

ДЖОН ГОЛСУЪРТИ

THE BRIGHT SIDE

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A little Englishwoman, married to a German, had dwelt with him eighteen years in humble happiness and the district of Putney, where her husband worked in the finer kinds of leather. He was a harmless, busy little man with the gift for turning his hand to anything which is bred into the peasants of the Black Forest, who on their upland farms make all the necessities of daily life—their coarse linen from home-grown flax, their leather gear from the hides of their beasts, their clothes from the wool thereof, their furniture from the pine logs of the Forest, their bread from home-grown flour milled in simple fashion and baked in the home-made ovens, their cheese from the milk of their own goats. Why he had come to England he probably did not remember—it was so long ago; but he would still know why he had married Dora, the daughter of the Putney carpenter, she being, as it were, salt of the earth: one of those Cockney women, deeply sensitive beneath a well-nigh impermeable mask of humour and philosophy, who quite unselfconsciously are always doing things for others. In their little grey Putney house they had dwelt those eighteen years, without perhaps ever having had time to move, though they had often had the intention of doing so for the sake of the children, of whom they had three, a boy and two girls. Mrs. Gerhardt—she shall be called, for her husband had a very German name, and there is more in a name than Shakespeare dreamed of—Mrs. Gerhardt was a little woman with large hazel eyes and dark crinkled hair in which there were already a few threads of grey when the war broke out. Her boy David, the eldest, was fourteen at that date, and her girls, Minnie and Violet, were eight and five, rather pretty children, especially the little one. Gerhardt, perhaps because he was so handy, had never risen. His firm regarded him as indispensable and paid him fair wages, but he had no “push,” having the craftsman’s temperament, and employing his spare time in little neat jobs for his house and his neighbours, which brought him no return. They made their way, therefore, without that provision for the future which necessitates the employment of one’s time for one’s own ends. But they were happy, and had no enemies; and each year saw some mild improvements in their studiously clean house and tiny back garden. Mrs. Gerhardt, who was cook, seamstress, washerwoman, besides being wife and mother, was almost notorious in that street of semi-detached houses for being at the disposal of any one in sickness or trouble. She was not strong in body, for things had gone wrong when she bore her first, but her spirit had that peculiar power of seeing things as they were,

and yet refusing to be dismayed, which so embarrasses Fate. She saw her husband's defects clearly, and his good qualities no less distinctly—they never quarrelled. She gauged her children's characters too, with an admirable precision, which left, however, loopholes of wonder as to what they would become.

The outbreak of the war found them on the point of going to Margate for Bank Holiday, an almost unparalleled event; so that the importance of the world catastrophe was brought home to them with a vividness which would otherwise have been absent from folks so simple, domestic, and far-removed from that atmosphere in which the egg of war is hatched. Over the origin and merits of the struggle, beyond saying to each other several times that it was a dreadful thing, Mr. and Mrs. Gerhardt held but one little conversation, lying in their iron bed with an immortal brown eiderdown patterned with red wriggles over them. They agreed that it was a cruel, wicked thing to invade "that little Belgium," and there left a matter which seemed to them a mysterious and insane perversion of all they had hitherto been accustomed to think of as life. Reading their papers—a daily and a weekly, in which they had as much implicit faith as a million other readers—they were soon duly horrified by the reports therein of "Hun" atrocities; so horrified that they would express their condemnation of the Kaiser and his militarism as freely as if they had been British subjects. It was therefore with an uneasy surprise that they began to find these papers talking of "the Huns at large in our midst," of "spies," and the national danger of "nourishing such vipers." They were deeply conscious of not being "vipers," and such sayings began to awaken in both their breasts a humble sense of injustice as it were. This was more acute in the breast of little Mrs. Gerhardt, because, of course, the shafts were directed not at her but at her husband. She knew her husband so well, knew him incapable of anything but homely, kindly busyness, and that he should be lumped into the category of "Huns" and "spies" and tarred with the brush of mass hatred amazed and stirred her indignation, or would have, if her Cockney temperament had allowed her to take it very seriously. As for Gerhardt, he became extremely silent, so that it was ever more and more difficult to tell what he was feeling. The patriotism of the newspapers took a considerable time to affect the charity of the citizens of Putney, and so long as no neighbour showed signs of thinking that little Gerhardt was a monster and a spy it was fairly easy for Mrs. Gerhardt to sleep at night, and to read her

