

The Old Lady Shows Her Medals

BY J. M. BARRIE

Three nice old ladies and a criminal, who is even nicer, are discussing the war over a cup of tea. The criminal, who is the hostess, calls it a dish of tea, which shows that she comes from Caledonia; but that is not her crime.

They are all London charwomen, but three of them, including the hostess, are what are called professionally 'charwomen *and*' or simply 'ands.' An 'and' is also a caretaker when required; her name is entered as such in ink in a registry book, financial transactions take place across a counter between her and the registrar, and altogether she is of a very different social status from one who, like Mrs. Haggerty, is a charwoman but nothing else. Mrs. Haggerty, though present, is not at the party by invitation; having seen Mrs. Dowey buying the winkles, she followed her downstairs, so has shuffled into the play and sat down in it against our wish. We would remove her by force, or at least print her name in small letters, were it not that she takes offence very readily and says that nobody respects her. So, as you have slipped in, you sit there, Mrs. Haggerty; but keep quiet.

There is nothing doing at present in the caretaking way for Mrs. Dowey, our hostess; but this does not damp her, caretaking being only to such as she an extra financially and a halo socially. If she had the honour of being served with an income-tax paper she would probably fill in one of the nasty little compartments with the words, 'Trade--charring; Profession (if any)--caretaking.' This home of hers (from which, to look after your house, she makes occasionally temporary departures in great style, escorting a barrow) is in one of those what-care-I streets that you discover only when you have lost your way; on discovering them, your duty is to report them to the authorities, who immediately add them to the map of London. That is why we are now reporting Friday Street. We shall call it, in the rough sketch drawn for to-morrow's press, 'Street in which the criminal resided'; and you will find Mrs. Dowey's home therein marked with a X.

Her abode really consists of one room, but she maintains that there are two; so, rather than argue, let us say that there are two. The other one

has no window, and she could not swish her old skirts in it without knocking something over; its grandest display is of tin pans and crockery on top of a dresser which has a lid to it; you have but to whip off the utensils and raise the lid, and, behold, a bath with hot and cold. Mrs. Dowey is very proud of this possession, and when she shows it off, as she does perhaps too frequently, she first signs to you with closed fist (funny old thing that she is) to approach softly. She then tiptoes to the dresser and pops off the lid, as if to take the bath unawares. Then she sucks her lips, and is modest if you have the grace to do the exclamations.

In the real room is a bed, though that is putting the matter too briefly. The fair way to begin, if you love Mrs. Dowey, is to say to her that it is a pity she has no bed. If she is in her best form she will chuckle, and agree that the want of a bed tries her sore; she will keep you on the hooks, so to speak, as long as she can; and then, with that mouse-like movement again, she will suddenly spring the bed on you. You thought it was a wardrobe, but she brings it down from the wall; and lo, a bed. There is nothing else in her abode (which we now see to contain four rooms--kitchen, pantry, bedroom, and bathroom) that is absolutely a surprise; but it is full of 'bits,' every one of which has been paid ready money for, and gloated over and tended until it has become part of its owner. Genuine Doweys, the dealers might call them, though there is probably nothing in the place except the bed that would fetch half-a-crown.

Her home is in the basement, so that the view is restricted to the lower half of persons passing overhead beyond the area stairs. Here at the window Mrs. Dowey sometimes sits of a summer evening gazing, not sentimentally at a flower-pot which contains one poor bulb, nor yearningly at some tiny speck of sky, but with unholy relish at holes in stockings, and the like, which are revealed to her from her point of vantage. You, gentle reader, may flaunt by, thinking that your finery awes the street, but Mrs. Dowey can tell (and does) that your soles are in need of neat repair.

Also, lower parts being as expressive as the face to those whose view is thus limited, she could swear to scores of the passers-by in a court of law.

These four lively old codgers are having a good time at the tea-table, and wit is flowing free. As you can see by their everyday garments, and by their pails and mops (which are having a little tea-party by themselves in the corner), it is not a gathering by invitations stretching away into yesterday, it is a purely informal affair; so much more attractive, don't you think? than banquets elaborately prearranged. You know how they come about, especially in war-time. Very likely Mrs. Dowey met Mrs. Twymley and Mrs. Mickleham quite casually in the street, and meant to do no more than the time of day; then, naturally enough, the word camouflage was mentioned, and they got heated, but in the end Mrs. Twymley apologised; then, in the odd way in which one thing leads to another, the winkle man appeared, and Mrs. Dowey remembered that she had that pot of jam and that Mrs. Mickleham had stood treat last time; and soon they were all three descending the area stairs, followed cringingly by the Haggerty Woman.

They have been extremely merry, and never were four hard-worked old ladies who deserved it better. All a woman can do in war-time they do daily and cheerfully. Just as their men-folk are doing it at the Front; and now, with the mops and pails laid aside, they sprawl gracefully at ease. There is no intention on their part to consider peace terms until a decisive victory has been gained in the field (Sarah Ann Dowey), until the Kaiser is put to the right-about (Emma Mickleham), and singing very small (Amelia Twymley).

At this tea-party the lady who is to play the part of Mrs. Dowey is sure to want to suggest that our heroine has a secret sorrow, namely, the crime; but you should see us knocking that idea out of her head! Mrs. Dowey knows she is a criminal, but, unlike the actress, she does not know that she is about to be found out; and she is, to put it bluntly in her own Scotch way, the merriest of the whole clanjamfry. She presses more tea on her guests, but they wave her away from them in the pretty manner of ladies who know that they have already had more than enough.

MRS. DOWEY. 'Just one more winkle, Mrs. Mickleham?' Indeed there is only one more.

