

# In Peace and War

## Or, The End of It All

### CHAPTER XXIII.—Cont.

"But," added Mrs. Wylie with conviction, "he is not half good enough for you."

Brenda smiled a little wistfully and rose to preside at the tea-tray, which the maid brought in at that moment.

During their simple tea and the evening that followed there were other things to talk of, and it was only after dinner, when they were left alone with their work and their books, that Mrs. Wylie made reference to the afternoon's proceedings. "On my way back from Hicks," she said conversationally, "I met Sir Edward."

"Ah! Indeed! . . ."

Brenda looked up from the heavy volume on her lap and waited with some interest. Mrs. Wylie paused some time before continuing. She leaned to one side and took up a large work-basket, in which she searched busily for something.

"Yes," she murmured at length, with her face literally in the basket; "and . . . there is in St. Petersburg!"

"St. Petersburg!" repeated Brenda slowly. "In the winter, I rather envy him!"

"I do not imagine," said Mrs. Wylie, still occupied with the dishevelled contents of her work-basket, "that he is there on pleasure."

Brenda laughed lightly. "Theo," she observed in a casual way, "is not much given to pleasure in an undiluted state."

"I like a man who takes life and his life's work seriously."

"So do I," assented Brenda indifferently.

She knew that Mrs. Wylie was studying her face with kindly keenness, and so she smiled in a friendly way at the fire, which seemed to dance and laugh in reply.

"Is it generally known that he is in St. Petersburg?" she asked with some interest.

"Oh, no! Sir Edward told me in confidence. He says that it does not matter much, but that he and Theo would prefer it not being talked about."

"Why has he gone?" asked the girl. Mrs. Wylie laid aside the basket and looked across at her companion with a curious, baffled smile.

"I don't know," she answered.

"I suppose," she said presently, as she turned a page, "that it means war."

The widow shrugged her shoulders. "We must not get into the habit," she suggested, "of taking it for granted that every action of Theo's means that."

"He lives for war," said the girl wearily as she bent over her book with decision.

Mrs. Wylie worked on in silence. She had no desire to press the subject, and Brenda's statement was undeniable.

They now returned to their respective occupations, but Brenda knew that at times her companion's eyes wandered from the work toward her own face. Mrs. Wylie was evidently thinking actively—not passively, as was her wont. The result was not long in forthcoming.

"My dear," she said energetically, "I have been thinking. Let us go down to Wyl's Hall."

Brenda pondered for a few seconds before replying. It was the first time that there had been any mention of the old Suffolk house since

its master's sudden death. Mrs. Wylie had never crossed the threshold of this, the birthplace of many Wylies (all good sailors and true men), since she returned in the Hermione to Wyvenwich a childless widow. All this Brenda knew, and consequently attached some importance to the suggestion. During the last six months they had lived on in an unsettled way from day to day. Both had, perhaps, been a little restless. There was a want of homeliness about the chambers in Suffolk Mansions; not so much, perhaps, in the rooms themselves as in the stairs, the common door with its civil porter, and the general air of joint proprietorship.

Brenda did not lose sight of the possibility that Mrs. Wylie might be longing for the familiar faces and pleasant voices of the humble dwellers in Wyvenwich; but the proposal to return to Wyl's Hall was apparently unpremeditated, and therefore the girl doubted its sincerity.

"Not on my account?" she inquired doubtfully, without looking up.

"No. On my own. I am longing for the old place, Brenda. This fog and gloom makes one think of the brightness of Wyvenwich and the sea, which is always lovely in a frost. Let us go at once—to-morrow or the next day. The winter is by no means over yet, and London is detestable. Even if we are snowed up at Wyl's Hall, it does not matter much, for it is always bright and cheery despite its loneliness. We will take plenty of books and work."

The girl made no further demur, and presently caught the infection of her companion's cheerful enthusiasm. Mrs. Wylie possessed the pleasant art of making life a comfortable thing under most circumstances, and for such as her a sudden move has no fears. While Trist adapted himself to circumstances, Mrs. Wylie seemed to adapt circumstances to herself, which is, perhaps, the more difficult art.