papers with the feeling that the remarks in them were not really intended for Gerhardt and herself. But she noticed that her man had given up reading them, and would push them away from his eyes if, in the tiny sitting-room with the heavily-flowered walls, they happened to rest beside him. He had perhaps a closer sense of impending Fate than she. The boy, David, went to his first work, and the girls to their school, and so things dragged on through that first long war winter and spring. Mrs. Gerhardt, in the intervals of doing everything, knitted socks for "our poor cold boys in the trenches," but Gerhardt no longer sought out little jobs to do in the houses of his neighbours. Mrs. Gerhardt thought that he "fancied" they would not like it. It was early in that spring that she took a deaf aunt to live with them, the wife of her mother's brother, no blood-relation, but the poor woman had nowhere else to go; so David was put to sleep on the horsehair sofa in the sitting-room because she "couldn't refuse the poor thing." And then, of an April afternoon, while she was washing the household sheets, her neighbour, Mrs. Clirehugh, a little spare woman all eyes, cheekbones, hair, and decision, came in breathless and burst out:

"Oh! Mrs. Gerhardt, 'ave you 'eard? They've sunk the *Loositania*! Has I said to Will: Isn't it horful?"

Mrs. Gerhardt, with her round arms dripping soap-suds, answered: "What a dreadful thing! The poor drowning people! Dear! Oh dear!"

"Oh! Those Huns! I'd shoot the lot, I would!"

"They *are* wicked!" Mrs. Gerhardt echoed: "That was a dreadful thing to do!"

But it was not till Gerhardt came in at five o'clock, white as a sheet, that she perceived how this dreadful catastrophe affected them.

"I have been called a German," were the first words he uttered; "Dollee, I have been called a German."

"Well, so you are, my dear," said Mrs. Gerhardt.

"You do not see," he answered, with a heat and agitation which surprised her. "I tell you this *Lusitania* will finish our business. They will have me. They will take me away from you all. Already the papers have: 'Intern all the Huns.'" He sat down at the kitchen table and buried his face in hands still grimy from his leather work. Mrs. Gerhardt stood beside him, her eyes unnaturally big.

"But Max," she said, "what has it to do with you? You couldn't help it. Max!"

Gerhardt looked up, his white face, broad in the brow and tapering to a thin chin, seemed all distraught.

“What do they care for that? Is my name Max Gerhardt? What do they care if I hate the war? I am a German. That’s enough. You will see.”

“Oh!” murmured Mrs. Gerhardt, “they won’t be so unjust.”

Gerhardt reached up and caught her chin in his hand, and for a moment those two pairs of eyes gazed, straining, into each other. Then he said:

“I don’t want to be taken, Dollee. What shall I do away from you and the children? I don’t want to be taken, Dollee.”

Mrs. Gerhardt, with a feeling of terror and a cheerful smile, answered:

“You mustn’t go fancyin’ things, Max. I’ll make you a nice cup of tea. Cheer up, old man! Look on the bright side!”

But Gerhardt lapsed into the silence which of late she had begun to dread.

That night some shop windows were broken, some German names effaced. The Gerhardts had no shop, no name painted up, and they escaped. In Press and Parliament the cry against “the Huns in our midst” rose with a fresh fury; but for the Gerhardts the face of Fate was withdrawn. Gerhardt went to his work as usual, and their laborious and quiet existence remained undisturbed; nor could Mrs. Gerhardt tell whether her man’s ever-deepening silence was due to his “fancying things” or to the demeanour of his neighbours and fellow workmen. One would have said that he, like the derelict aunt, was deaf, so difficult to converse with had he become. His length of sojourn in England and his value to his employers, for he had real skill, had saved him for the time being; but, behind the screen, Fate twitched her grinning chaps.