But Mrs. Mickleham indicates politely that if she took this one it would have to swim for it. (The Haggerty Woman takes it long afterwards when she thinks, erroneously, that no one is looking.)

Mrs. Twymley is sulking. Evidently some one has contradicted her. Probably the Haggerty Woman.

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'I say it is so.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'I say it may be so.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'I suppose I ought to know: me that has a son a prisoner in Germany.' She has so obviously scored that all good feeling seems to call upon her to end here. But she continues rather shabbily, 'Being the only lady present that has that proud misfortune.' The others are stung.

MRS. DOWEY. 'My son is fighting in France.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'Mine is wounded in two places.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'Mine is at Salonaiky.'

The absurd pronunciation of this uneducated person moves the others to mirth.

MRS. DOWEY. 'You'll excuse us, Mrs. Haggerty, but the correct pronunciation is Salonikky.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN, to cover her confusion. 'I don't think.' She feels that even this does not prove her case. 'And I speak as one that has War Savings Certificates.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'We all have them.'

The Haggerty Woman whimpers, and the other guests regard her with unfeeling disdain.

MRS. DOWEY, to restore cheerfulness, 'Oh, it's a terrible war.'

ALL, brightening, 'It is. You may say so.'

MRS. DOWEY, encouraged, 'What I say is, the men is splendid, but I'm none so easy about the staff. That's your weak point, Mrs. Mickleham.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM, on the defence, but determined to reveal nothing that might be of use to the enemy, 'You may take it from me, the staff's all right.'

MRS. DOWEY. 'And very relieved I am to hear you say it.'

It is here that the Haggerty Woman has the remaining winkle.

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'You don't understand properly about trench warfare. If I had a map----'

MRS. DOWEY, wetting her finger to draw lines on the table. 'That's the river Sommy. Now, if we had barrages here----'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Very soon you would be enfiladed. Where's your supports, my lady?' Mrs. Dowey is damped.

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'What none of you grasps is that this is a artillery war----'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN, strengthened by the winkle, 'I say that the word is Salonaiky.'

The others purse their lips.

MRS. TWYMLEY, with terrible meaning, 'We'll change the subject. Have you seen this week's *Fashion Chat*?' She has evidently seen and devoured it herself, and even licked up the crumbs. 'The gabardine with accordion pleats has quite gone out.'

MRS. DOWEY, her old face sparkling. 'My sakes! You tell me?'

MRS. TWYMLEY, with the touch of haughtiness that comes of great topics, 'The plain smock has come in again, with silk lacing, giving that charming chic effect.'

MRS. DOWEY. 'Oho!'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'I must say I was always partial to the straight line'--thoughtfully regarding the want of line in Mrs. Twymley's person--'though trying to them as is of too friendly a figure.'

It is here that the Haggerty Woman's fingers close unostentatiously upon a piece of sugar.

MRS. TWYMLEY, sailing into the Empyrean, 'Lady Dolly Kanister was seen conversing across the railings in a dainty *de jou*.'

MRS. DOWEY. 'Fine would I have liked to see her.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'She is equally popular as maid, wife, and munition-worker. Her two children is inset. Lady Pops Babington was married in a tight tulle.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'What was her going-away dress?'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'A champagne cream velvet with dreamy corsage. She's married to Colonel the Hon. Chingford--"Snubs," they called him at Eton.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN, having disposed of the sugar, 'Very likely he'll be sent to Salonaiky.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'Wherever he is sent, she'll have the same tremors as the rest of us. She'll be as keen to get the letters wrote with pencils as you or me.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Them pencil letters!'

MRS. DOWEY, in her sweet Scotch voice, timidly, afraid she may be going too far, 'And women in enemy lands gets those pencil letters

and then stop getting them, the same as ourselves. Let's occasionally think of that.'

She has gone too far. Chairs are pushed back.

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'I ask you!'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'That's hardly language, Mrs. Dowey.'

MRS. DOWEY, scared, 'Kindly excuse. I swear to death I'm none of your pacifists.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'Freely granted.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'I've heard of females that have no male relations, and so they have no man-party at the wars. I've heard of them, but I don't mix with them.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'What can the likes of us have to say to them? It's not their war.'

MRS. DOWEY, wistfully, 'They are to be pitied.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'But the place for them, Mrs. Dowey, is within doors with the blinds down.'

MRS. DOWEY, hurriedly, 'That's the place for them.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'I saw one of them to-day buying a flag. I thought it was very impudent of her.'

MRS. DOWEY, meekly, 'So it was.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM, trying to look modest with indifferent success, 'I had a letter from my son, Percy, yesterday.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Alfred sent me his photo.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'Letters from Salonaiky is less common.'

Three bosoms heave, but not, alas, Mrs. Dowey's. Nevertheless she doggedly knits her lips.

MRS. DOWEY, the criminal, 'Kenneth writes to me every week.' There are exclamations. The dauntless old thing holds aloft a packet of letters. 'Look at this. All his.'

The Haggerty Woman whimpers.

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Alfred has little time for writing, being a bombardier.'

MRS. DOWEY, relentlessly, 'Do your letters begin "Dear mother"?'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Generally.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'Invariable.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'Every time.'

MRS. DOWEY, delivering the knock-out blow, 'Kenneth's begin "Dearest mother."'

No one can think of the right reply.

MRS. TWYMLEY, doing her best, 'A short man, I should say, judging by yourself.'

She ought to have left it alone.

MRS. DOWEY. 'Six feet two-and a half.'

The gloom deepens.

MRS. MICKLEHAM, against her better judgment, 'A kilty, did you tell me?'

