E. M. DELAFIELD

THE WAR-WORKERS

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Содержание

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Author's Foreword

The "Midland Supply Depot" of *The War-Workers* has no counterpart in real life, and the scenes and characters described are also purely imaginary.

E.M. Delafield

I

At the Hostel for Voluntary Workers, in Questerham, Miss Vivian, Director of the Midland Supply Depôt, was under discussion that evening.

Half a dozen people, all of whom had been working for Miss Vivian ever since ten o'clock that morning, as they had worked the day before and would work again the next day, sat in the Hostel sitting-room and talked about their work and about Miss Vivian.

No one ever talked anything but "shop," either in the office or at the Hostel.

"Didn't you think Miss Vivian looked awfully tired today?"

"No wonder, after Monday night. You know the train wasn't in till past ten o'clock. I think those troop-trains tire her more than anything."

"She doesn't have to cut cake and bread-and-butter and sandwiches for two hours before the train gets in, though. I've got the usual blister today," said an anaemic-looking girl of twenty, examining her forefinger.

There was a low scoffing laugh from her neighbour.

"Miss Vivian cutting bread-and-butter! She does quite enough without that, Henderson. She had the D.G.V.O. in there yesterday afternoon for ages. I thought he was *never* going. I stood outside her door for half an hour, I should think, absolutely hung up over the whole of my work, and I knew she was fearfully busy herself."

"It's all very well for you, Miss Delmege-you're her secretary and work in her room, but *we* can't get at her unless we're sent for. I simply didn't know what to do about those surgical supplies for the Town Hospital this morning, and Miss Vivian never sent for me till past eleven o'clock. It simply wasted half my morning."

"She didn't have a minute; the telephone was going the whole time," said Miss Delmege quickly. "But yesterday, you know, when the D.G.V.O. wouldn't go, I thought she was going to be late at the station for that troop-train, and things were fairly desperate, so what d'you suppose I did?"

"Dashed into her room and got your head snapped off?" some one suggested languidly. "I shall never forget one day last week when *I* didn't know which way to *turn*, we were so busy, and I went in without being sent for, and Miss Vivian – "

"Oh yes, I remember," said Miss Delmege rapidly. She was a tall girl with eyeglasses and a superior manner. She did not remember Miss Marsh's irruption into her chief's sanctum with any particular clearness, but she was anxious to finish her own anecdote. "But as *I* was telling you," she hurried on, affecting to be unaware that Miss Marsh and her neighbour were exchanging glances, "when I saw that it was getting later every minute, and the D.G.V.O. seemed rooted to the spot, I simply went straight downstairs and rang up Miss Vivian on the telephone. Miss Cox was on telephone duty, and she was absolutely horrified. She said, 'You *don't* mean to say you're going to ring up Miss Vivian,' she said; and I said, 'Yes, I am. Yes, I am,' I said, and I did it. Miss Cox simply couldn't get over it."

Miss Delmege paused to laugh in solitary enjoyment of her story.

"'Who's there?' Miss Vivian said-you know what she's like when she's in a hurry. 'It's Miss Delmege,' I said. 'I thought you might want to know that the train will be in at eight o'clock, Miss Vivian, and it's half-past seven now.' She just said 'Thank you,' and rang off; but she must have told the D.G.V.O., because he came downstairs two minutes later. And she simply flung on her hat and dashed down into the car and to the station."

"And, after all, the train wasn't in till past ten, so she might just as well have stayed to put her hat on straight," said Miss Henderson boldly. She had a reputation for being "downright" of which she was aware, and which she strenuously sought to maintain by occasionally making small oblique sallies at Miss Vivian's expense.

"I must say it was most awfully crooked. I noticed it myself," said a pretty little giggling girl whom the others always called Tony, because her surname was Anthony. "How killing," I thought; "there's Miss Vivian with her hat on quite crooked."

"Yes, wasn't it killing?"

"Simply killing. I thought the minute I saw her: How killing to see Miss Vivian with her hat on like that!"

"She looked perfectly killing hurrying down the platform," remarked Miss Marsh, with an air of originality. "She was carrying cigarettes for the men, and her hat got crookeder every minute. I was pining to tell her."

"Go on, Marshy! She'd have had your head off. Fancy Marsh stopping Miss Vivian in the middle of a troop-train to say her hat was on crooked!"

Every one laughed.

"I should think she'd be shot at dawn," suggested Tony. "That's the official penalty for making personal remarks to your C.O., I believe."

"You know," said Miss Delmege, in the tones whose refinement was always calculated to show up the unmodulated accents of her neighbours, "one day I absolutely did tell Miss Vivian when her hat was crooked. I said right out: 'Do excuse me, Miss Vivian, but your hat isn't quite straight.' She didn't mind a *bit*."

"I suppose she knows she always looks nice anyway," said Tony easily.

"I mean she didn't mind me telling her," explained Miss Delmege. "She's most awfully human, you know, really. That's what I like about Miss Vivian. She's so frightfully human."

"Yes, she *is* human," Miss Marsh agreed. "Awfully human."

Miss Delmege raised her eyebrows.

"Of course," she said, with quiet emphasis, "working in her room, as I do, I suppose I see quite another side of her – the *human* side, you know."

There was a silence. Nobody felt disposed to encourage Miss Vivian's secretary in her all-too-frequent recapitulations of the privileges which she enjoyed.

Presently another worker came in, looking inky and harassed.

"You're late tonight, Mrs. Potter, aren't you?" Tony asked her.

"Oh yes. It's those awful Belgians, you know. Wherever I put them, they're miserable, and write and ask to be taken away. There's a family now that I settled simply beautifully at Little Quester village only a month ago, and this afternoon the mother came in to say the air doesn't suit them at all – she has a consumptive son or something – and could they be moved to the seaside at once. So I told Miss Vivian, and she said I was to get them moved directly. At once – today, you know. Of course, it was perfectly absurd – they couldn't even get packed up – and I told her so; but she said, 'Oh, settle it all by telephone' – you know her way. 'But, Miss Vivian,' I said, 'really I don't see how it can be managed. I've got a most fearful amount of work,' I said. 'Well,' she said, 'if you can't get through it, Mrs. Potter, I must simply put some one else at the head of the department who *can*.' It's too bad, you know."

Mrs. Potter sank into the only unoccupied wicker arm-chair in the room, looking very much jaded indeed.

Tony said sympathetically:

"What a shame! Miss Vivian doesn't realize what an awful lot you do, I'm perfectly certain."

"Well, considering that every letter and every bit of work in the whole office passes through Miss Vivian's hands, that's absurd," said Miss Delmege sharply. "She knows exactly what each department has to do, but, of course, she's such a quick worker herself that she can't understand any one not being able to get through the same amount."

Mrs. Potter looked far from enchanted with the proffered explanation.

"It isn't that I can't get through the work," she said resentfully. "Of course I can get through the regular work all right. But I must say, I do think she's inconsiderate over these lightning touches of hers. What on earth was the sense of making those people move tonight, I should like to know?"

"Miss Vivian never will let the work get behindhand if she can help it," exclaimed Miss Marsh; and Miss Henderson at the same instant said, rather defiantly:

"Well, of course, Miss Vivian always puts the work before everything. She never spares herself, so I don't quite see why she should spare any of us."

"The fact is," said the small, cool voice of Miss Delmege, as usual contriving to filter through every other less refined sound, "she is extraordinarily tender-hearted. She can't bear to think any one is suffering when she could possibly help them; she'll simply go miles out of her way to do something for a wounded soldier or a Belgian refugee. I see that in her correspondence so much. You know – the letters she writes about quite little things, because some one or other wants her to. She'll take *endless* trouble."

"I know she's wonderful," said Mrs. Potter, looking remorseful.

She was a middle-aged woman with light wispy hair, always untidy, and wearing a permanent expression of fluster. She had only been at the Hostel a few weeks. "Isn't it nearly supper-time?" yawned Tony. "I want to go to bed."

"Tired, Tony?"

"Yes, awfully. I was on telephone duty last night, stamping the letters, and I didn't get off till nearly eleven."

"There must have been a lot of letters," said Miss Delmege, with the hint of scepticism which she always managed to infuse into her tones when speaking of other people's work.

"About a hundred and thirty odd, but they didn't come down till very late. Miss Vivian was still signing the last lot at ten o'clock."

"She must have been very late getting out to Plessing. It's all very well for us," remarked Miss Marsh instructively; "*we* finish work at about six or seven o'clock, and then just come across the road, and here we are. But poor Miss Vivian has about an hour's drive before she gets home at all."

"She's always at the office by ten every morning, too."

"She ought to have some one to help her," sighed Miss Delmege. "Of course, I'd do anything to take some of the work off her hands, and I think she knows it. I think she knows I'd do simply anything for her; but she really wants some one who could take her place when she has to be away, and sign the letters for her, and see people. That's what she really needs."

"Thank goodness, there's the supper bell," said Tony.

They trooped downstairs.

The house was the ordinary high, narrow building of a provincial town, and held an insufficiency of rooms for the number of people domiciled there. The girls slept three or four in a room; the Superintendent had a tiny bedroom, and a slightly larger sitting-room adjoining the large room on the ground floor where they congregated in the evenings and on Sundays, and the dining-room was in the basement.

Gas flared on to the white shining American-cloth covering the long table and on the wooden kitchen chairs. The windows were set high up in the walls, and gave a view of area railings and, at certain angles, of a piece of pavement.

One or two coloured lithographs hung on the walls.

There was a hideous sound of scraping as chairs were drawn back or pulled forwards over the uncarpeted boards.

"Sit next me, duck."

"All right. Come on, Tony; get the other side of Sprouts."

Miss Delmege, aloof and superior, received no invitation to place herself beside any one, and settled herself with genteel swishings of her skirt at the foot of the table.

The Superintendent sat at the head.

She was a small, delicate-looking Irish woman with an enthusiastic manner, who had married late in life, and been left a widow within two years of her marriage. She worked very hard, and it was her constant endeavour to maintain an atmosphere of perpetual brightness in the Hostel.

It was with this end in view that she invariably changed her blouse for a slightly cleaner one at suppertime, although all the girls were in uniform, and many of them still wearing a hat. But little Mrs. Bullivant always appeared in a rather pallid example of the dyer or cleaner's art, and said hopefully: "One of these days I must make a rule that all you girls dress for dinner. We shall find ourselves growing dreadfully uncivilized, I'm afraid, if we go on like this."

The Hostel liked Mrs. Bullivant, although she was a bad manager and could never keep a servant for long. She made no secret of the fact that she could not afford to be a voluntary worker.

Every Hostel in the district, and they were numerous owing to the recently-opened Munitions Factory near Questerham, had rapidly become, as it were, fish for Miss Vivian's net. Each and all were under her control, and the rivalry between the Questerham Hostel "for Miss Vivian's *own* workers" and those reserved for the munition-makers was an embittered one.

"What has every one been doing to-day?" Mrs. Bullivant asked cheerfully.

The inquiry was readily responded to.

The angle of Miss Vivian's hat, when she had gone down to meet the troop-train, was again the subject of comment, and Miss Delmege was again reminded of the story, which she told with quiet and undiminished enjoyment, of her erstwhile daring in approaching Miss Vivian upon the subject.