Not till the howl which followed some air raids in 1916 did they take off Gerhardt, with a variety of other elderly men, whose crime it was to have been born in Germany. They did it suddenly, and perhaps it was as well, for a prolonged sight of his silent misery must have upset his family till they would have been unable to look on that bright side of things which Mrs. Gerhardt had, as it were, always up her sleeve. When, in charge of a big and sympathetic constable, he was gone, taking all she could hurriedly get together for him, she hastened to the police station. They were friendly to her there: She must cheer up, Missis, ’e’d be all right, she needn’t worry.

Ah! she could go down to the 'Ome Office, if she liked, and see what could be done. But they 'eld out no 'ope! Mrs. Gerhardt waited till the morrow, having the little Violet in bed with her, and crying quietly into her pillow; then, putting on her Sunday best she went down to a building in Whitehall, larger than any she had ever entered. Two hours she waited, sitting unobtrusive, with big anxious eyes, and a line between her brows. At intervals of half an hour she would get up and ask the messenger cheerfully: "I 'ope they haven't forgotten me, sir. Perhaps you'd see to it." And because she was cheerful the messenger took her under his protection, and answered: "All right, Missis. They're very busy, but *I'll* wangle you in some'ow."

When at length she was wangled into the presence of a grave gentleman in eye-glasses, realisation of the utter importance of this moment overcame her so that she could not speak. "Oh! dear"—she thought, while her heart fluttered like a bird—"he'll never understand; I'll never be able to make him." She saw her husband buried under the leaves of despair; she saw her children getting too little food, the deaf aunt, now bedridden, neglected in the new pressure of work that must fall on the only breadwinner left. And, choking a little, she said:

"I'm sure I'm very sorry to take up your time, sir; but my 'usband's been taken to the Palace; and we've been married over twenty years, and he's been in England twenty-five; and he's a very good man and a good workman; and I thought perhaps they didn't understand that; and we've got three children and a relation that's bedridden. And of course, we understand that the Germans have been very wicked; Gerhardt always said that himself. And it isn't as if he was a spy; so I thought if you could do something for us, sir, I being English myself."

The gentleman, looking past her at the wall, answered wearily:

"Gerhardt—I'll look into it. We have to do very hard things, Mrs. Gerhardt."

Little Mrs. Gerhardt, with big eyes almost starting out of her head, for she was no fool, and perceived that this was the end, said eagerly:

"Of course I know that there's a big outcry, and the papers are askin' for it; but the people in our street don't mind 'im, sir. He's always done little things for them; so I thought perhaps you might make an exception in his case."

She noticed that the gentleman's lips tightened at the word outcry, and that he was looking at her now.

"His case was before the Committee no doubt; but I'll inquire. Good-morning."

Mrs. Gerhardt, accustomed to not being troublesome, rose; a tear rolled down her cheek and was arrested by her smile.

"Thank you, sir, I'm sure. Good-morning, sir."

And she went out. Meeting the messenger in the corridor, and hearing his: "Well, Missis?" she answered: "I don't know. I must look on the bright side. Good-bye, and thank you for your trouble." And she turned away feeling as if she had been beaten all over.