MRS. DOWEY. 'Most certainly. He's in the famous Black Watch.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN, producing her handkerchief, 'The Surrey Rifles is the famousest.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'There you and the King disagrees, Mrs. Haggerty. His choice is the Buffs, same as my Percy's.'

MRS. TWYMLEY, magnanimously, 'Give me the R.H.A. and you can keep all the rest.'

MRS. DOWEY. 'I'm sure I have nothing to say against the Surreys and the R.H.A. and the Buffs; but they are just breeches regiments, I understand.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'We can't all be kilties.'

MRS. DOWEY, crushingly, 'That's very true.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. It is foolish of her, but she can't help saying it. 'Has your Kenneth great hairy legs?'

MRS. DOWEY. 'Tremendous.'

The wicked woman: but let us also say 'Poor Sarah Ann Dowey.' For at this moment, enter Nemesis. In other words, the less important part of a clergyman appears upon the stair.

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'It's the reverent gent!'

MRS. DOWEY, little knowing what he is bringing her, 'I see he has had his boots heeled.'

It may be said of Mr. Willings that his happy smile always walks in front of him. This smile makes music of his life, it means that once again he has been chosen, in his opinion, as the central figure in romance. No one can well have led a more drab existence, but he will never know it; he will always think of himself, humbly though elatedly, as the chosen of the gods. Of him must it have been originally written that adventures are for the adventurous. He meets them at every street corner. For instance, he assists an old lady off a bus, and asks her if he can be of any further help. She tells him that

she wants to know the way to Maddox the butcher's. Then comes the kind, triumphant smile; it always comes first, followed by its explanation, 'I was there yesterday!' This is the merest sample of the adventures that keep Mr. Willings up to the mark.

Since the war broke out, his zest for life has become almost terrible. He can scarcely lift a newspaper and read of a hero without remembering that he knows some one of the name. The Soldiers' Rest he is connected with was once a china emporium, and (mark my words), he had bought his tea service at it. Such is life when you are in the thick of it. Sometimes he feels that he is part of a gigantic spy drama. In the course of his extraordinary comings and goings he meets with Great Personages, of course, and is the confidential recipient of secret news. Before imparting the news he does not, as you might expect, first smile expansively; on the contrary, there comes over his face an awful solemnity, which, however, means the same thing. When divulging the names of the personages, he first looks around to make sure that no suspicious character is about, and then, lowering his voice, tells you, 'I had that from Mr. Farthing himself--he is the secretary of the Bethnal Green Branch,--h'sh!'

There is a commotion about finding a worthy chair for the reverent, and there is also some furtive pulling down of sleeves, but he stands surveying the ladies through his triumphant smile. This amazing man knows that he is about to score again.

MR. WILLINGS, waving aside the chairs, 'I thank you. But not at all. Friends, I have news.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'News?'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'From the Front?'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'My Alfred, sir?'

They are all grown suddenly anxious--all except the hostess, who knows that there can never be any news from the Front for her.

MR. WILLINGS. 'I tell you at once that all is well. The news is for Mrs. Dowey.'

She stares.

MRS. DOWEY. 'News for me?'

MR. WILLINGS. 'Your son, Mrs. Dowey--he has got five days' leave.' She shakes her head slightly, or perhaps it only trembles a little on its stem. 'Now, now, good news doesn't kill.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'We're glad, Mrs. Dowey.'

MRS. DOWEY. 'You're sure?'

MR. WILLINGS. 'Quite sure. He has arrived.'

MRS. DOWEY. 'He is in London?'

MR. WILLINGS. 'He is. I have spoken to him.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'You lucky woman.'

They might see that she is not looking lucky, but experience has told them how differently these things take people.

MR. WILLINGS, marvelling more and more as he unfolds his tale, 'Ladies, it is quite a romance, I was in the----' he looks around cautiously, but he knows that they are all to be trusted--'in the Church Army quarters in Central Street, trying to get on the track of one or two of our missing men. Suddenly my eyes--I can't account for it--but suddenly my eyes alighted on a Highlander seated rather drearily on a bench, with his kit at his feet.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'A big man?'

MR. WILLINGS. 'A great brawny fellow.' The Haggerty Woman groans. "'My friend," I said at once, "welcome back to Blighty." I make a point of calling it Blighty. "I wonder," I said, "if there is anything I can do for you?" He shook his head. "What regiment?" I asked.' Here Mr. Willings very properly lowers his voice to a whisper.

"Black Watch, 5th Battalion," he said. "Name?" I asked. "Dowey," he said.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'I declare. I do declare.'

MR. WILLINGS, showing how the thing was done, with the help of a chair, 'I put my hand on his shoulder as it might be thus. "Kenneth Dowey," I said, "I know your mother.'"

MRS. DOWEY, wetting her lips, 'What did he say to that?'

MR. WILLINGS. 'He was incredulous. Indeed, he seemed to think I was balmy. But I offered to bring him straight to you. I told him how much you had talked to me about him.'

MRS. DOWEY. 'Bring him here!'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'I wonder he needed to be brought.'

MR. WILLINGS. 'He had just arrived, and was bewildered by the great city. He listened to me in the taciturn Scotch way, and then he gave a curious laugh.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Laugh?'

MR. WILLINGS, whose wild life has brought him into contact with the strangest people, 'The Scotch, Mrs. Twymley, express their emotions differently from us. With them tears signify a rollicking mood, while merriment denotes that they are plunged in gloom. When I had finished he said at once, "Let us go and see the old lady.'"

MRS. DOWEY, backing, which is the first movement she has made since he began his tale, 'Is he--coming?'