"Did you really?" said Mrs. Bullivant admiringly. "Of course, it's different for you, Miss Delmege, working in her room all day. You see so much more of her than any one else does."

Every one except the complacent Miss Delmege looked reproachfully at the little Superintendent. She was incapable of snubbing any one, but the Hostel thought her encouragement of Miss Delmege unnecessary in the extreme.

Mrs. Bullivant changed the conversation rather hurriedly.

"Who is on telephone duty tonight?" she inquired.

"I am, worse luck."

"Miss Plumtree? And your head is bad again, isn't it, dear?"

"Yes," said Miss Plumtree wearily.

She was a fair, round-faced girl of five or six and twenty who suffered from frequent sick headaches. She worked for longer hours than any one else, and had a reputation for "making muddles." It was popularly supposed that Miss Vivian "had a down on her," but the Hostel liked Miss Plumtree, and affectionately called her Greengage and Gooseberry-bush.

"Greengage got another headache?" Miss Marsh asked concernedly. "I can take your duty to-night, dear, quite well."

"Thanks awfully, Marsh; it's sweet of you, but I haven't got leave to change. You know last time, when Tony took duty for me, Miss Vivian asked why I wasn't there."

"I can say you're sick."

"Oh, I'm sure she wouldn't like it," said Miss Plumtree, looking nervous and undecided.

"I think you ought to be in bed, I must say," said Mrs. Bullivant uncertainly.

"She certainly doesn't look fit to sit at that awful telephone for two and a half hours; and there are heaps of letters to-night. I can answer for the Hospital Department, anyway," sighed Miss Henderson. "Marshy, you look pretty tired yourself. I can quite well take the telephone if you like. I'm not doing anything."

"I thought you were going to the cinema."

"I don't care. I can do that another night. I'm not a bit keen on pictures, really, and it's raining hard."

"Thanks most awfully, both of you," repeated Miss Plumtree, "but I really think I'd better go myself. You know what Miss Vivian is, if she thinks one's shirking, and I'm not at all in her good books at the moment, either. There was the most ghastly muddle about those returns last month, and I sent in the averages as wrong as they could be."

"That's nothing to do with your being unfit for telephone duty tonight," said Miss Delmege, with acid sweetness. "I think I can answer for it that Miss Vivian would be the first person to say you ought to let some one else take duty for you. I'd do it myself, only I really must get some letters written tonight. One never has a minute here. But I think I can answer for Miss Vivian."

In spite of the number of times that Miss Delmege expressed herself as ready to answer for Miss Vivian, no one had ever yet failed to be moved to exasperation by her pretensions.

"On the whole, Plumtree, you may be right not to risk it," said Miss Henderson freezingly, as she rose from the table.

"I'll manage all right," declared Miss Plumtree; but her round apple-blossom face was drawn with pain, and she stumbled up the dark stairs.

In the hall there was a hurried consultation between Miss Marsh and Miss Anthony.

"I say, Tony, old Gooseberry-bush isn't fit to stir. She ought to be tucked up in her bye-byes this minute. Shall I risk it, and go instead of her, leave or no leave?"

"I should think so, yes. What have things been like today?"

"Oh, fairly serene. I didn't see Miss Vivian this morning, myself, but nobody seems to have had their heads snapped off. There wasn't a fearful lot of work for her, either, because Miss Delmege came in quite early."

"Delmege makes me sick, the way she goes on! As though nobody else knew anything about Miss Vivian, and she was a sort of connecting-link between her and us. Didn't you hear her tonight? 'I think I can answer for Miss Vivian,'" mimicked Tony in an exaggerated falsetto. "I should jolly well like Miss Vivian to hear her one of these days. She'd appreciate being answered for like that by her secretary – I don't think!"

"I say, Marshy, can you keep a secret?"

"Rather!"

"Well, swear not to tell, and, mind, I'm speaking absolutely unofficially. I've no business to know it officially at all, because I only saw it on a telegram I sent for the Billeting Department. Miss Delmege is going to get her nose put out of joint with Miss V. Another secretary is coming."

"She's not! D'you mean Delmege has got the sack?"

"Oh, Lord, no! It's only somebody coming to help her, because there is so much work for one secretary. She's coming from Wales, and her name is Jones."

"I seem to have heard that name before."

They both giggled explosively; then made a simultaneous dash at the hall-door as Miss Plumtree, in hat and coat, came slowly out of the sitting-room.

"No, you don't, Plumtree! You're going straight up to bed, and I'll tell Miss Vivian you were ill. It'll be all right."

"You are a brick, Marsh."

"Nonsense! You'll do as much for me some day. Goodnight, dear."

Miss Marsh hurried out, and Miss Plumtree thankfully took the felt uniform hat off her aching head.

"Get into bed," directed Tony, "and take an aspirin."

"Haven't got one left, worse luck."

"I'll see if any one else has any. I believe Mrs. Potter has."

Tony hurried into the sitting-room. Mrs. Potter had no aspirin, but she hoisted herself out of her arm-chair and said she would go round to the chemist and get some.

She went out into the rain.

Tony borrowed a rubber hot-water bottle from Miss Henderson, and a kettle from somebody else, and went upstairs to boil some water, forgetting that she was tired and had meant to go to bed after supper.

Presently little Mrs. Bullivant came upstairs with a cup of tea and the aspirin, both of which she administered to the patient.

"You'll go to sleep after that, I expect," she said consolingly.

"I'll tell the girls to get into bed quietly," Tony whispered.

Miss Plumtree shared a room with Miss Delmege and Miss Henderson.

"I never do make any noise in the room that I am aware of," said Miss Delmege coldly; but she and her room-mate both crept upstairs soon after nine o'clock, lest their entrance later should awaken the sufferer, and they undressed with the gas turned as low as it would go, and in silence.

Padding softly in dressing-slippers to the bathroom later on, for the lukewarm water which was all that they could hope to get until the solitary gas-ring should have served the turn of numerous waiting kettles, they heard Miss Marsh returning from telephone duty, bolting the hall-door, and putting up the chain.

"You're back early," whispered Miss Henderson, coming halfway downstairs in her pink flannelette dressing-gown, her scanty fair hair screwed back into a tight plait.

"Wasn't much doing. Miss Vivian got off at half-past nine. Jolly good thing, too; she's been late every night this week."

"Was it all right about your taking duty?"

"Ab-solutely. Said she was glad Miss Plumtree had gone to bed, and asked if she had anything to take for her head."

"How awfully decent of her!"

"Wasn't it? It'll buck old Greengage up, too. She always thinks Miss Vivian has a down on her."

Miss Delmege leant over the banisters and said in a subdued but very complacent undertone:

"I thought Miss Vivian would be all right. I thought I could safely answer for her."

II

Plessing was also speaking of Miss Vivian that evening.

"Where is this to end, Miss Bruce? I ask you, where is it to end?" demanded Miss Vivian's mother.

Miss Bruce knew quite well that Lady Vivian was not asking her at all, in the sense of expecting to receive from her any suggestion of a term to that which in fact appeared to be interminable, so she only made a clicking sound of sympathy with her tongue and went on rapidly stamping postcards.

"I am not unpatriotic, though I do dislike Flagdays, and I was the first person to say that Char must go and do work somewhere – nurse in a hospital if she liked, or do censor's work at the War Office. Sir Piers said 'No' at first – you know he's old-fashioned in many ways – and then he said Char wasn't strong enough, and to a certain extent I agreed with him. But I put aside all that and absolutely encouraged her, as you know, to organize this Supply Depôt. But I must say, Miss Bruce, that I never expected the thing to grow to these dimensions. Of course, it may be a very splendid work – in fact, I'm sure it is, and every one says how proud I must be of such a wonderful daughter but *is* it all absolutely necessary?"

"Oh, Lady Vivian," said the secretary reproachfully. "Why, the very War Office itself knows the value of dear Charmian's work. They are always asking her to take on fresh branches."

"That's just what I am complaining of. Why should the Midland Supply Depôt do all these odd jobs? Hospital supplies are all very well, but when it comes to meeting all the troop-trains and supplying all the bandages, and being central Depôt for sphagnum moss, and all the rest of it – all I can say is, that it's beyond a joke."

Miss Bruce took instant advantage of her employer's infelicitous final *cliché* to remark austerely:

"Certainly one would never dream of looking upon it as a *joke*, Lady Vivian. I quite feel with you about the working so fearfully hard, and keeping these strange, irregular hours, but I'm convinced that it's perfectly unavoidable – perfectly unavoidable. Charmian owns herself that no one can possibly take her place at the Depôt, even for a day."

This striking testimony to the irreplacableness of her daughter appeared to leave Lady Vivian cold.

"I dare say," she said curtly. "Of course, she's got a gift for organization, and all she's done is perfectly marvellous, but I must say I wish she'd taken up nursing or something reasonable, like anybody else, when she could have had proper holidays and kept regular hours."

Miss Bruce gave the secretarial equivalent for laughing the suggestion to scorn.

"As though nursing wasn't something that *anyone* could do! Why, any ordinary girl can work in a hospital. But I should like to know what other woman could do Charmian's work. Why, if she left, the whole organization would break down in a week."

"Well," said the goaded Lady Vivian, "the war wouldn't go on any the longer if it did, I don't suppose – any more than it's going to end twenty-four hours sooner because Char has dinner at eleven o'clock every night and spends five pounds a day on postage stamps."

Miss Bruce looked hurt, as she went on applying halfpenny stamps to the postcards that formed an increasing mountain on the writing-table in front of her.

"I suppose you're working for her now?"

"I only wish I could do more," said the secretary fervently. "She gives me these odd jobs because I'm always imploring her to let me do some of the mechanical work that any one can manage, and spare her for other things. But, of course, no one can really do anything much to help her."

"I'm sorry to hear it, since she has a staff of thirty or forty people there. Pray, are they all being paid out of Red Cross funds for doing nothing at all?" inquired Lady Vivian satirically.

"Oh, of course they all do their bit. Routine work, as Charmian calls it. But she has to superintend everything – hold the whole thing together. She looks through every letter that leaves that office, and knows the workings of every single department, and they come and ask her about every little thing."

"Yes, they do. She enjoys that."

Lady Vivian's tone held nothing more than reflectiveness, but the little secretary reddened unbecomingly, and said in a strongly protesting voice:

"Of course, it's a very big responsibility, and she knows that it all rests on her."

"Well, well," said Lady Vivian soothingly. "No one is ever a prophet in his own country, and I suppose Char is no exception. Anyhow, she has a most devoted champion in you, Miss Bruce."

"It has nothing to do with any – any personal liking, Lady Vivian, I assure you," said the secretary, her voice trembling and her colour rising yet more. "I don't say it because it's her, but quite dispassionately. I hope that even if I knew nothing of Charmian's own personal attractiveness and – and kindness, I should still be able to see how wonderful her devotion and self-sacrifice are, and admire her extraordinary capacity for work. Speaking quite impersonally, you know."

Anything less impersonal than her secretary's impassioned utterances, it seemed to Lady Vivian, would have been hard to find, and she shrugged her shoulders very slightly.