The bright side on which she looked did not include the return to her of little Gerhardt, who was duly detained for the safety of the country. Obedient to economy, and with a dim sense that her favourite papers were in some way responsible for this, she ceased to take them in, and took in sewing instead. It had become necessary to do so, for the allowance she received from the government was about a quarter of Gerhardt's weekly earnings. In spite of its inadequacy it was something, and she felt she must be grateful. But, curiously enough, she could not forget that she was English, and it seemed strange to her that, in addition to the grief caused by separation from her husband from whom she had never been parted not even for a night, she should now be compelled to work twice as hard and eat half as much because that husband had paid her country the compliment of preferring it to his own. But, after all, many other people had much worse trouble to grieve over, so she looked on the bright side of all this, especially on those days once a week when alone, or accompanied by the little Violet, she visited that Palace where she had read in her favourite journals to her great comfort that her husband was treated like a prince. Since he had no money he was in what they called "the battalion," and their meetings were held in the bazaar, where things which "the princes" made were exposed for sale. Here Mr. and Mrs. Gerhardt would stand in front of some doll, some blotting-book, calendar, or walking-stick, which had been fashioned by one of "the princes." There they would hold each others' hands and try to imagine themselves unsurrounded by other men and wives, while the little Violet would stray and return to embrace her father's leg spasmodically. Standing there, Mrs. Gerhardt would look on the bright side, and explain to Gerhardt how well everything was going, and he mustn't fret

about them, and how kind the police were, and how auntie asked after him, and Minnie would get a prize; and how he oughtn't to mope, but eat his food, and look on the bright side. And Gerhardt would smile the smile which went into her heart just like a sword, and say:

"All right, Dollee. I'm getting on fine." Then, when the whistle blew and he had kissed little Violet, they would be quite silent, looking at each other. And she would say in a voice so matter-of-fact that it could have deceived no one:

"Well, I must go now. Good-bye, old man!"

And he would say:

"Good-bye, Dollee. Kiss me."

They would kiss, and holding little Violet's hand very hard she would hurry away in the crowd, taking care not to look back for fear she might suddenly lose sight of the bright side. But as the months went on, became a year, eighteen months, two years, and still she went weekly to see her "prince" in his Palace, that visit became for her the hardest experience of all her hard week's doings. For she was a realist, as well as a heroine, and she could see the lines of despair not only in her man's heart but in his face. For a long time he had not said: "I'm getting on fine, Dollee." His face had a beaten look, his figure had wasted, he complained of his head.

"It's so noisy," he would say constantly; "oh! it's so noisy—never a quiet moment—never alone—never—never—never—never. And not enough to eat; it's all reduced now, Dollee."

She learned to smuggle food into his hands, but it was very little, for they had not enough at home either, with the price of living ever going up and her depleted income ever stationary. They had—her "man" told her—made a fuss in the papers about their being fed like turkeycocks, while the "Huns" were sinking the ships. Gerhardt, always a spare little man, had lost eighteen pounds. She, naturally well covered, was getting thin herself, but that she did not notice, too busy all day long, and too occupied in thinking of her "man." To watch him week by week, more hopeless, as the months dragged on, was an acute torture, to disguise which was torture even more acute. She had long seen that there was no bright side, but if she admitted that she knew she would go down; so she did not. And she carefully kept from Gerhardt such matters as David's overgrowing his strength, because she could not feed him properly; the completely bedridden nature of auntie; and worse than these, the growing coldness and unkindness of her

neighbours. Perhaps they did not mean to be unkind, perhaps they did, for it was not in their nature to withstand the pressure of mass sentiment, the continual personal discomfort of having to stand in queues, the fear of air raids, the cumulative indignation caused by stories of atrocities true and untrue. In spite of her record of kindness towards them she became tarred with the brush at last, for her nerves had given way once or twice, and she had said it was a shame to keep her man like that, gettin' iller and iller, who had never done a thing. Even her reasonableness—and she was very reasonable—succumbed to the strain of that weekly sight of him, till she could no longer allow for the difficulties which Mrs. Clirehugh assured her the Government had to deal with. Then one day she used the words “fair play,” and at once it became current that she had “German sympathies.” From that time on she was somewhat doomed. Those who had received kindnesses from her were foremost in showing her coldness, being wounded in their self-esteem. To have received little benefits, such as being nursed when they were sick, from one who had “German sympathies” was too much for the pride which is in every human being, however humble an inhabitant of Putney. Mrs. Gerhardt's Cockney spirit could support this for herself, but she could not bear it for her children. David came home with a black eye, and would not say why he had got it. Minnie missed her prize at school, though she had clearly won it. That was just after the last German offensive began; but Mrs. Gerhardt refused to see that this was any reason. Little Violet twice put the heart-rending question to her: “Aren't I English, Mummy?”