MR. WILLINGS, gloriously, 'He has come. He is up there. I told him I thought I had better break the joyful news to you.'

Three women rush to the window. Mrs. Dowey looks at her pantry door, but perhaps she remembers that it does not lock on the inside. She stands rigid, though her face has gone very grey.

MRS. DOWEY. 'Kindly get them to go away.'

MR. WILLINGS. 'Ladies, I think this happy occasion scarcely requires you.' He is not the man to ask of woman a sacrifice that he is not prepared to make himself. 'I also am going instantly.' They all survey Mrs. Dowey, and understand--or think they understand.

MRS. TWYMLEY, pail and mop in hand, 'I would thank none for their company if my Alfred was at the door.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM, similarly burdened, 'The same from me. Shall I send him down, Mrs. Dowey?' The old lady does not hear her. She is listening, terrified, for a step on the stairs. 'Look at the poor, joyous thing, sir. She has his letters in her hand.'

The three women go. Mr. Willings puts a kind hand on Mrs. Dowey's shoulder. He thinks he so thoroughly understands the situation.

MR. WILLINGS. 'A good son, Mrs. Dowey, to have written to you so often.'

Our old criminal quakes, but she grips the letters more tightly. Private Dowey descends.

'Dowey, my friend, there she is, waiting for you, with your letters in her hand.'

DOWEY, grimly, 'That's great.'

Mr. Willings ascends the stair without one backward glance, like the good gentleman he is; and the Doweys are left together, with nearly the whole room between them. He is a great rough chunk of Scotland, howked out of her not so much neatly as liberally; and in his Black Watch uniform, all caked with mud, his kit and nearly all his worldly possessions on his back, he is an apparition scarcely less fearsome (but so much less ragged) than those ancestors of his who trotted with Prince Charlie to Derby. He stands silent, scowling at the old lady, daring her to raise her head; and she would like very much to do it, for

she longs to have a first glimpse of her son. When he does speak, it is to jeer at her.

'Do you recognise your loving son, missis?' ('Oh, the fine Scotch tang of him,' she thinks.) 'I'm pleased I wrote so often.' ('Oh, but he's *raized*,' she thinks.) He strides towards her, and seizes the letters roughly, 'Let's see them.'

There is a string round the package, and he unties it, and examines the letters at his leisure with much curiosity. The envelopes are in order, all addressed in pencil to Mrs. Dowey, with the proud words 'Opened by Censor' on them. But the letter paper inside contains not a word of writing.

'Nothing but blank paper! Is this your writing in pencil on the envelope?' She nods, and he gives the matter further consideration.

'The covey told me you were a charwoman; so I suppose you picked the envelopes out of waste-paper baskets, or such like, and then changed the addresses?' She nods again; still she dare not look up, but she is admiring his legs. When, however, he would cast the letters into the fire, she flames up with sudden spirit. She clutches them.

'Don't you burn them letters, mister.'

'They're not real letters.'

'They're all I have.'

He returns to irony. 'I thought you had a son?'

'I never had a man nor a son nor anything. I just call myself Missis to give me a standing.'

'Well, it's past my seeing through.'

He turns to look for some explanation from the walls. She gets a peep at him at last. Oh, what a grandly set-up man! Oh, the stride of him. Oh, the noble rage of him. Oh, Samson had been like this before that woman took him in hand.

He whirls round on her. 'What made you do it?'

'It was everybody's war, mister, except mine.' She beats her arms. 'I wanted it to be my war too.'

'You'll need to be plainer. And yet I'm d----d if I care to hear you, you lying old trickster.'

The words are merely what were to be expected, and so are endurable; but he has moved towards the door.

'You're not going already, mister?'

'Yes, I just came to give you an ugly piece of my mind.'

She holds out her arms longingly. 'You haven't gave it to me yet.'

'You have a cheek!'

She gives further proof of it. 'You wouldn't drink some tea?'

'Me! I tell you I came here for the one purpose of blazing away at you.'

It is such a roaring negative that it blows her into a chair. But she is up again in a moment, is this spirited old lady. 'You could drink the tea while you was blazing away. There's winkles.'

'Is there?' He turns interestedly towards the table, but his proud Scots character checks him, which is just as well, for what she should have said was that there had been winkles. 'Not me. You're just a common rogue.' He seats himself far from the table. 'Now, then, out with it. Sit down!' She sits meekly; there is nothing she would not do for him. 'As you char, I suppose you are on your feet all day.'

'I'm more on my knees.'

'That's where you should be to me.'

'Oh, mister, I'm willing.'

'Stop it. Go on, you accomplished liar.'

'It's true that my name is Dowey.'

'It's enough to make me change mine.'

'I've been charring and charring and charring as far back as I mind.
I've been in London this twenty years.'

'We'll skip your early days. I have an appointment.'

'And then when I was old the war broke out.'

'How could it affect you?'

'Oh, mister, that's the thing. It didn't affect me. It affected everybody but me. The neighbours looked down on me. Even the posters, on the walls, of the woman saying, "Go, my boy," leered at me. I sometimes cried by myself in the dark. You won't have a cup of tea?'

'No.'

'Sudden like the idea came to me to pretend I had a son.'

'You depraved old limmer! But what in the name of Old Nick made you choose me out of the whole British Army?'

Mrs. Dowey giggles. There is little doubt that in her youth she was an accomplished flirt. 'Maybe, mister, it was because I liked you best.'

'Now, now, woman.'

'I read one day in the papers, "In which, he was assisted by Private K. Dowey, 5th Battalion, Black Watch."'