"Well, Char certainly needs a champion, for she's making herself very unpopular in the county. All these people who ran their small organizations and war charities quite comfortably for the first six or eight months of the war naturally don't like the way everything has been snatched away and affiliated to this Central Depôt – "

"Official co-ordination is absolutely – "

"Yes, yes, I know; that's Char's *cri de bataille*. But there are ways and ways of doing things, and I must say that some of the things she's said and written, to perfectly well-meaning people who've been doing their best and giving endless time and trouble to the work, seem to me tactless to a degree."

"She says herself that anyone in her position is bound to give offence sometimes."

"Position fiddlesticks!" said Miss Vivian's parent briskly. "Why can't she behave like anybody else? She might be the War Office and the Admiralty rolled into one, to hear her talk sometimes. Of course, people who've known her ever since she was a little scrap in short petticoats aren't going to stand it. Why, she won't even be thirty till next month! – though, I must say, she might be sixty from the way she talks. But then she always was like that, from the time she was five years old. It worried poor Sir Piers dreadfully when he wanted to show her how to manage her hoop, and she insisted on arguing with him about the law of gravitation instead. I suppose I ought to have smacked her then."

Miss Bruce choked, but any protest at the thought of the obviously regretted opportunity lost by Lady Vivian for the perpetration of the suggested outrage remained unuttered.

The sharp sound of the telephone-bell cut across the air.

Miss Bruce attempted to rise, but was hampered by the paraphernalia of her clerical work, and Lady Vivian said:

"Sir Piers will answer it. He is in the hall, and you know he likes telephoning, because then he can think he isn't really getting as deaf as he sometimes thinks he is."

Miss Bruce, respecting this rather complicated reason, sat down again, and Lady Vivian remarked dispassionately:

"Of course it's Char, probably to say she can't come back to dinner. You know, I specially asked her to get back early tonight because John Trevellyan is dining with us. There! what did I tell you?"

They listened to the one-sided conversation.

"Sir Piers Vivian speaking. What's that? Oh, you'll put me through to Miss Vivian. Very well; I'll hold on. That you, my dear? Your mother and I are most anxious you should be back for dinner – Trevellyan is coming… We'll put off dinner for half an hour if that would help you… But, my dear, he'll be very much disappointed not to see you, and it really seems a pity, when the poor chap is just

back … he'll be so disappointed… Yes, yes, I see. I'm sure it's very good of you, but couldn't they manage without you just for once?.. Very well, my dear, I'll tell him… It's really very good of you, my poor dear child…"

Lady Vivian stamped her foot noiselessly as her husband's voice reached her; but when Sir Piers had put back the receiver and come slowly into the room, she greeted him with a smile.

"Was that Char? To say she couldn't be back in time for dinner tonight, I suppose?"

Quick-tempered, sharp-tongued woman as she was, Joanna Vivian's voice was always gentle in speaking to her white-haired husband, twenty years her senior.

"The poor child seems to think she can't be spared. Very good of her, but isn't she overdoing it just a little – eh, Joanna? Aren't they working her rather too hard?"

"It's mostly her own doing, Piers. She's head of this show, you know. I suppose that's why she thinks she can't leave it."

"The whole thing would go to pieces without her," thrust in the secretary, in the sudden falsetto with which she always impressed upon Sir Piers her recollection of his increasing deafness. "She supervises the whole organization, and if she's away there isn't any one to take her place."

"But they don't want to work after six o'clock," said the old man, looking puzzled. "Ten to six – that's office hours. She oughtn't to want to be there after the place is shut up."

"Oh, there's no 'close time' for the Midland Supply Depôt," said Miss Bruce, looking superior. "They may have orders to meet a train at any hour of the day or night, and the telephone often goes on ringing till eleven or twelve o'clock, I believe. And Charmian *never* leaves till everyone else has finished work."

Sir Piers looked bewildered, and his wife said quietly:

"I'm thinking of suggesting to Char that she should sleep at the Hostel they opened last year, instead of coming back here at impossible hours every night. It really is very hard on the servants, and, besides, I don't think we shall have enough petrol this winter for it to be possible. She could always come home for week-ends, and on the whole it would be less tiring for her to be altogether in Questerham during the week."

"But is it necessary?" inquired Sir Piers piteously.

His wife shrugged her shoulders.

"If she'd been a boy she would be in the trenches now. I suppose we must let her do what she can, even though she's a girl. Other parents have to make greater sacrifices than ours, Piers."

"Yes, yes, to be sure," he assented. "And it's very good of the dear child to give up all her time as she does. But I'm sorry she can't be back for dinner tonight, Joanna – very sorry. Poor Trevellyan will be disappointed."

"Yes," said Lady Vivian, and refrained from adding, "I hope he will be."

She had once hoped that Char and John Trevellyan might marry; but Char's easy contempt for her cousin's Philistinism was only equalled by his unconcealed regret that so much prettiness should be allied to such alarming quick-wittedness.

"Miss Bruce," she said, turning to her secretary, "I hope you will dine with us tonight. Captain Trevellyan is bringing over a brother-officer and his wife, and we shall be an odd number, since there is no hope of Char."

"What's that, my dear?" said Sir Piers. "I hadn't heard that. Who is Trevellyan bringing with him?"

"Major Willoughby and his wife. She used to be Lesbia Carroll, and I knew her years ago – before she married. I shall be rather curious to see her again."

"Are they motoring?"

"Yes, in Johnnie's new car."

The dressing-gong reverberated through the hall.

"They will very likely be late," remarked Lady Vivian, "but I must go and dress at once."

She went across the long room, a tall, upright woman with a beautiful figure, obviously better-looking at fifty-two than she could ever have been as a girl. Her hair was thick and dark, with more than a sprinkling of white, and two deep vertical lines ran from the corners of her nostrils to her rather square chin. But her blue eyes were brilliant, and deeply set under a forehead that was singularly unlined.

As Joanna Trevellyan, ungainly and devoid of beauty, she had been far too outspoken to conceal her native cleverness, and had never known popularity. As the wife of Sir Piers Vivian, the only man who had ever wished to marry her, and mistress of Plessing, her wit and shrewdness became her, and as the years went on she was even accounted good-looking.

Miss Bruce, returning to her postcards after a hurried toilet, thought that Lady Vivian looked very handsome as she came down in her black-lace evening-dress with a high amethyst comb in her hair.

"Have the evening papers come?" was her first inquiry.

"I think Sir Piers had them taken upstairs."

Lady Vivian frowned quickly.

"How I wish he wouldn't do that! The casualty lists depress him so dreadfully. We must try and keep off the subject of the war at dinner, Miss Bruce, or he won't sleep all night."

Miss Bruce said nothing, but she pursed up her lips in a manner which meant that a possibly wakeful night for Sir Piers Vivian ought not to be weighed in the balance against the universal tendency to discuss the war. That the subject was never willingly embarked upon at Plessing, except by Char Vivian, seemed to her a confession of weakness.

Lady Vivian was perfectly aware of her secretary's point of view, and profoundly indifferent to it. She even took a rather malicious pleasure in saying lightly and yet very decidedly:

"John is safe enough, but I don't know what Lesbia Willoughby may choose to talk about. As a girl she had the voice of a pea-hen, and never stopped chattering. So, if you can, please head her off war-talk at dinner."

Her employer's trenchant simile as to Mrs. Willoughby's vocal powers could not but recur to Miss Bruce with a sense of its extreme appositeness when the guests entered.

Mrs. Willoughby billowed into the room. There was really no other word to describe that rapid, undulating, and yet buoyant advance. Tall as Lady Vivian was, and by no means slightly built, she seemed to Miss Bruce to be at once physically overpowered and almost eclipsed in the strident and voluminous greeting of her old acquaintance.

"My *dear* Joanna! After *all* these years … how too, too delightful to see you so absolutely and utterly unchanged! *Dear* old days! And now we meet in the midst of all these horrors!"

The exaggeration of the look she cast round her seemed to include the drawing-room and its occupants alike in the pleasing category.

"I'm sorry you don't like my Louis XV.," said Lady Vivian flippantly, and turned to greet the rest of the party.

Her cousin John, who looked, even in khaki, a great deal less than his thirty years, smiled at her with steady blue eyes that bore a great resemblance to her own, and wrung her hand, saying, "This is very jolly, Cousin Joanna," in a pleasant, rather serious voice.

"And here," said Lesbia Willoughby piercingly – "here is my Lewis."

Her Lewis advanced, looking not unnaturally sheepish, and Trevellyan said conscientiously:

"May I introduce Major Willoughby to you? My cousin, Lady Vivian."

"You *never* told me, Joanna, that this dear thing was a cousin of yours," shrieked Lesbia reproachfully. "I think it quite disgustingly mean of you, considering that we were girls together."

"In the days when we were girls together," said Lady Vivian ruthlessly, "he wasn't born or thought of. Have they announced dinner, Miss Bruce?"

"This moment."

"Then, do let's go in at once. You must all be very hungry after such a drive."

"I *never* eat nowadays – simply never," proclaimed Mrs. Willoughby as she crossed the hall on Sir Piers's arm. "I think it most unpatriotic. We're all going to be starving quite soon, and the poor are living on simply nothing a day as it is. And one can't *bear* to touch food while our poor dear boys in the trenches and in Germany are literally starving."

Mrs. Willoughby's voice was of a very piercing quality, and she emphasized her words by rolling round a pair of enormous and over-prominent light grey eyes as she spoke. Seated at the dinner-table, she contrived to present an appearance that almost amounted to impropriety, by merely putting a large bare elbow on the table and flinging back an elaborately dressed head set on a short neck and opulent shoulders, thickly dredged with heavily scented powder. Miss Bruce, on the opposite side of the table, eyed her with distrustful disapproval. It did not appear to her likely that she would be able to carry out Lady Vivian's injunction that war-talk was to be avoided.

"Isn't Char at home?" Trevellyan inquired of his hostess.

"She's at Questerham, and the car has gone in for her, but she telephoned to say that she couldn't get back till late. It's this Supply Depôt of hers; she's giving every minute of the day and night to it," said Lady Vivian, characteristically allowing no tinge of disapproval or disappointment to colour her voice.

"Is that your delightful girl?" inquired Lesbia across the table, and pronouncing the word as though it rhymed with "curl." "Isn't it too wonderful to see all these young things devoting themselves? As for me, I'm literally run off my feet in town. I'm having a holiday here – just to see something of Lewis, who's stationed in these parts indefinitely, poor dear lamb – because my doctor said I was *killing* myself – literally killing myself."

"Really?" said Lady Vivian placidly. "I hope you're going to be here for some time. Are you staying – "

"Only till I'm fit to move. That *moment*," said Lesbia impressively, "that very moment, I must simply dash back to London. My dear, I can't tell you what it's like. I never have an instant to call my own – have I, Lewis?"

"Rather not," said Lewis hastily.

He was a small, brown-faced man, who had won his D.S.O. in South Africa, and whom no doctor could now be induced to pass for service abroad.

"Perhaps some charitable organization takes up your time," suggested Sir Piers to Mrs. Willoughby. His deafness seldom permitted him to follow more than the drift of general conversation. "Now, Charmian, our daughter, has taken up a most creditable piece of work – most creditable – although, perhaps, she is a little inclined to overdo things just at present."