She was answered: “Yes, my dear, of course.”

But the child obviously remained unconvinced in her troubled mind.

And then they took David for the British army. It was that which so upset the applecart in Mrs. Gerhardt that she broke out to her last friend, Mrs. Clirehugh:

“I do think it's hard, Eliza. They take his father and keep him there for a dangerous Hun year after year like that; and then they take his boy for the army to fight against him. And how I'm to get on without him I don't know.”

Little Mrs. Clirehugh, who was Scotch, with a Gloucestershire accent, replied:

“Well, we've got to beat them. They're such a wicked lot. I daresay it's 'ard on you, but we've got to beat them.”

“But we never did nothing,” cried Mrs. Gerhardt; “it isn’t us that’s wicked. We never wanted the war; it’s nothing but ruin to him. They did ought to let me have my man, or my boy, one or the other.”

“You should ’ave some feeling for the Government, Dora; they ’ave to do ’ard things.”

Mrs. Gerhardt, with a quivering face, had looked at her friend.

“I have,” she said at last in a tone which implanted in Mrs. Clirehugh’s heart the feeling that Dora was “bitter.”

She could not forget it; and she would flaunt her head at any mention of her former friend. It was a blow to Mrs. Gerhardt, who had now no friends, except the deaf and bedridden aunt, to whom all things were the same, war or no war, Germans or no Germans, so long as she was fed.

About then it was that the tide turned, and the Germans began to know defeat. Even Mrs. Gerhardt, who read the papers no longer, learned it daily, and her heart relaxed; that bright side began to reappear a little. She felt they could not feel so hardly towards her “man” now as when they were all in fear; and perhaps the war would be over before her boy went out. But Gerhardt puzzled her. He did not brighten up. The iron seemed to have entered his soul too deeply. And one day, in the bazaar, passing an open doorway, Mrs. Gerhardt had a glimpse of why. There, stretching before her astonished eyes, was a great, as it were, encampment of brown blankets, slung and looped up anyhow, dividing from each other countless sordid beds, which were almost touching, and a whiff of huddled humanity came out to her keen nostrils, and a hum of sound to her ears. So that was where her man had dwelt these thirty months, in that dirty, crowded, noisy place, with dirty-looking men, such as those she could see lying on the beds, or crouching by the side of them, over their work. He had kept neat somehow, at least on the days when she came to see him—but *that* was where he lived! Alone again (for she no longer brought the little Violet to see her German father), she grieved all the way home. Whatever happened to him now, even if she got him back, she knew he would never quite get over it.

And then came the morning when she came out of her door like the other inhabitants of Putney, at sound of the maroons, thinking it was an air raid; and, catching the smile on the toothless mouth of one of her old neighbours, hearing the cheers of the boys in the school round the corner, knew that it was Peace. Her heart overflowed then, and, withdrawing hastily, she sat down on a shiny chair in her little empty parlour. Her face

crumpled suddenly, the tears came welling forth; she cried and cried, alone in the little cold room. She cried from relief and utter thankfulness. It was over—over at last! The long waiting—the long misery—the yearning for her “man”—the grieving for all those poor boys in the mud, and the dreadful shell holes, and the fighting, the growing terror of anxiety for her own boy—over, all over! Now they would let Max out, now David would come back from the army; and people would not be unkind and spiteful to her and the children any more!

