a text, and the text absolutely focused his thought. But it was too big for him. Like some at least in England that day, he was conscious of staring down a lane of tragedy that appalled him. Fragments and sentences came and went in his head. He groped for words, mentally, as he walked. Over and over again he repeated his text. It amazed him by its simplicity; it horrified him by its depth.

Hilda was waiting at the pillar-box as she had said she would be, and little as she could guess it, she irritated him. He did not want her just then. He could hardly tell why, except that, somehow, she ran counter to his thoughts altogether that morning. She seemed, even in her excellent brown costume that fitted her fine figure so well, out of place, and out of place for the first time.

They were not openly engaged, these two, but there was an understanding between them, and an understanding that her family was slowly recognising. Mr. Lessing, at first, would never have accepted an engagement, for he had other ideas for his daughter of the big house in Park Lane. The rich city merchant, church-warden at St. John's, important in his party, and a person of distinction when at his club, would have been seriously annoyed that his daughter should consider a marriage with a curate whose gifts had not yet made him an income. But he recognised that the young man might go far. "Young Graham?" he would say, "Yes, a clever young fellow, with quite remarkable gifts, sir. Bishop thinks a lot of him, I believe. Preaches extraordinarily well. The Rector said he would ask him to St. John's one morning...."

Peter Graham's parish ran down to the river, and included slums in which some of the ladies of St. John's (whose congregation had seen to it that in their immediate neighbourhood there were no such things) were interested. So the two had met. She had found him admirable and likeable; he found her highly respectable and seemingly unapproachable. From which cold elements much more may come than one might suppose.

At any rate, now, Mrs. Lessing said nothing when Hilda went to post a letter in London on Sunday morning before breakfast. She would have mildly remonstrated if the girl had gone to meet the

young man. The which was England once, and may, despite the Kaiser, be England yet once more.

"I was nearly going," she declared. "You're a bit late."

"I know," he replied; "I couldn't help it. The early service took longer than usual. But I'm glad to see you before breakfast. Tell me, what does your father think of it all?"

The girl gave a little shrug of the shoulders, "Oh, he says war is impossible. The credit system makes it impossible. But if he really thinks so, I don't see why he should say it so often and so violently. Oh, Peter, what do you think?"

The young man unconsciously quickened his pace. "I think it is certain," he said. "We must come in. I should say, more likely, the credit system makes it impossible for us to keep out. I mean, half Europe can't go to war and we sit still. Not in these days. And if it comes—Good Lord, Hilda, do you know what it means? I can't see the end, only it looks to me like being a fearful smash.... Oh, we shall pull through, but nobody seems to see that our ordinary life will come down like a pack of cards. And what will the poor do? And can't you see the masses of poor souls that will be thrown into the vortex like, like...." He broke off. "I can't find words," he said, gesticulating nervously. "It's colossal."

"Peter, you're going to preach about it: I can see you are. But do take care what you say. I should hate father to be upset. He's so—oh, I don't know!—*British*, I think. He hates to be thrown out, you know, and he won't think all that possible."

She glanced up (the least little bit that she had to) anxiously. Graham smiled. "I know Mr. Lessing," he said. "But, Hilda, he's *got* to be moved. Why, he may be in khaki yet!"

"Oh, Peter, don't be silly. Why, father's fifty, and not exactly in training," she laughed. Then, seriously: "But for goodness' sake don't say such things—for my sake, anyway."

Peter regarded her gravely, and held open the gate. "I'll remember," he said, "but more unlikely things may happen than that."

They went up the path together, and Hilda slipped a key into the door. As it opened, a thought seemed to strike her for the first time. "What will *you* do?" she demanded suddenly.

Mrs. Lessing was just going into the dining-room, and Peter had no need to reply. "Good-morning, Mr. Graham," she said, coming forward graciously. "I wondered if Hilda would meet you: she wanted to post a letter. Come in. You must be hungry after your walk."

A manservant held the door open, and they all went in. That magic sun shone on the silver of the breakfast-table, and lit up the otherwise heavy room. Mrs. Lessing swung the cover of a silver dish and the eggs slipped in to boil. She touched a button on the table and sat down, just as Mr. Lessing came rather ponderously forward with a folded newspaper in his hand.