"No one can *possibly* overdo war-work," Mrs. Willoughby told him trenchantly. "Nothing that we women of England can do could ever be enough for the brave fathers, and husbands, and brothers, and sweethearts, who are risking their lives for us out there. Think of what the trenches are – just *hell*, as a boy said to me the other day – hell let loose!"

Sir Piers looked very much distressed, and his white head began to shake. He had only heard part of Lesbia's discourse. Trevellyan's boyishly fair face flushed scarlet. He had fought in Belgium, and in Flanders, until a bullet lodged in his knee, and now his next Medical Board might send him to France to rejoin his regiment. But it would have occurred to no one to suppose that the poignant description quoted by Mrs. Willoughby had ever emanated from Trevellyan.

From the head of the table Joanna Vivian said smoothly:

"You've made us all very curious as to your work, Lesbia. Do tell us what you do."

Mrs. Willoughby gave her high, strident laugh.

"Everything," was her modest claim. "Absolutely everything, my dear. Packing for prisoners three mornings a week, canteen work twice, and every Flag-day going. I can't tell you the *hours* I've stood outside Claridge's carrying a tray and seeing insolent wretches walk past me without buying.

I've been *so* exhausted by the end of the day I've had to have an hour's massage before I could *drag* myself out to patronize some Red Cross entertainment. But, of course, my real work is the Colonial officers. Dear, sweet things! I take them *all* over London!"

"By Jove, though, do you really!" said Trevellyan admiringly.

Only a certain naïve quality of sincerity in his simplicities, Joanna reflected, saved Johnnie from appearing absolutely stupid. But, her husband excepted, she was secretly fonder and more proud of Johnnie than of any one in the world, and she did not make the mistake of supposing that his easy chivalry denoted any admiration for the screeching monologue of which Lesbia was delivering herself.

"I make a specialty of South Africans," she proclaimed to the table. "They're so delightfully rural – even more so than the dear Australians, though I have a passion for Anzacs. But I take *some* of them *some*where every day – just show them London, you know. Not one of them knows a soul in England, and of course London is a perfect marvel to them. I simply live in taxis, rushing the dear things round."

"Ah, we had a couple of Canadians here last week – very fine fellows," said Sir Piers. "Been in hospital in Questerham, both of them, and Char thought they'd enjoy a day out in the country. She manages everything, you know – even the hospitals. The doctors all come to her for everything, I believe. She tells me that all the hospitals round about are affiliated to her office."

"Ranks as a sort of Universal Provider – what?" said Trevellyan.

"Yes; isn't it wonderful?" said Miss Bruce eagerly; and availed herself to the full of the double opportunity for obeying, even at the eleventh hour, Lady Vivian's injunctions as to the trend of the conversation, and at the same time making the utmost of her favourite topic, Char Vivian's work at the Midland Supply Depôt.

For the rest of dinner, in spite of several strenuous efforts from Lesbia Willoughby, nothing else was discussed.

III

Ten o'clock in the morning, and little Miss Anthony flew up Questerham High Street on her bicycle, conscious that her hurried choice of a winter hat had not only been highly unsatisfactory, owing to the extreme haste with which she had conducted it, but was also about to make her late in arriving at the office. She threw an anxious glance at the Post-Office clock, and redoubled her speed at the sight of it, though no amount of haste would get her to the Midland Supply Depôt Headquarters under another seven minutes.

But she sped gallantly across the tram-lines and in and out of the slow-moving stream of market-carts, and arrived breathless at the offices in Pollard Street just as Miss Vivian's small open car drew up at the door.

"Damn!" automatically muttered Tony under her breath, and seeing nothing for it but to put her bicycle into a corner and efface herself respectfully to let Miss Vivian pass.

But Miss Vivian, generally so unaware of any member of her staff as not even to exchange a "Good-morning," elected suddenly to reverse this policy.

"Good-morning," she said graciously. "We're both late today, I'm afraid."

The clerk in the hall, who drew an ominous line in her book under the last signature as the clock struck ten, laughed in a rather awestruck way and said, "Oh, Miss Vivian!"

"I think you must let Miss Anthony off today," said Char Vivian, smiling. "As I am late myself, you know."

She went slowly upstairs, just hearing an ecstatic gasp from the two girls in the hall.

She was vaguely aware that those few gracious words and tone of easy kindness had secured for her little Miss Anthony's unswerving loyalty and admiration.

Girls of that age and class *were* like that, she told herself with a slight smile.

The smile died away into an expression of weary concentration as she entered her private office.

"Good-morning, Miss Delmege. Is there much in today?"

"Good-morning, Miss Vivian," said Miss Delmege, elegantly rising from her knees, in which lowly position she had been trying to coax the small, indifferent fire to burn. "I am afraid there are a lot of letters."

Miss Vivian sighed and moved to the looking-glass to take off her hat. She also was in uniform, and wore several curly stripes of gold braid on her coat collar and cuffs to denote her exalted position.

Even when she had taken off her ugly and unbecoming felt hat and run her fingers through the thick, straight masses of reddish hair that hung over her forehead, Char Vivian contrived to look at least ten years older than her actual twenty-nine years.

She was very good-looking, with delicate aquiline features, a pale, fair skin powdered all over with tiny freckles, and beautiful deep-set brown eyes surrounded by unexpectedly dark lashes.

It was something quite indefinable in the lines round her pretty, decided mouth, and under her eyes that gave the odd impression of maturity. Her manner had always, from the age of five, been one of extreme self-security.

"Now, then, for the letters," she said, as she sat down before the great roll-top desk. Char Vivian's voice was deep and rather drawling in character, and she used it with great effect.

"Miss Delmege, did you put these heavenly lilies-of-the-valley here? You really mustn't – but they're too lovely. Thank you so much. They *do* make such a difference!"

She sniffed delicately, and Miss Delmege smiled with gratification. The lilies-of-the-valley had really cost more than she could afford, but those few words of appreciation sent her to her small table in the corner with a sense of great satisfaction.

Char tore open one envelope after another with murmured comments. She frequently affected an absence of mind denoted by fragmentary monologue.

"Transport wanted for fifty men going from the King Street Hospital today – and they want more sphagnum moss. There ought to be five hundred bags ready to go out this morning… I wonder if they've seen to it. Inquiries – inquiries – inquiries! When are people ever going to stop asking me questions? Hospital accounts – that can go to the Finance Department… The Stores bill – to the Commissariat. What's all this – transport for that man in Hospital? I shall have to see to that myself. Look me up the War Office letters as to Petrol regulations, Miss Delmege, will you? Belgians again; they're very difficult to satisfy, poor people. Madame Van Damm – I don't remember them – I must send for the files. Here are some more of those tiresome muddles of Mrs. Potter's. I told her all about those people on Monday. Why on earth hasn't it been arranged? Nothing is *ever* done unless one sees to it oneself. The Medical Officer of Health wants to see me. What are my appointments for today, Miss Delmege?"

"The man from the building contractors is coming at twelve, and the Matron from the Overseas Hospital at three, and then there's that Miss Jones who's coming to work here. And it's the day you generally go to the Convalescent Homes."

"I see. Ring up the Medical Officer and say I can give him a quarter of an hour at two o'clock. I can't really spare that," sighed Miss Vivian, "but I suppose I shall have to see him."

Miss Delmege knew that, whatever else her chief might depute to her, she never relinquished to any one a business interview, so she merely looked concerned and said: "I'm afraid it will be a great rush for you."

Miss Vivian gave her subtle, infrequent smile, and began the customary series of morning interviews which were supposed to settle the perplexities of each department for the day. That this supposition was not invariably correct was made manifest on this occasion by the demeanour of the unhappy Miss Plumtree, when her chief had made short work of a series of difficulties haltingly and stammeringly put before her in sentences made involved and awkward through sheer nervousness.

"Let me have those Requisition Averages by twelve o'clock, please – and I think that completes you, Miss Plumtree?" concluded Miss Vivian rapidly.

"Thank you, Miss Vivian. Is – are – do these averages include the first day of the month as well as the last?"

"Yes, of course. And remember to give the gross weight of the supplies as well as the net weight."

"And I – I divide by the number of days in each month. Yes, I see," faltered Miss Plumtree, seeing nothing at all except the brisk tapping of Miss Vivian's long, slight fingers on the blotting-paper in front of her, denoting with sufficient clearness that in her opinion the interview had reached its conclusion some moments since.

"It's for August, September, and October, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Miss Vivian's tone implied that the question was unnecessary in the extreme, as indeed it was, since Miss Plumtree had been engaged in conducting the quarterly Requisition Averages to an unsuccessful issue for the past eighteen months.

"Thank you."

Miss Plumtree faltered from the room, with the consciousness of past failures heavy upon her.

Char did not like an attitude of sycophantic dejection, and Miss Plumtree may therefore have been responsible for the very modified enthusiasm with which the next applicant's request for an afternoon off duty was received.

"It rather depends, Miss Cox," said Char, her drawl slightly emphasized. "I thought the work in that department was behindhand?"

"Not now, Miss Vivian," said the grey-haired spinster anxiously. "Mrs. Tweedale and I cleared it all up last night; I'm quite up to date."

"Well, I'm afraid there's a good deal for you here," said Char rather cruelly, handing her a bundle of papers. "However, please take your afternoon off if you want to, and if you feel that the work can be left."

"Thank you, Miss Vivian."

Miss Cox, who was meek and deferential, left the room, the pleasurable anticipation of a holiday quite gone from her tired face.

Char looked at the neatly coiled twist of Miss Delmege's sand-coloured hair.

"Was I a wet-blanket?" she inquired whimsically. "Really, the way these people are always asking for leave! I wonder what would happen if *I* took an afternoon off. How long is it since I had a holiday, Miss Delmege?"

"You've not had one since I've been here," declared her secretary, "and that's nearly a year."

"Exactly. But then I can't understand putting anything before the work, personally."

Char returned to her pile of letters and Miss Delmege went on with her writing in a glow of admiration, and resolved that, after all, she would come and work on Sunday morning, although nominally no one came to the office on Sundays except the clerks who took turns for telephone duty, and Miss Vivian herself in the afternoon.

The morning was a busy one. Telephone calls seemed incessant, and the operator downstairs was unintelligent and twice cut Miss Vivian off in the midst of an important trunk call.

"Hallo! hallo! are you there? Miss Henderson, what the *dickens* are you doing? You've cut me off again."

Char banged the receiver down impatiently with one hand, while the other continued to make rapid calculations on a large sheet of foolscap. She possessed and exercised to the full the faculty of following two or more trains of thought at the same moment.

Presently she rang her bell sharply, the customary signal that she was ready to dictate her letters.

Each department was supposed to possess its own typewriter and to make use of it, and the services of the shorthand-typist, who was amongst the few paid workers in the office, were exclusively reserved for Miss Vivian.

The work entailed was no sinecure, the more especially since Miss Collins was obdurate as to her time-limit of ten to five-thirty. But it was never difficult for Miss Vivian to commandeer volunteer typists from the departments when her enormous correspondence appeared to her to require it.

"Good-morning, Miss Vivian."

"Good-morning," said Char curtly, unsmiling. Miss Collins always gave her a sense of irritation. She was so jauntily competent, so consciously independent of the office.