For all she was a Cockney, hers was a simple soul, associating Peace with Good-will. Drying her tears, she stood up, and in the little cheap mirror above the empty grate looked at her face. It was lined, and she was grey; for more than two years her man had not seen her without her hat. What ever would he say? And she rubbed and rubbed her cheeks, trying to smooth them out. Then her conscience smote her, and she ran upstairs to the back bedroom, where the deaf aunt lay. Taking up the little amateur ear trumpet which Gerhardt himself had made for “auntie,” before he was taken away, she bawled into it:

“Peace, Auntie; it’s Peace! Think of that. It’s Peace!”

“What’s that?” answered the deaf woman.

“It’s Peace, Auntie, Peace.”

The deaf lady roused herself a little, and some meaning came into the lack-lustre black eyes of her long, leathery face. “You don’t say,” she said in her wooden voice, “I’m so hungry, Dolly, isn’t it time for my dinner?”

“I was just goin’ to get it, dearie,” replied Mrs. Gerhardt, and hurried back downstairs with her brain teeming, to make the deaf woman’s bowl of bread, pepper, salt, and onions.

All that day and the next and the next she saw the bright side of things with almost dazzling clearness, waiting to visit her “prince” in his Palace. She found him in a strange and pitiful state of nerves. The news had produced too intense and varied emotions among those crowded thousands of men buried away from normal life so long. She spent all her hour and a half trying desperately to make him see the bright side, but he was too full of fears and doubts, and she went away smiling, but utterly exhausted. Slowly in the weeks which followed she learned that nothing was changed. In the fond hope that Gerhardt might be home now any day, she was taking care that his slippers and some clothes of David’s were ready for him, and the hip bath handy for him to have a lovely hot wash. She had even bought

a bottle of beer and some of his favourite pickle, saving the price out of her own food, and was taking in the paper again, letting bygones be bygones. But he did not come. And soon the paper informed her that the English prisoners were returning—many in wretched state, poor things, so that her heart bled for them, and made her fiercely angry with the cruel men who had treated them so; but it informed her too, that if the paper had its way no “Huns” would be tolerated in this country for the future. “Send them all back!” were the words it used. She did not realise at first that this applied to Gerhardt; but when she did, she dropped the journal as if it had been a living coal of fire. Not let him come back to his home, and family, not let him stay, after all they’d done to him, and he never did anything to them! Not let him stay, but send him out to that dreadful country, which he had almost forgotten in these thirty years, and he with an English wife and children! In this new terror of utter dislocation the bright side so slipped from her that she was obliged to go out into the back garden in the dark, where a sou’-westerly wind was driving the rain. There, lifting her eyes to the evening sky she uttered a little moan. It couldn’t be true; and yet what they said in her paper had always turned out true, like the taking of Gerhardt away, and the reduction of his food. And the face of the gentleman in the building at Whitehall came before her out of the long past, with his lips tightening, and his words: “We have to do very hard things, Mrs. Gerhardt.” Why had they to do them? Her man had never done no harm to no one! A flood, bitter as sea water, surged in her, and seemed to choke her very being. Those gentlemen in the papers—why should they go on like that? Had they no hearts, no eyes to see the misery they brought to humble folk? “I wish them nothing worse than what they’ve brought to him and me,” she thought wildly: “nothing worse!”

The rain beat on her face, wetted her grey hair, cooled her eyeballs. “I mustn’t be spiteful,” she thought; and bending down in the dark she touched the glass of the tiny conservatory built against the warm kitchen wall, and heated by the cunning little hot-water pipe her man had put there in his old handy days. Under it were one little monthly rose, which still had blossoms, and some straggly small chrysanthemums. She had been keeping them for the feast when he came home; but if he wasn’t to come, what should she do? She raised herself. Above the wet roofs sky-rack was passing wild and dark, but in a little cleared space one or two stars shone the brighter for the

blackness below. "I must look on the bright side," she thought, "or I can't bear myself." And she went in to cook the porridge for the evening meal.