"Morning, Graham," he said. "Morning, Hilda. Been out, eh? Well, well, lovely morning out; makes one feel ten years younger. But what do you think of all this, Graham?" waving the paper as he spoke.

Peter just caught the portentous headline—

"GERMANY DECLARES WAR ON RUSSIA,"

as he pulled up to the table, but he did not need to see it. There was really no news: only that. "It is certain, I think, sir," he said.

"Oh, certain, certain," said Lessing, seating himself. "The telegrams say they are over the frontier of Luxembourg and massing against France. Grey can't stop 'em now, but the world won't stand it—can't stand it. There can't be a long war. Probably it's all a big bluff again; they know in Berlin that business can't stand a war, or at any rate a long war. And we needn't come in. In the City, yesterday, they said the Government could do more by standing out. We're not pledged. Anderson told me Asquith said so distinctly. And, thank God, the Fleet's ready! It's madness, madness, and we must keep our heads. That's what I say, anyway."

Graham cracked an egg mechanically. His sermon was coming back to him. He saw a congregation of Lessings, and more clearly

than ever the other things. "What about Belgium?" he queried. "Surely our honour is engaged there?"

Mr. Lessing pulled up his napkin, visibly perturbed. "Yes, but what can we do?" he demanded. "What is the good of flinging a handful of troops overseas, even if we can? It's incredible—English troops in Flanders in this century. In my opinion—in my opinion, I say—we should do better to hold ourselves in readiness. Germany would never really dare antagonise us. They know what it involves. Why, there's hundreds of millions of pounds at stake. Grey has only to be firm, and things must come right. Must—absolutely must."

"Annie said, this morning, that she heard everyone in the streets last night say we must fight, father," put in Hilda.

"Pooh!" exclaimed the city personage, touched now on the raw. "What do the fools know about it? I suppose the *Daily Mail* will scream, but, thank God, this country has not quite gone to the dogs yet. The people, indeed! The mass of the country is solid for sense and business, and trusts the Government. Of course, the Tory press will make the whole question a party lever if it can, but it can't. What! Are we going to be pushed into war by a mob and a few journalists? Why, Labour even will be dead against it. Come, Graham, you ought to know something about that. More in your line than mine—don't you think so?"

"You really ought not to let the maids talk so," said Mrs. Lessing gently.

Peter glanced at her with a curiously hopeless feeling, and looked slowly round the room until his eyes rested on Mr. Lessing's portrait over the mantelshelf, presented by the congregation of St. John's on some occasion two years before. From the portrait he turned to the gentleman, but it was not necessary for him to speak. Mr. Lessing was saying something to the man—probably ordering the car. He glanced across at Hilda, who had made some reply to her mother and was toying with a spoon. He thought he had never seen her look more handsome and.... He could not find the word: thought of "solid," and then smiled at the thought. It did not fit in with the sunlight on her hair.

"Well, well," said Mr. Lessing; "we ought to make a move. It won't do for either of us to be late, Mr. Preacher."

The congregation of St. John's assembled on a Sunday morning as befitted its importance and dignity. Families arrived, or arrived by two or three representatives, and proceeded with due solemnity to their private pews. No one, of course, exchanged greetings on the way up the church, but every lady became aware, not only of the other ladies present, but of what each wore. A sidesman, with an air of portentous gravity, as one who, in opening doors, performed an office more on behalf of the Deity than the worshippers, was usually at hand to usher the party in. Once there, there was some stir of orderly bustle: kneelers were distributed according to requirements, books sorted out after the solemn unlocking of the little box that contained them, sticks and hats safely stowed away. These duties performed, paterfamilias cast one penetrating glance round the church, and leaned gracefully forward with a kind of circular motion. Having suitably addressed Almighty God (it is to be supposed), he would lean back, adjust his trousers, possibly place an elbow on the pew-door, and contemplate with a fixed and determined gaze the distant altar.

Peter, of course, wound in to solemn music with the procession of choir boys and men, and, accorded the honour of a beadle with a silver mace, since he was to preach, was finally installed in a suitably cushioned seat within the altar-rails. He knelt to pray, but it was an effort to formulate anything. He was intensely conscious that morning that a meaning hitherto unfelt and unguessed lay behind his world, and even behind all this pomp and ceremony that he knew so well. Rising, of course, when the senior curate began to intone the opening sentence in a manner which one felt was worthy even of St. John's, he allowed himself to study his surroundings as never before.