Shorthand-typists could always find work in the big Questerham manufacturing works, and Miss Collins had only been secured for the Supply Depôt with difficulty. She received two pounds ten shillings a week, never worked overtime, and had every Saturday afternoon off. Miss Vivian had once, in the early days of Miss Collins, suggested that she might like to wear uniform, and had received a smiling and unqualified negative, coupled with a candid statement of Miss Collins's views as to the undesirability of combining clerical work with the exhausting activities required in meeting and feeding the troop-trains.

"I should be sorry to think that any of *my* staff would shirk the little additional work which brings them into contact with the men who have risked their lives for England," had been the freezing *finale* with which the dialogue had been brought to a close by the disgusted Miss Vivian.

Since then her stenographer had continued to frequent her presence in transparent and *décolletées* blouses, with short skirts swinging above silk-stockinged ankles and suede shoes. Even her red, fluffy curls were unnecessarily decked with half a dozen sparkling prongs. But she was very quick and intelligent, and Miss Vivian had perforce to accept her impudent prettiness and complete independence.

Char never, after the first week, made the mistake of supposing that Miss Collins would ever fall under that spell of personal magnetism to which the rest of the office was in more or less complete subjection, and she consequently wasted no smile upon her morning greeting.

"This is to the Director-General of Voluntary Organizations, and please do not use abbreviations. Kindly head the letter in full."

Miss Collins's small manicured hand ran easily over her notebook, leaving a trail of cabalistic signs behind it.

Char leant back, half-closing her eyes in a way which served to emphasize the tired shadows beneath them, and proceeded with her fluent, unhampered dictation.

She was seldom at a loss for a word, and had a positive gift for the production of rhetorical periods which never failed to impress Miss Delmege, still writing at her corner table. In spite of frequent interruptions, Char proceeded unconcernedly enough, until at the eleventh entry of a messenger she broke into an impatient exclamation:

"Miss Delmege, please deal for me!"

Miss Delmege swept forward, annihilating the unhappy bearer of the card with a look of deep reproach, as she took it from her.

"I'm afraid it's some one to see you," she faltered deprecatingly.

Char frowned and took the card impatiently, and Miss Delmege stood by looking nervous, as she invariably did when her chief appeared annoyed. Char Vivian, however, although frequently impatient, was not a passionate woman, and however much she might give rein to her tongue, seldom lost control of her temper, for the simple reason that she never lost sight of herself or of her own effect upon her surroundings.

Her face cleared as she read the card.

"Please ask Captain Trevellyan to come up here."

The messenger disappeared thankfully and Miss Delmege retreated relievedly to her corner.

Char leant back again in her capacious chair, a sheaf of papers, at which she only cast an occasional glance, before her.

She was not at all averse to being found in this attitude, which she judged to be most typical of herself and her work, and for an instant after Captain Trevellyan's booted tread had paused upon the threshold she affected unawareness of his presence and did not raise her eyes.

"… I am in receipt of your letter of even date, and would inform you in reply…"

"Oh, John! So you've come for an official inspection?"

"Since you're never to be seen any other way," he returned, laughing, and grasping her hand.

"I ought to send you away; we're in the midst of a heavy day's work."

"Don't you think you might call a – a sort of truce of God, for the moment, and tell me something about this office of yours? I'm much impressed by all I hear."

Miss Delmege, judging from her chief's smile that this suggestion was approved of, brought forward a chair, and acknowledged Captain Trevellyan's protesting thanks with a genteel bend at the waist and a small, tight smile.

The amenities of social intercourse were always strictly held in check by the limits of officialdom by Miss Vivian's staff, with the exception of the unregenerate Miss Collins, who tucked her pencil into her belt, uncrossed her knees, and rose from her chair.

"I'm afraid I'm interrupting you," said Trevellyan politely, addressing his remark to Char, but casting a quite unnecessary look at the now smiling Miss Collins.

"I've nearly finished," said Char.

"Shall I come back later?" suggested Miss Collins gaily, swinging a turquoise heart from the end of an outrageously long gold chain.

"I will ring if I want you," said Miss Vivian in tones eminently calculated to allay any assumption of indispensability on the part of her employée.

With a freezing eye she watched Miss Collins swing jauntily from the room, her red head cocked at an angle that enabled her to throw a farewell dimple in the direction of Captain Trevellyan.

"Is that one of your helpers?" was the rather infelicitously worded inquiry which John was inspired to put as Miss Collins disappeared.

"The office stenographer," said Char curtly.

"Why don't you have poor old Miss Bruce up here? She's longing to help you – couldn't talk about anything but this place last night."

"Dear old Brucey!" said Char, with more languor than enthusiasm in her voice. "But there are one or two reasons why it wouldn't quite do to have her in the office; we have to be desperately official here, you know. Besides, it's such a comfort to get back in the evenings to some one who doesn't look upon me as the Director of the Midland Supply Depôt! I sometimes feel I'm turning into an organization instead of a human being."

Miss Vivian, needless to say, had never felt anything of the sort, but there was something rather gallantly pathetic in the half-laughing turn of the phrase, and it sufficed for a weighty addition to Miss Delmege's treasured collections of "Glimpses into Miss Vivian's Real Self."

She received yet another such a few minutes later, when Captain Trevellyan began to urge Miss Vivian to come out with him in the new car waiting at the office door.

"Do! I'll take you anywhere you want to go, and I really do want you to see how beautifully she runs. Come and lunch somewhere?"

"I'd love it," declared Char wistfully, "but I really mustn't, Johnnie. There's so much to do."

Either the cousinly diminutive, or something unusually unofficial in Miss Vivian's regretful voice, caused the discreet Miss Delmege to rise and glide quietly from the room.

"Miss Vivian really is most awfully human," she declared to a fellow-worker whom she met upon the stairs. "What do you think I've left her doing?"

The fellow-worker leant comfortably against the wall, balancing a wire basket full of official-looking documents on her hip, and said interestedly:

"Do tell me."

"Refusing to go for a motor ride with a cousin of hers, an officer, who wants her to see his new car. And she awfully wants to go – I could see that – it's only the work that's keeping her."

"I must say she *is* splendid!"

"Yes, isn't she?"

"I think I saw the cousin, waiting downstairs about a quarter of an hour ago. Is he a Staff Officer, very tall and large, and awfully fair?"

"Yes. Rather nice-looking, isn't he?"

"Quite, and I do like them to be tall. He's got a nice voice, too. You know – I mean his voice is nice."

"Yes; he has got a nice voice, hasn't he? I noticed it myself. Of course, that awful Miss Collins made eyes at him like anything. She was taking letters when he came in."

"Rotten little minx! I wonder if he's engaged to Miss Vivian?"

"I couldn't say," primly returned Miss Delmege, with a sudden access of discretion, implying a reticence which in point of fact she was not in a position to exercise.

She did not go upstairs again until Captain Trevellyan and his motor-car had safely negotiated the corner of Pollard Street, unaccompanied by Miss Vivian.

This Miss Delmege ascertained from a ground-floor window, and then returned to her corner table, wearing an expression of compassionate admiration that Char was perfectly able to interpret.

"I'm afraid that was an interruption to our morning's work," she said kindly. "What time is it?"

"Nearly one o'clock, Miss Vivian."

"Oh, good heavens! Just bring me the Belgian files, will you? and then you'd better go to lunch."

"I can quite well go later," said Miss Delmege eagerly. "I – I thought perhaps you'd be lunching out today."

"No," drawled Char decisively; "in spite of the inducement of the new car, I shan't leave the office till I have to go to the Convalescent Homes. I'll send for some lunch when I want it."

Miss Delmege went to her own lunch with a vexed soul.

"I do wish one could get Miss Vivian to eat something," she murmured distractedly to her neighbour. "I know exactly what it'll be, you know. She'll sit there writing, writing, writing, and forget all about food, and then it'll be two o'clock, and she has to see the M.O. of Health and somebody else coming at three – and she'll have had no lunch at all."

"Doesn't she ever go out to lunch?"

"Only on slack days, and you know how often we get *them*, especially now that the work is simply increasing by leaps and bounds every day."

"Couldn't you take her some sandwiches?" asked Mrs. Bullivant from the head of the table. "I could cut some in a minute."

"Oh, no, thank you. She wouldn't like it. She hates a fuss," Miss Delmege declared decidedly.

The refusal, with its attendant tag of explanatory ingratitude, was received in matter-of-fact silence by every one.

Miss Vivian's hatred of a fuss, as interpreted by her secretary, merely redounded to her credit in the eyes of the Hostel.

They ate indifferent pressed beef and tepid milk-pudding, and those who could afford it – for the most part accompanied by those who could not afford it – supplemented the meal with coffee and cakes devoured in haste at the High Street confectioner's, and then hurried back to the office.

It was nearly three o'clock before Miss Delmege ventured to address her chief.

"I'm afraid you haven't had lunch. Do let me send for something."

Miss Vivian looked up, flushed and tired.

"Dear me, yes. It's much later than I thought. Send out one of the Scouts for a couple of buns and a piece of chocolate."

"Oh!" protested Miss Delmege, as she invariably did on receipt of this menu.

Char Vivian did not raise her eyes from the letter she was rapidly inditing, and her secretary retreated to give the order.

Miss Plumtree, counting on her fingers and looking acutely distressed, sat at a small table in the hall from whence the Scout was dispatched.

"Is that *all* she's having for lunch?" she paused in her pursuit of ever-elusive averages to inquire in awestruck tones.

"Yes, and she's been simply worked to death this morning. And it's nearly three now, and she won't get back to dinner till long after ten o'clock, probably; but she never will have more for lunch, when she's very busy, than just buns and a penny piece of chocolate. That," said Miss Delmege, with a sort of desperate admiration – "that is just Miss Vivian all over!"

IV

Char looked wearily at the clock.

The buns and chocolate hastily disposed of in the intervals of work during the afternoon had only served to spoil the successive cups of strong tea, which formed her only indulgence, brought to her at five o'clock. They were guiltless of sustaining qualities. It was not yet seven, and she never ordered the car until nine o'clock or later.

Her eyes dropped to the diminished, but still formidable, pile of papers on the table. She was excessively tired, and she knew that the papers before her could be dealt with in the morning.

But it was characteristic of Char Vivian that she did not make up her mind then and there to order the car round and arrive at Plessing in time for eight o'clock dinner and early bed, much as she needed both. To do so would have jarred with her own and her staff's conception of her self-sacrificing, untiring energy, her devotion to an immense and indispensable task, just as surely as would a trivial, easy interruption to the day's work in the shape of John Trevellyan and his new car, or an hour consecrated to fresh air and luncheon. Necessity compelled Char to work twelve hours a day some two evenings a week, in order that the amount undertaken by the Midland Supply Depôt might be duly accomplished; but on the remaining days, when work was comparatively light and over early in the evening, she did not choose to spoil the picture which she carried always in her mind's eye of the indefatigable and overtaxed Director of the Midland Supply Depôt.

So Miss Vivian applied herself wearily, once again, to her inspection of those Army Forms which were to be sent up to the London office on the morrow.

Presently the door opened and Miss Delmege came in with her hat and coat on, prepared to go.

"I thought I'd just tell you," she said hesitatingly, "that Miss Jones has come – the new clerk. Shall I take her over to the Hostel?"

Char sighed wearily.