The good lady seemed somewhat relieved when the move was finally decided upon and arranged; nevertheless, there was a look of anxiety on her round face when she sought her room that night.

"I wish," she observed to her own reflection in the looking-glass, "that I knew what to do. I must be a terrible coward. It would be so very easy to ask Brenda outright . . . though . . . I know what the answer would be . . . poor child! And I might just as well have spoken out boldly when I went to see him that night. It is a difficult predicament, because—they are both so strong!"

### CHAPTER XXIV.

It does not fall to the lot of many travelers by sea to plough through the yellow broken waters of the German Ocean where the coast of Suffolk lies low and fertile. Thus it happens that these shores are little visited, and never overrun by the cheap tourist. Upon this bleak, shingly shore there are little villages and small ancient towns quite unknown to the August holiday-seeker, who prefers crowding down to the south coast.

Suffolk by the sea is not all marsh. There are high sand-dunes, where oaks grow to a wonderful stature and a mighty toughness; where clean-limbed beeches rustle melodiously in the breeze that is never still on the

hottest autumn day; and where pines grow straight and tall despite the salty breath of ocean.

The little town of Wyvenwich lies upon the northern slope of such a bank as this. Before it spreads a bleak sandy plain seven miles across, while behind all is fertility and leafy luxuriance. To the south, over the hill, lies a vast purple moor, which undulates inland until a mixed forest of pine, oak and beech shuts out further investigation. The heathland slopes gently down to a vast marsh, in the midst of which stands a solitary red-brick cottage, the home of the marsh-man. The nearest house to it is the Mizzen Heath Coastguard Station, set back from the greedy sea upon the height of the moor; and beyond that surrounded by trees on all sides except the front, is Wyl's Hall.

The parish register tells of Wylies since the thirteenth century. Nothing of great importance, perhaps, but the name is there, and the possessors of it appear to have done their duty faithfully in the state of life in which they were placed. And now the old race is extinct. A lonely widow, childless, almost kinless, lives in Wyl's Hall; and the last possessor of the name, kindly, honest Admiral Wylie, lies in his great solitude among the nameless northern dead, far away in the deserted Norse churchyard upon the mountain-side.

Brenda Gilholme found a place for herself. Even to her it was clear that Mrs. Wylie had need of someone to bear her company in her widowhood, and so she stayed unquestioningly at Wyl's Hall now that Mrs. Wylie had returned there.

Here she lived just like an ordinary little country maiden. She knew all about the tides, and sympathized with the marshman, when the north-east winds blew against the ebbing tide, and laughed at his five creaking windmills. She learnt the names of all the six stalwart coastguardsmen stationed at Mizzen Heath, and was deeply versed in the smuggling lore of this famous smuggling country. These coastguardsmen, with their civil tongues and ready ways, occupied an important position in the domestic economy of Wyl's Hall. Their little turf refuge was at the foot of the kitchen garden, and there a pleasant-spoken man was to be found by night and day.

Women are weak where sailors are concerned. Mrs. Wylie set an example with the London newspaper, and the portly cook followed with surreptitious cold pudding when her dishes were washed on a warm evening. There was always something requiring a man's hand at Wyl's Hall, and the coastguards had a certain leisure, during which the most somnolent could scarcely sleep. No man slumbers quite peacefully about five o'clock in the evening, however actively employed he may have been during the previous night; and, indeed, at all times of day or night there was usually one of the six Mizzen Heath guardians awake and off duty.

Into this little world, shut off by shallow seas in front, closed in by vast moors behind, Brenda had quietly made her way like some new and gracious flower when the flowers of earth were still frozen in. In it she had found a place, among its denizens a welcome. And this was life. This the end and aim of all existence. To do a little good, to leave a pleasant memory in a few hearts.