Private K. Dowey is flattered, 'Did you, now! Well, I expect that's the only time I was ever in the papers.'

Mrs. Dowey tries it on again, 'I didn't choose you for that alone. I read a history of the Black Watch first, to make sure it was the best regiment in the world.'

'Anybody could have told you that.' He is moving about now in better humour, and, meeting the loaf in his stride, he cuts a slice from it. He is hardly aware of this, but Mrs. Dowey knows. 'I like the Scotch voice of you, woman. It drumbles on like a hill burn.'

'Prosen Water runs by where I was born.' Flirting again, 'May be it teached me to speak, mister.'

'Canny, woman, canny.'

'I read about the Black Watch's ghostly piper that plays proudly when the men of the Black Watch do well, and prouder when they fall.'

'There's some foolish story of that kind.' He has another careless slice off the loaf. 'But you couldn't have been living here at that time or they would have guessed. I suppose you flitted?'

'Yes, it cost me eleven and sixpence.'

'How did you guess the *K* in my name stood for Kenneth?'

'Does it?'

'Umpha.'

'An angel whispered it to me in my sleep.'

'Well, that's the only angel in the whole black business.' He chuckles.

'You little thought I would turn up!' Wheeling suddenly on her. 'Or did you?'

'I was beginning to weary for a sight of you, Kenneth.'

'What word was that?'

'Mister.'

He helps himself to butter, and she holds out the jam pot to him, but he haughtily rejects it. Do you think she gives in now? Not a bit of it.

He returns to sarcasm, 'I hope you're pleased with me now you see me.'

'I'm very pleased. Does your folk live in Scotland?'

'Glasgow.'

'Both living?'

'Ay.'

'Is your mother terrible proud of you?'

'Naturally.'

'You'll be going to them?'

'After I've had a skite in London first.'

The old lady sniffs, 'So she is in London!'

'Who?'

'Your young lady.'

'Are you jealyous?'

'Not me.'

'You needna be. She's a young thing.'

'You surprises me. A beauty, no doubt?'

'You may be sure.' He tries the jam. 'She's a titled person. She is equally popular as maid, wife and munition-worker.'

Mrs. Dowey remembers Lady Dolly Kanister, so familiar to readers of fashionable gossip, and a very leery expression indeed comes into her face.

'Tell me more about her, man.'

'She has sent me a lot of things, especially cakes, and a worsted waistcoat, with a loving message on the enclosed card.'

The old lady is now in a quiver of excitement. She loses control of her arms, which jump excitedly this way and that.

'You'll try one of my cakes, mister?'

'Not me.'

'They're of my own making.'

'No, I thank you.'

But with a funny little run she is in the pantry and back again. She plunks down a cake before him, at sight of which he gapes.

'What's the matter? Tell me, oh, tell me, mister.'

'That's exactly the kind of cake that her ladyship sends me.'

Mrs. Dowey is now a very glorious old character indeed.

'Is the waistcoat right, mister? I hope the Black Watch colours pleased you.'

'Wha----t! Was it you?'

'I daredna give my own name, you see, and I was always reading hers in the papers.'

The badgered man looms over her, terrible for the last time.

'Woman, is there no getting rid of you!'

'Are you angry?'

He sits down with a groan.

'Oh, hell! Give me some tea.'

She rushes about preparing a meal for him, every bit of her wanting to cry out to every other bit, 'Oh, glory, glory, glory!' For a moment she hovers behind his chair. 'Kenneth!' she murmurs. 'What?' he asks, no longer aware that she is taking a liberty. 'Nothing,' she says, 'just Kenneth,' and is off gleefully for the tea-caddy. But when his tea is poured out, and he has drunk a saucerful, the instinct of self-preservation returns to him between two bites.

'Don't you be thinking, missis, for one minute that you have got me.'

'No, no.'

On that understanding he unbends.

'I have a theatre to-night, followed by a randy-dandy.'

'Oho! Kenneth, this is a queer first meeting!'

'It is, woman, oh, it is,' guardedly, 'and it's also a last meeting.'

'Yes, yes.'

'So here's to you--you old mop and pail. *Ave atque vale!*'

'What's that?'

'That means Hail and Farewell.'

'Are you a scholar?'

'Being Scotch, there's almost nothing I don't know.'

'What was you to trade?'

'Carter, glazier, orraman, any rough jobs.'

'You're a proper man to look at.'

'I'm generally admired.'

'She's an enviable woman.'

'Who?'

'Your mother.'

'Eh? Oh, that was just protecting myself from you. I have neither father nor mother nor wife nor grandmama.' Bitterly, 'This party never even knew who his proud parents were.'

'Is that--gleaming--'is that true?'

'It's gospel.'

'Heaven be praised!'

'Eh? None of that! I was a fool to tell you. But don't think you can take advantage of it. Pass the cake.'

'I daresay it's true we'll never meet again, Kenneth, but--but if we do, I wonder where it will be?'

'Not in this world.'

'There's no telling'--leering ingratiatingly--'It might be at Berlin.'

'Tod, if I ever get to Berlin, I believe I'll find you there waiting for me!'

'With a cup of tea for you in my hand.'

'Yes, and'--heartily--'very good tea too.'

He has partaken heavily, he is now in high good humour.

'Kenneth, we could come back by Paris!'

'All the ladies,' slapping his knees, 'likes to go to Paris.'

'Oh, Kenneth, Kenneth, if just once before I die I could be fitted for a Paris gown with dreamy corsage!'

'You're all alike, old covey. We have a song about it.' He sings:

'Mrs. Gill is very ill, Nothing can improve her
But to see the Tuileries
And waddle through the Louvre.'