"Oh, I suppose I'd better see her. If it isn't tonight, it will have to be tomorrow. I'd rather get it over. Send her up."

"Oh, Miss Vivian!"

"Never mind. I shan't be long."

Miss Vivian smiled resignedly.

As a matter of fact, she was rather relieved at the prospect of an interview to break the monotony of the evening. The Army Forms in question had failed to repay inspection, in the sense of presenting any glaring errors for which the Medical Officer in charge of the Hospital could have been brought sharply to book.

She unconsciously strewed the papers on the desk into a rather more elaborate confusion in front of her, and began to open the inkpot, although she had no further writing to do. The pen was poised between her fingers when Miss Delmege noiselessly opened the door, and shut it again on the entry of Miss Jones.

Char put down her pen, raised her heavy-lidded eyes, and said in her deep, effective voice:

"Good-evening, Miss – er – Jones."

She almost always hesitated and drawled for an instant before pronouncing the name of any member of her staff. The trick was purely instinctive, and indicated both her own overcharged memory and the insignificance of the unit, among many, whom she was addressing.

"How do you do?" said Miss Jones.

Her voice possessed the indefinable and quite unmistakable intonation of good-breeding, and Char instantly observed that she did not wind up her brief greeting with Miss Vivian's name.

She looked at her with an instant's surprise. Miss Jones was short and squarely built, looked about twenty-seven, and was not pretty. But she had a fine pair of grey eyes in her little colourless face, and her slim, ungloved hands, which Char immediately noticed, were unusually beautiful.

"You are from Wales, I believe?" said Char, unexpectedly even to herself. She made a point of avoiding personalities with the staff. But there appeared to be something which required explanation in Miss Jones.

"Yes. My father is the Dean of Penally. I have had some secretarial experience with him during the last five years."

Evidently Miss Jones wished to keep to the matter in hand. Char was rather amused, reflecting on the fluttered gratification which Miss Delmege or Miss Henderson would have displayed at any directing of the conversation into more personal channels.

"I see," she said, smiling a little. "Now, I wonder what you call secretarial experience?"

"My father naturally has a great deal of correspondence," returned Miss Jones, without any answering smile on her small, serious face. "I have been his only secretary for four years. Since the war he has employed some one else for most of his letters, so as to set me free for other work."

"Yes; I understood from your letter that you had been working in a hospital."

"As clerk."

"Excellent. That will be most useful experience here. You know this office controls the hospitals in Questerham and round about. I want you to work in this room with my secretary, and learn her work, so that she can use you as her second."

"I will do my best."

"I'm sure of that," said Miss Vivian, redoubling her charm of manner, and eyeing the impassive Miss Jones narrowly. "I hope you'll be happy here and like the work. You must always let me know if there's anything you don't like. I think you're billeted just across the road, at our Questerham Hostel?"

"Yes."

"I'll send some one to show you the way."

"Thank you; I know where it is. I left my luggage there before coming here."

"The new workers generally come to report to me before doing anything else," said Char, indefinably vexed at having failed to obtain the expected smile of gratitude.

"However, if you know the way I must let you go now, so as to be in time for supper. Good-night, Miss Jones."

"Good-night," responded Miss Jones placidly, and closed the door noiselessly behind her. Her movements were very quiet in spite of her solid build, and she moved lightly enough, but the Hostel perceived a certain irony, nevertheless, in the fact that Miss Jones's parents had bestowed upon her the baptismal name of Grace.

The appeal thus made to a rather elementary sense of humour resulted in Miss Jones holding the solitary privilege of being the only person in the Hostel who was almost invariably called by her Christian name. She enjoyed from the first a strange sort of popularity, nominally due to the fact that "you never knew what she was going to say next"; in reality owing to a curious quality of absolute sincerity which was best translated by her surroundings as "originality." Another manifestation of it, less easily defined, was the complete good faith which she placed in all those with whom she came into contact. Only a decided tincture of Welsh shrewdness preserved her from the absolute credulity of the simpleton.

Almost the first question put to Miss Jones was that favourite test one of the enthusiastic Tony, "And what do you think of Miss Vivian?"

"I think," said Miss Jones thoughtfully, "that she is a reincarnation of Queen Elizabeth."

There was a rather stunned silence in the Hostel sitting-room.

Reincarnation was not a word which had ever sounded there before, and it carried with it a subtle suggestion of impropriety to several listeners. Nor was any one at the moment sufficiently

au courant with the Virgin Queen's leading characteristics to feel certain whether the comparison instituted was meant to be complimentary or insulting in the extreme.

Miss Delmege for once voiced the popular feeling by ejaculating coldly.

"That's rather a strange thing to say, surely!"

"Why? Hasn't it ever struck anybody before? I should have thought it so obvious. Why, even to look at, you know – that sandy colouring, and the way she holds her head: just as though there ought to be a ruff behind it."

"Oh, you mean to look at," said Miss Marsh, the general tension considerably relaxed as the trend of the conversation shifted from that dreaded line of abstract discussion whither the indiscreet Miss Jones had appeared, for one horrid moment, to conduct it.

"Had Queen Elizabeth got freckles? I really don't know much about her, except that they found a thousand dresses in her wardrobe when she died," said Tony, voicing, as it happened, the solitary fact concerning the Sovereign under discussion which any one present was able to remember, as outcome of each one's varying form of a solid English education.

"Her power of administration and personal magnetism, you know," explained Miss Jones.

"Oh, of course she's perfectly wonderful," Miss Delmege exclaimed, sure of her ground. "You'll see that more and more, working in her room."

Whether such increased perception was indeed the result of Miss Jones's activities in the room of the Director might remain open to question.

Char found her very quick, exceedingly accurate, and more conscientious than the quick-witted can generally boast of being. She remained entirely self-possessed under praise, blame, or indifference, and Miss Vivian was half-unconsciously irritated at this tacit assumption of an independence more significant and no less secure than that of Miss Collins the typist.

"Gracie, I wish you'd tell me what you *really* think of Miss Vivian," her room-mate demanded one night as they were undressing together.

Screens were chastely placed round each bed, and it was a matter of some surprise to Miss Marsh that her companion so frequently neglected these modest adjuncts to privacy, and often took off her stockings, or folded up even more intimate garments, under the full light, such as it was, of the gas-jet in the middle of the room.

Miss Jones was extremely orderly, and always folded her clothes with scrupulous tidiness. She rolled up a pair of black stockings with exactitude before answering.

"I think she's rather interesting."

"Good Lord, Gracie! if Delmege could only hear you! *Rather interesting!* The Director of the Sacred Supply Depôt! You really are the limit, the things you say, you know."

"Well, that's all I *do* think. She is very capable, and a fairly good organizer, but I don't think her as marvellous as you or Miss Delmege or Tony do. In fact, I think you're all rather *détraquées* about Miss Vivian."

Miss Marsh was as well aware as anybody in the Hostel that the insertion of a foreign word into a British discourse is the height of affectation and of bad form; and although she could not believe Grace to be at all an affected person, she felt it due to her own nationality to assume a very disapproving expression and to allow an interval of at least three seconds to elapse before she continued the conversation.

"Don't you *like* her?"

"I'm not sure."

"I suppose you don't know her well enough to say yet?" Miss Marsh suggested.

"Do you think that has anything to do with it? I often like people without knowing them a bit," said Grace cordially; "and certainly I quite often dislike them thoroughly, even if I've only heard them speak once, or perhaps not at all."

"Then you judge by appearances, which is a great mistake."

Miss Jones said in a thoughtful manner that she didn't think it was *that* exactly, and supposed regretfully that Miss Marsh would think she was "swanking" if she explained that she considered herself a sound and rapid judge of character.

"Oh, what a sweet camisole, dear!"

"My petticoat-bodice," said Grace matter-of-factly. "I'm glad you like it. The ribbon always takes a long time to put in, but it does look rather nice. I like mauve better than pink or blue."

There came a knock at the door.

"Come in!" called Miss Jones, bare-armed and bare-legged in the middle of the room.

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed the scandalized Miss Marsh, in the midst of a shuffling process by which her clothes were removed under the nightgown which hung round her with empty flapping sleeves.

"It's only me," said Miss Plumtree in melancholy tones, walking in. "I'm just waiting for my kettle to boil."

The gas-ring was on the landing just outside the bedroom door.

Grace looked up,

"How pretty you look with your hair down!" she said admiringly.

"Me? Rubbish!" exclaimed Miss Plumtree, colouring with astonishment and embarrassment, but with a much livelier note in her voice.

"Your hair is so nice," explained Grace, gazing at the soft brown mop of curls.

"Oh, lovely, of course."

Miss Plumtree wriggled with confusion, and had no mind to betray how much the unaffected little bit of praise had restored her spirits. But she sat down on Grace's bed in her pink cotton kimono in a distinctly more cheerful frame of mind than that in which she had entered the room.

"Are you in the blues, Gooseberry-bush?" was the sympathetic inquiry of Miss Marsh.

"Well, I am, rather. It's Miss Vivian, you know. She can be awfully down on one when she likes."

"I know; you always do seem to get on the wrong side of her. Grace will sympathize; she's just been abusing her like a pickpocket," said Miss Marsh, apparently believing herself to be speaking the truth.

Miss Jones raised her eyebrows rather protestingly, but said nothing. She supposed that in an atmosphere of adulation such as that which appeared to her to surround Miss Vivian, even such negative criticism as was implied in an absence of comment might be regarded seriously enough.

"But even if one doesn't like her *awfully* much, she has a sort of fascination, don't you think?" said Miss Plumtree eagerly. "I always feel like a – a sort of bird with a sort of snake, you know."

The modification which she wished to put into this trenchant comparison was successfully conveyed by the qualifying "sort of," an adverb distinctly in favour at the Hostel.

"I know what you mean exactly, dear," Miss Marsh assured her. "And of course she does work one fearfully hard. I sometimes think I shall have to leave."

"She works every bit as hard as we do – harder. I suppose you'll admit that, Gracie?"

"Oh yes."

"Don't go on like that," protested Miss Marsh, presumably with reference to some indefinable quality detected by her in these two simple monosyllables.

"I only meant," said Grace Jones diffidently, "that it might really be better if she didn't do quite so much. If she could have her luncheon regularly, for instance."

"My dear, she simply hasn't the time."

"She could make it."

"The work comes before everything with Miss Vivian. I mean, really it does," said Miss Plumtree solemnly.

Miss Jones finished off the end of a thick plait of dark hair with a neat blue bow, and said nothing.

"I suppose even you'll admit that, Gracie?"

Grace gave a sudden little laugh, and said in the midst of it:

"Really, I'm not sure."

"My dear girl, what on earth do you mean?"

"I think I mean that I don't feel certain Miss Vivian would work quite so hard or keep such very strenuous hours if she lived on a desert island, for instance."

The other two exchanged glances.

"Dotty, isn't she?"

"Mad as a hatter, I should imagine."

"Perhaps you'll explain what sort of war-work people *do* on desert islands?"

"That isn't what I mean, quite," Gracie explained. "My idea is that perhaps Miss Vivian does *partly* work so very hard because there are so many people looking on. If she was on a desert isle she might – find time for luncheon."

"My dear girl, you're ab-solutely raving, in my opinion," said Miss Plumtree with simple directness. "There! That's my kettle."