Mrs. Wylie was almost her old self again. At times the former cheerfulness of demeanor would lighten up the old house. There was the same capable sense of comfort in her presence, the same readiness to make the best of unpropitious environments. Her own sorrow, never publicly aired, was hidden deeply beneath a certain cheerfulness which can only be described as worldly. If she never referred to her late husband in touching terms, it was not because his memory was devoid of meaning to her; it was because she cordially disliked any approach to cant, because the memory was too sacred a thing to be discussed. Of course, society at large and her neighbors in particular had a say in the matter—the usual kind of say—flavored with tea and thin bread, garnished with spite and kindly malice. But Mrs. Wylie had always been rashly indifferent to criticism.

All through February and March the two ladies had lived happily at Wyl's Hall, without longing for the busier life of London. At times Mrs. Wylie heard about Theodore—usually a vague rumor that he was in London, or Paris, or Berlin, and once directly from him a short note, sent with some quaint old jewelry he had brought back from the Slavonki Bazaar in Moscow for herself and Brenda.

March was drawing to a close, and the low Suffolk lands were already green by reason of their dampness, when a second communication arrived at Wyl's Hall from the busy correspondent.

"May I," he asked tersely, "come down for a day or two to see you? Please answer by telegraph."

The note came at breakfast-time, and a messenger was at once dispatched to Wyvenwich with a telegram.

"It is quite an age since we have seen Theo," observed Mrs. Wylie pleasantly, as she wrote out the message.

Brenda, who was occupied with her letters, acquiesced carelessly; but in a few moments she laid the communications aside and took up the newspaper. With singular nonchalance she opened it and went toward the window. There was nothing

very peculiar in this action, and yet the girl's movements were in some slight and inexplicable way embarrassed. It seemed almost as if she did not wish Mrs. Wylie to notice that she was looking at the newspaper. During breakfast there was a furtive anxiety visible in the manner and voice of these deceitful women. Each attempted to rejoice openly over the advent of Theodore Trist, and at the same time carefully avoided seeking a reason for his unusual mode of procedure; for Trist was a man who never invited himself.

While the table was being cleared Brenda left the room on some small errand, and Mrs. Wylie literally pounced upon the newspaper the moment the door was closed. With practiced hand and eye she sought the column containing foreign intelligence. Eagerly she scanned the closely-printed lines, but disappointment was the evident result.

"Not a word," she reflected—"not a word. But perhaps that is all the worse. Theo is coming down here for some specific reason, I am sure. Either to say good-bye or for something else. War—war! I feel it in the air!"

And the good lady stood there in the bow-window gazing through the rime-shaded panes away across the moor, over the green and mournful sea.

### CHAPTER XXV.

It happened that there were some warm balmy days toward the end of March, and on one of these Theodore Trist arrived at Wyvenwich. Mrs. Wylie and Brenda were on the little platform to meet him, and the elder lady, in her practical way, noted the lightness of his baggage and drew her own conclusions.

They walked to Wyl's Hall through the High Street of the little town, down toward the sea, up a steep path on the cliff, and finally across the moor. All green things were budding, tender shoots and bold weeds alike. Overhead the larks were singing in gladness chorus. Side by side the three friends walked, and talked of the weather. I mention it because none of the three took much interest in the matter, as a rule, nor ever talked of it.

"Spring is upon us again," Mrs. Wylie had said during the first pause.

"Yes," answered Trist; "this weather always makes me restless."

"More so than usual?" inquired Brenda innocently.

Trist looked at her sideways.

"Yes," he murmured, "more so than usual. I suppose a new fund of energy creeps into my somnolent being."

"Do you really believe," inquired Mrs. Wylie, with exceeding great interest, "that the weather has so much effect upon one as that?"

"I am sure of it. There is no denying the fact that in the spring-time, when all things are beginning to grow, men grow energetic. If they be working, they work harder; fighting, fight harder; playing, play harder. The majority of events happen in the first six months of the year."

"So the unexpected may be expected before July," suggested Mrs. Wylie quietly.

"That may be expected at all times." Thus they talked on in vague commonplaces, not entirely devoid of a second meaning perhaps. Brenda scarcely joined in the conversation. It was enough for her to listen to these two strangely assorted friends, who seemed to her analytical mind to be rather different in each other's company than they were before the rest of the world.