No song ever had a greater success. Mrs. Dowey is doubled up with mirth. When she comes to, when they both come to, for there are a pair of them, she cries:

'You must learn me that,' and off she goes in song also:

'Mrs. Dowey's very ill, Nothing can improve her.'

'Stop!' cries clever Kenneth, and finishes the verse:

'But dressed up in a Paris gown
To waddle through the Louvre.'

They fling back their heads, she points at him, he points at her. She says ecstatically:

'Hairy legs!'

A mad remark, which brings him to his senses; he remembers who and what she is.

'Mind your manners!' Rising, 'Well, thank you for my tea. I must be stepping.'

Poor Mrs. Dowey, he is putting on his kit.

'Where are you living?'

He sighs.

'That's the question. But there's a place called The Hut, where some of the 2nd Battalion are. They'll take me in. Beggars,' bitterly, 'can't be choosers.'

'Beggars?'

'I've never been here before. If you knew'--a shadow coming over him--'what it is to be in such a place without a friend. I was crazy with glee, when I got my leave, at the thought of seeing London at last, but after wandering its streets for four hours, I would almost have been glad to be back in the trenches.'

'If you knew,' he has said, but indeed the old lady knows.

'That's my quandorum too, Kenneth.'

He nods sympathetically.

'I'm sorry for you, you poor old body,' shouldering his kit. 'But I see no way out for either of us.'

A cooing voice says, 'Do you not?'

'Are you at it again!'

She knows that it must be now or never. She has left her biggest guns for the end. In her excitement she is rising up and down on her toes.

'Kenneth, I've heard that the thing a man on leave longs for more than anything else is a bed with sheets, and a bath.'

'You never heard anything truer.'

'Go into that pantry, Kenneth Dowey, and lift the dresser-top, and tell me what you see.'

He goes. There is an awful stillness. He returns, impressed.

'It's a kind of a bath!'

'You could do yourself there pretty, half at a time.'

'Me?'

'There's a woman through the wall that would be very willing to give me a shakedown till your leave is up.'

He snorts.

'Oh, is there!'

She has not got him yet, but there is still one more gun.

'Kenneth, look!'

With these simple words she lets down the bed. She says no more; an effect like this would be spoilt by language. Fortunately he is not made of stone. He thrills.

'My word! That's the dodge we need in the trenches.'

'That's your bed, Kenneth.'

'Mine?' He grins at her. 'You queer old divert. What can make you so keen to be burdened by a lump like me?'

'He! he! he! he!'

'I tell you, I'm the commonest kind of man.'

'I'm just the commonest kind of old wifie myself.'

'I've been a kick-about all my life, and I'm no great shakes at the war.'

'Yes, you are. How many Germans have you killed?'

'Just two for certain, and there was no glory in it. It was just because they wanted my shirt.'

'Your shirt?'

'Well, they said it was their shirt.'

'Have you took prisoners?'

'I once took half a dozen, but that was a poor affair too.'

'How could one man take half a dozen?'

'Just in the usual way. I surrounded them.'

'Kenneth, you're just my ideal.'

'You're easily pleased.'

He turns again to the bed, 'Let's see how the thing works.' He kneads the mattress with his fist, and the result is so satisfactory that he puts down his kit.

'Old lady, if you really want me, I'll bide.'

'Oh! oh! oh! oh!'

Her joy is so demonstrative that he has to drop a word of warning.

'But, mind you, I don't accept you as a relation. For your personal glory, you can go on pretending to the neighbours; but the best I can say for you is that you're on your probation. I'm a cautious character, and we must see how you'll turn out.'

'Yes, Kenneth.'

'And now, I think, for that bath. My theatre begins at six-thirty. A cove I met on a 'bus is going with me.'

She is a little alarmed.

'You're sure you'll come back?'

'Yes, yes,' handsomely, 'I leave my kit in pledge.'

'You won't liquor up too freely, Kenneth?'

'You're the first,' chuckling, 'to care whether I do or not.' Nothing she has said has pleased the lonely man so much as this. 'I promise. Tod, I'm beginning to look forward to being wakened in the morning by hearing you cry, "Get up, you lazy swine." I've kind of envied men that had womenfolk with the right to say that.'

He is passing to the bathroom when a diverting notion strikes him.

'What is it, Kenneth?'

'The theatre. It would be showier if I took a lady.'

Mrs. Dowey feels a thumping at her breast.

'Kenneth, tell me this instant what you mean. Don't keep me on the jumps.'

He turns her round.

'No, It couldn't be done.'

'Was it me you were thinking of?'

'Just for the moment,' regretfully, 'but you have no style.'

She catches hold of him by the sleeve.

'Not in this, of course. But, oh, Kenneth, if you saw me in my merino! It's laced up the back in the very latest.'

'Hum,' doubtfully; 'but let's see it.'

It is produced from a drawer, to which the old lady runs with almost indecent haste. The connoisseur examines it critically.

'Looks none so bad. Have you a bit of chiffon for the neck? It's not bombs nor Kaisers nor Tipperary that men in the trenches think of, it's chiffon.'

'I swear I have, Kenneth, And I have a bangle, and a muff, and gloves.'

'Ay, ay.' He considers. 'Do you think you could give your face less of a homely look?'

'I'm sure I could.'

'Then you can have a try. But, mind you, I promise nothing. All will depend on the effect.'

He goes into the pantry, and the old lady is left alone. Not alone, for she is ringed round by entrancing hopes and dreadful fears. They beam on her and jeer at her, they pull her this way and that; with difficulty she breaks through them and rushes to her pail, hot water, soap, and a looking-glass. Our last glimpse of her for this evening shows her staring (not discontentedly) at her soft old face, licking her palm, and pressing it to her hair. Her eyes are sparkling.