She dashed out of the room, as a hissing sound betrayed that her kettle had overboiled on to the gas-ring, as it invariably did.

After the rescue had been effected she looked in again and said:

"I suppose you wouldn't let me come in for some of your tea tomorrow morning, would you, dear? Ours is absolutely finished, and that ass Henderson forgot to get any more."

"Rather," said Miss Marsh cordially. "This extraordinary girl doesn't take any, so you can have the second cup."

"Thanks most awfully. I can do without most things, but I can't do without my tea. Good-night, girls."

It was an accepted fact all through the Hostel that, although one could do without most things, one could not do without one's tea.

This requirement was of an elastic nature, and might extend from early morning to a late return from meeting a troop-train at night. Grace every morning refused the urgent offer of her room-mate to "make her a cup of nice hot tea," and watched, with a sort of interested surprise, while Miss Marsh got out of bed a quarter of an hour earlier than was necessary in order to fill and boil a small kettle and make herself three and sometimes four successive cups of very strong tea. She was always willing to share this refreshment with any one, but every room in the Hostel had its own appliances for tea-making, and made daily and ample use of them.

Although Miss Jones did not drink tea, she often washed up the cup and saucer and the little teapot. Miss Marsh suffered from a chronic inability to arrive at the office punctually, although breakfast was at nine o'clock, and she had only to walk across the road. But she frequently said, in a very agitated way, as she rose from the breakfast-table:

"Excuse me. I simply must go and do my washing. It's Monday, and I've left it to the last moment."

This meant that the counting and dispatching of Miss Marsh's weekly bundle for the laundry would occupy all her energies until the desperate moment when she would look at her wrist-watch, exclaim in a mechanical sort of way, "Oh, damn! I shall never do it!" and dash out of the house and across Pollard Street as the clock struck ten.

"I'll wash the tea-things for you."

"Oh, no, dear! Why *should* you? I can quite well do them to-night."

But Grace knew that when her room-mate came in tired at seven o'clock that evening she might very likely want "a good hot cup of tea" then and there, and she accordingly took the little heap of crockery into the bathroom. Standing over the tiny basin jutting out of the wall, Miss Jones, with

her sleeves carefully rolled up over a very solid pair of forearms, washed and dried each piece with orderly deliberation, and replaced them in the corner of Miss Marsh's cupboard.

"I'm afraid you'll be late. Can't I help you?"

"Thanks, dear, but I dare say I can just scramble through. What about *your* washing?"

"Oh, I did all that on Saturday night," said Grace, indicating a respectable brown-paper parcel tied up with string and with an orderly list pinned on to the outside.

"You're a marvel!" sighed Miss Marsh. "Don't wait, Gracie."

Miss Jones went downstairs and out into Pollard Street. She moved rather well, and had never been known to swing her arms as she walked. Her face was very serious. She often thought how kind it was of the others not to call her a prig, since her methodical habits and innate neatness appeared to be in such startling contrast to the standards prevailing at the Hostel. She had never been sent to school, or seen much of other girls, and the universal liking shown to her by her fellow-workers gave her almost daily a fresh sense of pleased surprise.

Arrived at the office, she signed her name at the door, and proceeded upstairs to Miss Vivian's room.

Miss Vivian came in, chilled from her motor drive and with that rather pinky tinge on her aquiline nose which generally forecasted a troubled morning. The observant Miss Jones regarded this law very matter-of-factly as an example of cause and effect. She felt sure that Miss Vivian only felt at her best when conscious of looking her best, and hoped very much that the winter would not be a very cold one. It was obvious that Miss Vivian suffered from defective circulation, which her sedentary existence had not improved.

But it was Miss Delmege who solicitously suggested fetching a foot-warmer from the Supplies Department, and who placed it tenderly at the disposal of Miss Vivian.

After that the atmosphere lightened, and it was with comparative equanimity that Miss Vivian received the announcement that a lady had called and desired to see her.

"Please send up her name and her business on a slip of paper, and you can tell the clerk in the outer hall that I won't have those slipshod messages sent up," was the reception of the emissary.

"Yes, Miss Vivian."

Miss Delmege gathered up a sheaf of papers from her table and glided from the room. Grace, whose powers of mental detachment permitted her to concentrate on whatever she was doing without regard to her surroundings, went on with her work.

The interviews conducted by Miss Vivian seldom interested her in the least.

That this one was, however, destined to become an exception, struck her forcibly when the sudden sound of a piercing feminine voice on the stairs came rapidly nearer.

"… as for my name on a slip of paper, I never heard such nonsensical red-tape in my life. Why, Char's mother and I were girls together!"

Although every one in the office was aware that Miss Vivian's baptismal name was Charmian, and that this was invariably shortened by her acquaintances to Char, it came as a shock even to the imperturbable Miss Jones to hear this more or less sacred monosyllable ringing up the stairs to Miss Vivian's very table.

"Who on earth – " began Char indignantly, when the door flew open before her caller, who exclaimed shrilly and affectionately on the threshold:

"My dear child, you can't possibly know who I am, but my name is Willoughby, and when I was Lesbia Carroll your mother and I were girls together. I had to come in and take a peep at you!"

There was a sort of rustling pounce, and Grace became aware that the outraged Miss Vivian had been audibly and overpoweringly kissed in the presence of a giggling Scout and of her own junior secretary.

V

Mrs. Willoughby, in Miss Vivian's private office, reversed all rules of official precedent.

"Sit down again, my dear child – sit down!" she cried cordially, at the same time establishing herself close to the table. "I hear you're doing wonderful work for all these dear people – Belgians and the dear Tommies and every one – and I felt I simply *had* to come in and hear all about it. Also, I want to propound a tiny little scheme of my own which I think will appeal to you. Or have you heard about it already from that precious boy John, with whom, I may tell you, I'm simply *madly* in love? I'm always threatening to elope with him!"

"I'm afraid," said Char, disregarding her visitor's pleasantry, "that I can really hardly undertake anything more. We are very much understaffed as it is, and the War Office is always – "

"I can turn the *whole* War Office round my little finger, my dear," declared Mrs. Willoughby. "There's the dearest lad there, a sort of under-secretary, who's absolutely devoted to me, and tells me all sorts of official tit-bits before any one else hears a word about them. I can get anything I want through him, so you needn't worry about the War Office. In fact, to tell you rather a shocking little secret, I can get what I want out of most of these big official places – just a little tiny manipulation of the wires, you know. [*Cherchez la femme*– though I oughtn't to say such things to a girl like you, ought I?"]

Char looked at Mrs. Willoughby's large, heavily powdered face, at her enormous top-heavy hat and over-ample figure, and said nothing.

But no silence, however subtly charged with uncomplimentary meanings, could stem Mrs. Willoughby's piercing eloquence.

"This is what I want to do, and I'm told at the camp here that it would be simply invaluable. I want to get up a Canteen for the troops here, and for all those dear things on leave."

"There are several Y.M.C.A. Huts already."

"My dear! I know it. But I want to do this all on my little own, and have quite different rules and regulations. My Lewis, who's been in the Army for over fifteen years, poor angel, tells me that they all – from the Colonel downwards – think it would be the greatest boon on earth, to have a *lady* at the head of things, you know."

"My time is too much taken up; it would be quite out of the question," said Char simply.

"Darling child! *Do* you suppose I meant you – a ridiculously young thing like you? Of course, it would have to be a married woman, with a certain regimental position, so to speak. And my Lewis is second in command, as you know, so that naturally his wife… You see, the Colonel's wife is an absolute dear, but an invalid – more or less, and no more *savoir faire* than a kitten. A perfect little provincial, between ourselves. Whereas, of course, I know this sort of job inside out and upside down – literally, my dear. The *hours* I've toiled in town!"

"But I'm afraid in that case you oughtn't to leave – "

"I must! I'm compelled to! It's *too* cruel, but the doctor simply won't answer for the consequences if I go back to London in my present state. But work I *must*. One would go quite, quite mad if one wasn't working – thinking about it all, you know."

"Major Willoughby is – er – in England, isn't he?"

"Thank God, yes!" exclaimed Lesbia, with a fervour that would have startled her husband considerably. "My heart bleeds for these poor wives and mothers. I simply thank God upon my knees that I have no son! When one thinks of it all – England's life-blood – "

Char did not share her mother's objection to eloquence expended upon the subject of the war, but she cut crisply enough into this *exaltée* outpouring.

"One is extremely thankful to do what little one can," she said, half-unconsciously throwing an appraising glance at the files and papers that were littered in profusion all over the table.

"Indeed one is!" cried Lesbia, just as fervently as before. "Work is the only thing. My dear, this war is killing me – simply killing me!"

Miss Vivian was not apparently prompted to any expression of regret at the announcement.

"As I said to Lewis the other day, I must work or go quite mad. And now this Canteen scheme seems to be calling out to me, and go I must. We've got a building – that big hall just at the bottom of the street here – and I'm insisting upon having a regular opening day – so much better to start these things with a flourish, you know – and the regimental band, and hoisting the Union Jack, and everything. And what I want you to do is this."

Lesbia paused at last to take breath, and Char immediately said:

"I'm afraid I'm so fearfully busy today that I haven't one moment, but if you'd like my secretary to – "

"Not your secretary, but your *entire* staff, and your attractive self. I want you *all* down there to help!"

"Quite impossible," said Char. "I wonder, Mrs. Willoughby, if you have any idea of the scale on which this Depôt is run?"

"*Every* idea," declared Lesbia recklessly. "I'm told everywhere that all the girls in Questerham are helping you, and that's exactly why I've come. I want girls to make my Canteen attractive – all the prettiest ones you have."

"I'm afraid my staff was not selected with a view to – er – personal attractions," said Miss Vivian, in a voice which would have created havoc amongst her staff in its ironical chilliness.

"Nonsense, my dear Char! I met the sweetest thing on the stairs – a perfect gem of a creature with Titian-coloured hair. Not in that hideous uniform, either."

Miss Vivian could not but recognize the description of her typist.

"I don't quite understand," she said. "Do you want helpers on your opening day, or regularly?"

"Quite regularly – from five to eleven or thereabouts every evening. I shall be there myself, of course, to supervise the whole thing, and I've got half a dozen dear things to help me: but what I want is *girls*, who'll run about and play barmaid and wash up, you know."

"Couldn't my mother spare Miss Bruce sometimes?"

"*Is* Miss Bruce a young and lively girl?" inquired Mrs. Willoughby, not without reason. "Besides, I need dozens of them."

"Yes, I see," said Char languidly. She was tired of Mrs. Willoughby, and it was with positive relief that she heard her telephone-bell ring sharply.

There was a certain satisfaction in leaning back in her chair and calling, "Miss – er – Jones!"

Miss Jones moved quietly to answer the insistent bell.

"I'm afraid this rather breaks into our consultation," said Char, deftly making her opportunity, "but may I write to you and let you know what I can manage?"

"I shall pop in again and commandeer all these delightful young creatures of yours. I'm marvellous at recruiting, my dear; every man I met out of khaki I always attacked in the early days. White feathers, you know, and everything of that sort. I had no mercy on them. One lad I absolutely dragged by main force to the recruiting office, though he said he couldn't leave his wife and babies. But, as I told him, I'd had to let my Lewis go – he was on the East Coast then – and was *proud* to do my bit for England. I dare say the wretch got out of it afterwards, because they wouldn't let me come in with him while he was actually being sworn, or whatever it is. Such red-tape!"