When they had reached the house the girl went upstairs to remove her hat and jacket, leaving her two companions together in the library. This was a good-sized room, with a broad old-fashioned bow-window, of which even the panes of glass were curved, while all round it there was a low window-seat softly cushioned. In the broad fireplace some logs of driftwood burnt slowly and silently, with a steady glow of heat, as only driftwood burns.

Trist went straight to the window and stood in the center of it, with his strong lean hands hanging idly. His eyes were soft and meek and dreamy as ever, while his limbs seemed full of strength and energy. The old incongruity was still apparent.

Mrs. Wylie followed him, and seated herself by the window at the end of the bow, so that the man's profile was visible to her. Thus they remained for some seconds; then he turned with grave deliberation and met her steady gaze.

"Well?" she inquired.

"Well?" he reiterated.

"How long are you going to stay?"

"Till Monday."

"This being Friday—"

He signified assent and turned away again.

"Why have you come?" asked Mrs. Wylie abruptly, after a short pause.

This time he avoided meeting her eyes by the simple expedient of staring out of the window.

"I do not know—" he replied, with some hesitation.

"Yes—you do!"

He wheeled round upon his heels and looked down at her with an aggravatingly gentle smile.

"Yes, Theo, you do! Why have you come?"

"May I not be allowed," he asked lightly, "a certain desire to see you and—Brenda?"

"You may," she replied; "but that

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is not the reason of your coming." She settled herself more comfortably on the window-seat, laid aside her muff, loosened her jacket, and composed herself to a long wait with a cheery determination eminently characteristic.

"In the spring—" he began, in a patient voice which seemed to contain the promise of a long story.

"The young man's fancy—" continued Mrs. Wylie.

"Lightly turns," he said gravely, taking up the thread, "to thoughts of—war."

At the last word he lowered his voice suddenly, and turned upon her as if to see its effect. She merely raised her eyebrows and looked at him speculatively. At last she gave a little nod of the head, signifying comprehension.

"Then you have come to say—good-bye?"

Here her voice failed a little. With care she could have prevented such an occurrence; but perhaps she spoke a trifle recklessly—perhaps she did not care to conceal the feeling which was betrayed by that passing break in her mellow sympathetic tones. When it was too late, she closed her lips with a small snap of determination, and looked up at him smiling defiantly.

"Not necessarily," he replied coolly. "It may mean that; or, at least, it may mean that I am summoned away at such short notice that there will be no opportunity of coming again. Personally, I should prefer it to be so. The pastime of saying good-bye may possess a certain sentimental value, but it is a weakness which is best avoided."

Mrs. Wylie continued to watch the young man's face with speculative criticism. It is just possible that she suspected him of talking nonsense, as it were, against time or against himself.

"Is your information of a general description, or have you certain advice that war is imminent?"

Trist smiled almost apologetically as he replied, with caution.

"I have reason to believe that there will be a big war before the summer."

"Turkey and Russia, of course?"

"Yes."

"And you go with Turkey, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"The losing side again?" inquired Mrs. Wylie diplomatically.

"Probably; but not without a good fight for it. It will not be such an easy matter as the Russians imagine."

"Where will you be?" asked the persistent lady. "At Constantinople?"

"At the front!" said Trist. "Do you know," said Mrs. Wylie, in a half-shamed way, "I believe I am beginning to lose my nerve. Is it a fortnight of approaching old age? I really believe I am going to be anxious about you."

Her semi-bantering tone justified Trist's easy laugh. He took it for granted that Mrs. Wylie was not speaking seriously.

"You must not allow yourself," he expostulated, "to get into bad habits of that sort."

"Still," argued the widow in the same tone, "I do not see why you should be free from the restraining and salutary feeling that there is someone waiting for you at home."

It was hard to tell whether Mrs. Wylie meant more than the mere words conveyed or no. Trist seemed to hesitate before replying.

"I am never free from that—but it is not necessary; my foolhardy days are over."

"And this is to be the last time?" said Mrs. Wylie, consoling herself.

"Yes. The last time!"

(To be Continued.)

Iolanthe—"So Jack is engaged, is he? And is Lucy the bride-to-be?"

Irene—"No; she's the tried-to-be."

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