* * * * *

One evening a few days later Mrs. Twymley and Mrs. Mickleham are in Mrs. Dowey's house, awaiting that lady's return from some fashionable dissipation. They have undoubtedly been discussing the war, for the first words we catch are:

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'I tell you flat, Amelia, I bows no knee to junkerdom.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Sitting here by the fire, you and me, as one to another, what do you think will happen after the war? Are we to go back to being as we were?'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'Speaking for myself, Amelia, not me. The war has wakened me up to a understanding of my own importance that is really astonishing.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Same here. Instead of being the poor worms the like of you and me thought we was, we turns out to be visible departments of a great and haughty empire.'

They are well under weigh, and with a little luck we might now hear their views on various passing problems of the day, such as the neglect of science in our public schools. But in comes the Haggerty Woman, and spoils everything. She is attired, like them, in her best, but the effect of her is that her clothes have gone out for a walk, leaving her at home.

MRS. MICKLEHAM, with deep distaste, 'Here's that submarine again.'

The Haggerty Woman cringes to them, but gets no encouragement.

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'It's a terrible war.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Is that so?'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'I wonder what will happen when it ends?'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'I have no idea.'

The intruder produces her handkerchief, but does not use it. After all, she is in her best.

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'Are they not back yet?'

Perfect ladies must reply to a direct question.

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'No,' icily. 'We have been waiting this half hour. They are at the theatre again.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'You tell me! I just popped in with an insignificant present for him, as his leave is up.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'The same errand brought us.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'My present is cigarettes.'

They have no intention of telling her what their presents are, but the secret leaps from them.

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'So is mine.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Mine too.'

Triumph of the Haggerty Woman. But it is short-lived.

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'Mine has gold tips.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'So has mine.'

The Haggerty Woman need not say a word. You have only to look at her to know that her cigarettes are not gold-tipped. She tries to brazen it out, which is so often a mistake.

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'What care I? Mine is Exquisytos.'

No wonder they titter.

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'Excuse us, Mrs. Haggerty (if that's your name), but the word is Exquiseetos.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'Much obliged' (weeps).

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'I think I heard a taxi.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'It will be her third this week.'

They peer through the blind. They are so excited that rank is forgotten.

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'What is she in?'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'A new astrakhan jacket he gave her, with Venus sleeves.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'Has she sold her gabardine coat?'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'Not her! She has them both at the theatre, warm night though it is. She's wearing the astrakhan, and carrying the gabardine, flung careless-like over her arm.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'I saw her strutting about with him yesterday, looking as if she thought the two of them made a procession.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Hsh!' peeping, 'Strike me dead, if she's not coming mincing down the stair, hooked on his arm!'

Indeed it is thus that Mrs. Dowey enters. Perhaps she had seen shadows lurking on the blind, and at once hooked on to Kenneth to impress the visitors. She is quite capable of it.

Now we see what Kenneth saw that afternoon five days ago when he emerged from the bathroom and found the old trembler awaiting his inspection. Here are the muff and the gloves and the chiffon, and such a kind old bonnet that it makes you laugh at once; I don't know how to describe it, but it is trimmed with a kiss, as bonnets should be when the wearer is old and frail. We must take the merino for granted until she steps out of the astrakhan. She is dressed up to the nines, there is no doubt about it. Yes, but is her face less homely? Above all, has she style? The answer is in a stout affirmative. Ask Kenneth. He knows. Many a time he has had to go behind a door to roar hilariously at the old lady. He has thought of her as a lark to tell his mates about by and by; but for some reason that he cannot fathom, he knows now that he will never do that.

MRS. DOWEY. 'Kenneth,' affecting surprise, 'we have visitors!'

DOWEY. 'Your servant, ladies.'

He is no longer mud-caked and dour. A very smart figure is this Private Dowey, and he winks engagingly at the visitors, like one who knows that for jolly company you cannot easily beat charwomen. The pleasantries that he and they have exchanged this week! The sauce he has given them. The wit of Mrs. Mickleham's retorts. The badinage of Mrs. Twymley. The neat giggles of the Haggerty Woman. There has been nothing like it since you took the countess in to dinner.

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'We should apologise. We're not meaning to stay.'

MRS. DOWEY. 'You are very welcome. Just wait'--the ostentation of this!--'till I get out of my astrakhan--and my muff--and my gloves--and' (it is the bonnet's turn now) 'my Excelsior.'

At last we see her in the merino (a triumph).

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'You've given her a glory time, Mr. Dowey.'

DOWEY. 'It's her that has given it to me, missis.'

MRS. DOWEY. 'Hey! hey! hey! hey! He just pampers me,' wagging her fists. 'The Lord forgive us, but this being the last night, we had a sit-down supper at a restaurant!' Vehemently: 'I swear by God that we had champagne wine.' There is a dead stillness, and she knows very well what it means, she has even prepared for it: 'And to them as doubts my word--here's the cork.'

She places the cork, in its lovely gold drapery, upon the table.

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'I'm sure!'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'I would thank you, Mrs. Dowey, not to say a word against my Alfred.'

MRS. DOWEY. 'Me!'

DOWEY. 'Come, come, ladies,' in the masterful way that is so hard for women to resist; 'if you say another word, I'll kiss the lot of you.'

There is a moment of pleased confusion.

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'Really, them sodgers!'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'The kilties is the worst!'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'I'm sure,' heartily, 'we don't grudge you your treats, Mrs. Dowey; and sorry we are that this is the end.'