Char paid small attention to these reminiscences of Lesbia's past activities.

"What is it, Miss Jones?"

"The D.G.V.O. is here."

"The Director-General of Voluntary Organizations," said Miss Vivian, carelessly tossing off the imposing syllables, with the corner of her eye, as it were, fixed upon Mrs. Willoughby. "In that case, I'm afraid I must ask you to forgive me."

"I must fly," said Lesbia in a sudden shriek, ignoring her dismissal with great skill. "Some of those boys from the camp are lunching with me, and they'll never forgive me if I'm late."

"Ask the Director-General of Voluntary Organizations to come up, Miss Jones," drawled Char. "And show Mrs. Willoughby the way downstairs."

"Good-bye, you sweet thing!" cried Lesbia gaily, agitating a tightly gloved white-kid hand. "I shall pop in again in a day or two, and you must let me help you. I adore Belgians – positively adore them, and can do anything I like with them."

Mrs. Willoughby's enthusiasm was still audible during her rustling progress down the stairs.

Char paid full attention to her interview with the opportunely arrived Director-General of Voluntary Organizations, because she wished him to think her a most official and business-like woman, entirely capable of accomplishing all that she had undertaken; but when the dignitary had departed she gave serious consideration to the scheme so lightly propounded by Mrs. Willoughby.

The visit of this enthusiast had ruffled her more than she would have owned to herself, and it was almost instinctively that she strove to readjust the disturbed balance of her own sense of competence and self-devotion by waving aside all Miss Delmege's proposals of lunch.

"I'm afraid I haven't got time for anything of that sort today. I've had a most interrupted morning. No, Miss Delmege, thank you, not even a bun. You'd better go to your own lunch now."

"I'm not in any hurry, Miss Vivian."

"It's one o'clock," Miss Vivian pointed out, quite aware that her secretary would now seek her cold mutton and milk-pudding with an absolute sense of guilt, as of one indulging in a Sybaritic orgy while her chief held aloof in austere abstention.

Miss Delmege, in fact, looked very unhappy, and said in low tones to her colleague at the other end of the room: "Miss Jones, if you care to go to lunch first, I'll take my time off between two and half-past instead, at the second table."

The second table for lunch was never a popular institution, the mutton and the milk-pudding having lost what charms they ever possessed, and, moreover, the time allowed being abridged by almost half an hour. Miss Delmege, in virtue of her seniority and of her own excessive sense of superiority, always arranged that Grace should take the second luncheon-hour, and Miss Jones looked surprised.

"Do you mind, because really I don't care when I go?"

"I'd *rather* you went first," repeated Miss Delmege unhappily.

"Thank you very much. I'm very hungry, and if you really don't mind, I shall be delighted to go now," said Grace cheerfully, in an undertone that nevertheless penetrated to Miss Vivian's annoyed perceptions.

It was evident that Miss Jones had no qualms as to enjoying a substantial lunch, however long her over-worked employer might elect to fast, and the conviction was perhaps responsible for the sharpness with which Char exclaimed: "For Heaven's sake don't chatter in the corner like that! You're driving me perfectly mad – a day when one simply doesn't know which way to *turn*."

Miss Delmege sank into her chair, looking more overwhelmed than ever, and Grace said gently, "I'm sorry, Miss Vivian," disregarding or not understanding Miss Delmege's signal that apologies were out of place in Miss Vivian's office.

Char drew pen and ink towards her, purely *pour la forme*, and began to make mechanical designs on the blotting-paper, while her mind turned over and over the question of Mrs. Willoughby's proposed canteen.

Char thought that her staff's time was fully employed already, as indeed it was, and had no wish to arouse any possible accusation of overworking. At the same time, she had hitherto succeeded in taking over the management of almost every war organization in Questerham and the district, and was by no means minded to allow a new Canteen, on a large scale, to spring into life under no better auspices than those of Mrs. Willoughby.

If she allowed her staff to go down to the Canteen in instalments, Char decided it would have to be definitely understood that the organization of the Canteen was entirely in the hands of the Midland Supply Depôt. She surmised shrewdly that such details of practical requirements as a boiler, tea-urns, kitchen utensils, and the like, had not yet crossed the sanguine line of vision of Mrs. Willoughby. It would be easy enough for Char to assume command when she alone could supply all such needs at a minimum of expenditure and trouble. The staff, she decided, should be sent down in shifts of five or six at a time, five nights a week.

Then, Char reflected considerately, no one could have more than one night in the week, whereas she herself would always put in an appearance, even if only for a few minutes. It would encourage her staff, and would also show Mrs. Willoughby quite plainly the sort of position held by the Director of the Midland Supply Depôt.

That afternoon she sent for Miss Collins and dictated a short letter to Mrs. Willoughby, in which she declared, in the third person singular, that the Director of the Midland Supply Depôt had considered the proposed scheme for the opening of a Canteen in Pollard Street, and was prepared to help with the practical management of it. She would also supply six voluntary workers between the hours of 7 and 11 P.M. for every night in the week, Saturday excepted. As she took down these official statements, Miss Collins's light eyebrows mounted almost into the roots of her red hair with surprise and disapproval.

Char, being observant, saw these symptoms of astonishment, as she was meant to do, but few thoughts were further from her mind than that of consulting the views of her stenographer on any subject. She even took a certain amount of satisfaction in dictating a rather imperiously worded document, which informed each department in the office that those workers who lived in Questerham would be required to report for duty one night a week for emergency work (7 to 11 P.M.) at the new Canteen which would shortly be opened in Pollard Street under the direction of Miss Vivian and Mrs. Willoughby. Followed a list of names, with a corresponding day of the week attached to each group of six.

"Cut a stencil and roll off six copies for each department and two or three extra ones for filing," commanded Miss Vivian. "You can add at the end: '(Signed) Director of the Midland Supply Depôt.'"

"Yes, Miss Vivian."

Miss Collins went away with her eyebrows still erect.

The new field of enterprise was loudly discussed by the staff, as they took the usual half-hour's break in the afternoon at tea-time.

"Isn't Miss Vivian wonderful?" said Tony excitedly. "She'd take on *anything*, I do believe."

"And make a success of it, too!"

"Yes, rather."

Hardly any one grumbled at the extra four hours of hard work coming at the end of the day, and there was a general feeling of disapproval when Mrs. Bullivant at the Hostel said timidly: "If you're to be down there at seven, it'll be rather difficult to arrange about supper. Cook won't like having to get a meal ready for half-past six, and, besides, you'll be so hungry by eleven o'clock."

"I'm afraid we can't think of that, Mrs. Bullivant," observed Miss Delmege severely. "Not when we remember that Miss Vivian practically *never* gets her supper till long after ten every night, and she doesn't get much lunch, either. In fact, sometimes she simply won't touch anything at all in the middle of the day."

And Mrs. Bullivant looked very much rebuked, and said that she must see what she could do. "Anyhow, it won't be just yet awhile," she exclaimed with Irish optimism.

"Things move very quickly with Miss Vivian."

"I think they mean the Canteen to open some time in December," said Grace. "That's not so very far off."

"Time does fly," sighed Miss Plumtree, wishing that the Monthly Averages were divided from one another by a longer space of time.

"Never mind, Sunday is all the nearer."

Sunday was the day most looked forward to by the whole Hostel, although an element of uncertainty was added to the enjoyment of it by the knowledge that the arrival of a troop-train might bring orders to any or every member of the staff to report for duty at the station at half an hour's notice.

One or two of the girls were able to go out of Questerham home, or to their friends, for the week-end, but the majority remained in the Hostel. Mrs. Bullivant tried to make the day "bright and homey" at the cost of pathetic exertions to herself, for Sunday was her hardest day of work.

A certain *laissez-aller* marked the day from its earliest beginnings.

Almost every one came down to breakfast in bedroom slippers, even though fully dressed.

"A girl here – before you came, Gracie," Miss Marsh told her room-mate, "used to come down in a kimono and sort of boudoir-cap arrangement. But I must say nobody liked it – just like a greasy foreigner, she was. All the sleeves loose, you know, so that you could see right up her arms. Myself, I don't call that awfully nice – not at the breakfast-table."

"It would be very cold to do that now," said Grace, shivering. She disliked the cold very much, and the Hostel was not warmed.

"Yes, wouldn't it? It's a comfort to get into one's own clothes again and out of uniform, isn't it, dear? That's what I like about Sundays – dainty clothes again," said Miss Marsh, fiercely pulling a comb backwards through her hair so as to make it look fluffy.

"I like you in uniform, though," said Miss Jones, who had received several shocks on first beholding the Sunday garbs known to the Hostel as "plain clothes."

"Very sweet of you to say that, dear. You always look nice yourself, only your plain clothes are too like your uniform – just a white blouse and dark skirt you wear, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid it's all I've got," said Grace apologetically; and Miss Marsh at once thought that perhaps poor little Gracie couldn't afford many things, and said warmly:

"But white blouses are awfully nice, dear, and *crêpe de Chine* always looks so *good*."

Then she thrust her stockinged feet into her red slippers and shuffled across the room. "How lucky you are! You never have to back-comb your hair, do you?"

"I never do back-comb it, because it's so bad for it," said Grace seriously. She had a book open on the dressing-table in front of her, but was characteristically quite as much interested in Miss Marsh's conversation as in her own reading.

"'Daniel Deronda'?" said Miss Marsh, looking over her. "Never heard of him. How fond you are of reading, Gracie! I love it myself, but I don't ever have time for it here."

The plea being one which never fails to rouse the scorn of every book-lover, Grace remained silent. Her solitary extravagance was the maximum subscription to the Questerham library.

"There's the bell," said Miss Marsh; "I must come up and make my bed afterwards. Thank goodness, there's no hurry today."

They went down together, Miss Marsh's heelless slippers clapping behind her on every step.

In the sitting-room after breakfast the girls clustered round the tiny smoking fire.

"It's going to rain all day. How beastly!" said Tony. "Who's going to church?"

"I shall probably go to evensong," remarked Miss Delmege, upon which several people at once decided that they would risk the weather and go to the eleven o'clock service.

There was only one church in Questerham which the Hostel thought it fashionable to attend.

The day was spent in more or less desultory lounging over the fire. Miss Delmege wrote a number of letters and Tony darned stockings. Grace Jones read "Daniel Deronda" to herself.

Lunch was protracted, and Mrs. Bullivant, to mark the day, exerted herself and made some rather smoked coffee, which she brought to the sitting-room triumphantly.

"Isn't there going to be any music this afternoon?" she inquired.

Every one declared that music was the very thing for such an afternoon, but no one appeared very willing to provide it.

"Do sing, somebody," implored Miss Henderson. "Plumtree?"

Miss Plumtree had a beautiful deep voice, utterly untrained and consequently unspoilt. She stood up willingly enough and sang all the songs that she was asked for. The taste of the Hostel was definite in songs. "A Perfect Day" and "The Rosary" were listened to in the absolute silence of appreciation, and then some one asked for a selection from the latest musical comedy.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.