The winter passed for her in the most dreadful anxiety. "Repatriate the Huns!" That cry continued to spurt up in her paper like a terrible face seen in some recurrent nightmare; and each week that she went to visit Gerhardt brought solid confirmation to her terror. He was taking it hard, so that sometimes she was afraid that "something" was happening in him. This was the utmost she went towards defining what doctors might have diagnosed as incipient softening of the brain. He seemed to dread the prospect of being sent to his native country.

"I couldn't stick it, Dollee," he would say. "What should I do—whatever should I do? I haven't a friend. I haven't a spot to go to. I should be lost. I'm afraid, Dollee. How could you come out there, you and the children? I couldn't make a living for you. I couldn't make one for myself now."

And she would say: "Cheer up, old man. Look on the bright side. Think of the others." For, though those others were not precisely the bright side, the mental picture of their sufferings, all those poor "princes" and their families, somehow helped her to bear her own. But he shook his head:

"No; I should never see you again."

"I'd follow you," she answered. "Never fear, Max, we'd work in the fields—me and the children. We'd get on somehow. Bear up, my dearie. It'll soon be over now. I'll stick to you, Max, never you fear. But they won't send you, they never will."

And then, like a lump of ice pressed on her breast, came the thought: "But if they do! Auntie! My boy! My girls! However shall I manage if they do!"

Then long lists began to appear, and in great batches men were shovelled wholesale back to the country whose speech some of them had well-nigh forgotten. Little Gerhardt's name had not appeared yet. The lists were hung up the day after Mrs. Gerhardt's weekly visit, but she urged him if his name did appear to appeal against repatriation. It was with the greatest difficulty that she roused in him the energy to promise. "Look on the bright side, Max," she implored him. "You've got a son in the British army; they'll never send you. They wouldn't be so cruel. Never say die, old man."

His name appeared but was taken out, and the matter hung again in awful suspense, while the evil face of the recurrent nightmare confronted

Mrs. Gerhardt out of her favourite journal. She read that journal again, because, so far as in her gentle spirit lay, she hated it. It was slowly killing her man, and all her chance of future happiness; she hated it, and read it every morning. To the monthly rose and straggly little brown-red chrysanthemums in the tiny hothouse there had succeeded spring flowers—a few hardy January snowdrops, and one by one blue scillas, and the little pale daffodils called “angels’ tears.”

Peace tarried, but the flowers came up long before their time in their tiny hothouse against the kitchen flue. And then one wonderful day there came to Mrs. Gerhardt a strange letter, announcing that Gerhardt was coming home. He would not be sent to Germany—he was coming home! To-day, that very day—any moment he might be with her. When she received it, who had long received no letters save the weekly letters of her boy still in the army, she was spreading margarine on auntie’s bread for breakfast, and, moved beyond all control, she spread it thick, wickedly, wastefully thick, then dropped the knife, sobbed, laughed, clasped her hands on her breast, and without rhyme or reason, began singing: “Hark! the herald angels sing.” The girls had gone to school already, auntie in the room above could not hear her, no one heard her, nor saw her drop suddenly into the wooden chair, and, with her bare arms stretched out one on either side of the plate of bread and margarine, cry her heart out against the clean white table. Coming home, coming home, coming home! The bright side! The little white stars!

It was a quarter of an hour before she could trust herself to answer the knocking on the floor, which meant that “auntie” was missing her breakfast. Hastily she made the tea and went up with it and the bread and margarine. The woman’s dim long face gleamed greedily when she saw how thick the margarine was spread; but little Mrs. Gerhardt said no word of the reason for that feast. She just watched her only friend eating it, while a little moisture still trickled out from her big eyes on to her flushed cheeks, and the words still hummed in her brain:

*“Peace on earth and mercy mild,
Jesus Christ a little child.”*

Then, still speaking no word, she ran out and put clean sheets on her and her man's bed. She was on wires, she could not keep still, and all the morning she polished, polished. About noon she went out into her garden, and from under the glass plucked every flower that grew there—snowdrops, scillas, "angels' tears," quite two dozen blossoms. She brought them into the little parlour and opened its window wide. The sun was shining, and fell on the flowers strewn on the table, ready to be made into the nosegay of triumphant happiness. While she stood fingering them, delicately breaking half an inch off their stalks so that they should last the longer in water, she became conscious of someone on the pavement outside the window, and looking up saw Mrs. Clirehugh. The past, the sense of having been deserted by her friends, left her, and she called out:

"Come in, Eliza; look at my flowers!"