The church had, indeed, an air of great beauty in the morning sunlight. The Renaissance galleries and woodwork, mellowed by time, were dusted by that soft warm glow, and the somewhat sparse congregation, in its magnificently isolated groups, was humanised by it too. The stone of the chancel, flecked with colour, had a quiet dignity, and even the altar, ecclesiastically ludicrous, had a

grace of its own. There was to be a celebration after Matins. The historic gold plate was therefore arranged on the retable with something of the effect of show pieces at Mappin and Webb's. Peter noticed three flagons, and between them two patens of great size. A smaller pair for use stood on the credence-table. The gold chalice and paten, veiled, stood on the altar-table itself, and above them, behind, rose the cross and two vases of hot-house lilies. Suggesting one of the great shields of beaten gold that King Solomon had made for the Temple of Jerusalem, an alms-dish stood on edge, and leant against the retable to the right of the veiled chalice. Peter found himself marvelling at its size, but was recalled to his position when it became necessary to kneel for the Confession.

The service followed its accustomed course, and throughout the whole of it Peter was conscious of his chaotic sermon. He glanced at his notes occasionally, and then put them resolutely away, well aware that they would be all but useless to him. Either he would, at the last, be able to formulate the thoughts that raced through his head, or else he could do no more than occupy the pulpit for the conventional twenty minutes with a conventional sermon. At times he half thought he would follow this easier course, but then the great letters of the newspaper poster seemed to frame themselves before him, and he knew he could not. And so, at last, there was the bowing beadle with the silver mace, and he must set out on the little dignified procession to the great Jacobean pulpit with its velvet cushion at the top.

Hilda's mind was a curious study during that sermon. At first, as her lover's rather close-cropped, dark-haired head appeared in sight, she had studied him with an odd mixture of pride and apprehension. She held her hymn-book, but she did not need it, and she watched surreptitiously while he opened the Bible, arranged some papers, and, in accordance with custom, knelt to pray. She began to think half-thoughts of the days that might be, when perhaps she would be the wife of the Rector of some St. John's, and later, possibly, of a Bishop. Peter had it in him to go far, she knew. She half glanced round with a self-conscious feeling that people might be guessing at her thoughts, and then back, wondering suddenly if she really knew the man, or only the minister. And then there came the rustle of shutting books and of people composing themselves to

listen, the few coughs, the vague suggestion of hassocks and cushions being made comfortable. And then, in a moment, almost with the giving out of the text, the sudden stillness and that tense sensation which told that the young orator had gripped his congregation.

Thereafter she hardly heard him, as it were, and she certainly lost the feeling of ownership that had been hers before. As he leaned over the pulpit, and the words rang out almost harshly from their intensity, she began to see, as the rest of the congregation began to see, the images that the preacher conjured up before her. A sense of coming disaster riveted her—the feeling that she was already watching the end of an age.

"Jesus had compassion on the multitude"—that had been the short and simple text. Simple words, the preacher had said, but how when one realised Who had had compassion, and on what? Almighty God Himself, with His incarnate Mind set on the working out of immense and agelong plans, had, as it were, paused for a moment to have compassion on hungry women and crying babies and folk whose petty confused affairs could have seemed of no consequence to anyone in the drama of the world. And then, with a few terse sentences, the preacher swung from that instance to the world drama of to-day. Did they realise, he asked, that peaceful bright Sunday morning, that millions of simple men were at that moment being hurled at each other to maim and kill? At the bidding of powers that even they could hardly visualise, at the behest of world politics that not one in a thousand would understand and scarcely any justify, houses were being broken up, women were weeping, and children playing in the sun before cottage doors were even now being left fatherless. It was incredible, colossal, unimaginable, but as one tried to picture it, Hell had opened her mouth and Death gone forth to slay. It was terrible enough that battlefields of stupendous size should soon be littered with the dying and the dead, but the aftermath of such a war as this would be still more terrible. No one could say how near it would come to them all. No one could tell what revolution in morals and social order such a war as this might not bring. That day God Himself looked down on the multitude as sheep having no shepherd, abandoned to be butchered by the wolves, and His heart beat with a divine compassion for the infinite sorrows of the world.