DOWEY. 'Yes, it's the end,' with a troubled look at his old lady; 'I must be off in ten minutes.'

The little soul is too gallant to break down in company. She hurries into the pantry and shuts the door.

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'Poor thing! But we must run, for you'll be having some last words to say to her.'

DOWEY. 'I kept her out long on purpose so as to have less time to say them in.'

He more than half wishes that he could make a bolt to a public-house.

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'It's the best way.' In the important affairs of life there is not much that any one can teach a charwoman. 'Just a mere nothing, to wish you well, Mr. Dowey.'

All three present him with the cigarettes.

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'A scraping, as one might say.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'The heart,' enigmatically, 'is warm though it may not be gold-tipped.'

DOWEY. 'You bricks!'

THE LADIES. 'Good luck, cocky.'

DOWEY. 'The same to you. And if you see a sodger man up there in a kilt, he is one that is going back with me. Tell him not to come down, but--but to give me till the last minute, and then to whistle.'

It is quite a grave man who is left alone, thinking what to do next. He tries a horse laugh, but that proves of no help. He says 'Hell!' to himself, but it is equally ineffective. Then he opens the pantry door and calls.

'Old lady.'

She comes timidly to the door, her hand up as if to ward off a blow.

'Is it time?'

An encouraging voice answers her.

'No, no, not yet. I've left word for Dixon to whistle when go I must.'

'All is ended.'

'Now, then, you promised to be gay. We were to help one another.'

'Yes, Kenneth.'

'It's bad for me, but it's worse for you.'

'The men have medals to win, you see.'

'The women have their medals, too.' He knows she likes him to order her about, so he tries it again.

'Come here. No, I'll come to you.' He stands gaping at her wonderingly. He has no power of words, nor does he quite know what he would like to say. 'God!'

'What is it, Kenneth?'

'You're a woman.'

'I had near forgot it.'

He wishes he was at the station with Dixon. Dixon is sure to have a bottle in his pocket. They will be roaring a song presently. But in the meantime--there is that son business. Blethers, the whole thing, of course--or mostly blethers. But it's the way to please her.

'Have you noticed you have never called me son?'

'Have I noticed it! I was feared, Kenneth. You said I was on probation.'

'And so you were. Well, the probation's ended.' He laughs uncomfortably. 'The like of me! But if you want me you can have me.'

'Kenneth, will I do?'

'Woman,' artfully gay, 'don't be so forward. Wait till I have proposed.'

'Propose for a mother?'

'What for no?' In the grand style, 'Mrs. Dowey, you queer carl, you spunky tiddy, have I your permission to ask you the most important question a neglected orphan can ask of an old lady?'

She bubbles with mirth. Who could help it, the man has such a way with him.

'None of your sauce, Kenneth.'

'For a long time, Mrs. Dowey, you cannot have been unaware of my sonnish feelings for you.'

'Wait till I get my mop to you!'

'And if you're not willing to be my mother, I swear I'll never ask another.'

The old divert pulls him down to her and strokes his hair.

'Was I a well-behaved infant, mother?'

'Not you, sonny, you were a rampaging rogue.'

'Was I slow in learning to walk?'

'The quickest in our street. He! he! he!' She starts up. 'Was that the whistle?'

'No, no. See here. In taking me over you have, in a manner of speaking, joined the Black Watch.'

'I like to think that, Kenneth.'

'Then you must behave so that the ghost piper can be proud of you. 'Tion!' She stands bravely at attention. 'That's the style. Now listen, I've sent in your name as being my nearest of kin, and your allowance will be coming to you weekly in the usual way.'

'Hey! hey! hey! Is it wicked, Kenneth?'

'I'll take the responsibility for it in both worlds. You see, I want you to be safeguarded in case anything hap--'

'Kenneth!'

'Tion! Have no fear. I'll come back, covered with mud and medals. Mind you have that cup of tea waiting for me.' He is listening for the whistle. He pulls her on to his knee.

'Hey! hey! hey! hey!'

'What fun we'll have writing to one another! Real letters this time!'

'Yes.'

'It would be a good plan if you began the first letter as soon as I've gone.'

'I will.'

'I hope Lady Dolly will go on sending me cakes.'

'You may be sure.'

He ties his scarf round her neck.

'You must have been a bonny thing when you were young.'

'Away with you!'

'That scarf sets you fine.'

'Blue was always my colour.'

The whistle sounds.

'Old lady, you are what Blighty means to me now.'

She hides in the pantry again. She is out of sight to us, but she does something that makes Private Dowey take off his bonnet. Then he shoulders his equipment and departs. That is he laughing coarsely with Dixon.

We have one last glimpse of the old lady--a month or two after Kenneth's death in action. It would be rosemary to us to see her in her black dress, of which she is very proud; but let us rather peep at her in the familiar garments that make a third to her mop and pail. It is early morning, and she is having a look at her medals before setting off on the daily round. They are in a drawer, with the scarf covering them, and on the scarf a piece of lavender. First, the black frock, which she carries in her arms like a baby. Then her War Savings Certificates, Kenneth's bonnet, a thin packet of real letters, and the famous champagne cork. She kisses the letters, but she does not blub over them. She strokes the dress, and waggles her head over the certificates and presses the bonnet to her cheeks, and rubs the tinsel of the cork carefully with her apron. She is a tremulous old 'un; yet she exults, for she owns all these things, and also the penny flag on her breast. She puts them away in the drawer, the scarf over them, the lavender on the scarf. Her air of triumph well becomes her. She lifts the pail and the mop, and slouches off gamely to the day's toil.