Mrs. Clirehugh came in; she was in black, her cheekbones higher, her hair looser, her eyes bigger. Mrs. Gerhardt saw tears starting from those eyes, wetting those high cheekbones, and cried out:

"Why, what's the matter, dear?"

Mrs. Clirehugh choked. "My baby!"

Mrs. Gerhardt dropped an "angels' tear," and went up to her.

"Whatever's happened?" she cried.

"Dead!" replied Mrs. Clirehugh. "Dead o' the influenza. 'E's to be buried to-day. I can't—I can't—I can't—" Wild choking stopped her utterance. Mrs. Gerhardt put an arm round her and drew her head on to her shoulder.

"I can't—I can't—" sobbed Mrs. Clirehugh; "I can't find any flowers. It's seein' yours made me cry."

"There, there!" cried Mrs. Gerhardt. "Have them. I'm sure you're welcome, dearie. Have them—I'm so sorry!"

"I don't know," choked Mrs. Clirehugh, "I 'aven't deserved them." Mrs. Gerhardt gathered up the flowers.

"Take them," she said. "I couldn't think of it. Your poor little baby. Take them! There, there, he's spared a lot of trouble. You must look on the bright side, dearie."

Mrs. Clirehugh tossed up her head.

"You're an angel, that's what you are!" she said, and grasping the flowers she hurried out, a little black figure passing the window in the sunlight.

Mrs. Gerhardt stood above the emptied table, thinking: "Poor dear—I'm glad she had the flowers. It was a mercy I didn't call out that Max was coming!" And from the floor she picked up one "angels' tear" she had dropped, and set it in a glass of water, where the sunlight fell. She was still gazing at it, pale, slender, lonely in that coarse tumbler, when she heard a knock on the parlour door, and went to open it. There stood her man, with a large brown-paper parcel in his hand. He stood quite still, his head a little down, the face very grey. She cried out; "Max!" but the thought flashed through her: "He knocked on the door! It's *his* door—he knocked on the door!"

"Dollee?" he said, with a sort of question in his voice.

She threw her arms round him, drew him into the room, and shutting the door, looked hard into his face. Yes, it was his face, but in the eyes something wandered—lit up, went out, lit up.

"Dollee," he said again, and clutched her hand.

She strained him to her with a sob.

"I'm not well, Dollee," he murmured.

"No, of course not, my dearie man; but you'll soon be all right now—home again with me. Cheer up, cheer up!"

"I'm not well," he said again.

She caught the parcel out of his hand, and taking the "angels' tear" from the tumbler, fixed it in his coat.

"Here's a spring flower for you, Max; out of your own little hothouse. You're home again; home again, my dearie. Auntie's upstairs, and the girls'll be coming soon. And we'll have dinner."

"I'm not well, Dollee," he said.

Terrified by that reiteration, she drew him down on the little horsehair sofa, and sat on his knee. "You're home, Max, kiss me. There's my man!" and she rocked him to and fro against her, yearning yet fearing to look into his face and see that "something" wander there—light up, go out, light up. "Look, dearie," she said, "I've got some beer for you. You'd like a glass of beer?"

He made a motion of his lips, a sound that was like the ghost of a smack. It terrified her, so little life was there in it.

He clutched her close, and repeated feebly:

"Yes, all right in a day or two. They let me come—I'm not well, Dollee." He touched his head.

Straining him to her, rocking him, she murmured over and over again, like a cat purring to its kitten:

“It’s all right, my dearie—soon be well—soon be well! We must look on the bright side—My man!”

1919.

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