

**THE END OF THE  
HOUSE  
OF ALARD**

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*“We only know that the last sad squires ride slowly towards the sea,  
And a new people takes the land....”*

—G. K. CHESTERTON.

## ***PART I***

### **CONSTER MANOR**

#### **§ 1**

There are Alards buried in Winchelsea church—they lie in the south aisle on their altar tombs, with lions at their feet. At least one of them went to the Crusades and lies there cross-legged—the first Gervase Alard, Admiral of the Cinque Ports and Bailiff of Winchelsea, a man of mighty stature.

Those were the days just after the Great Storm, when the sea swallowed up the first parish of St. Thomas à Becket, and King Edward laid out a new town on the hoke above Bukenie. The Alards then were powerful on the marsh, rivals of De Icklesham and fighters of the Abbot of Fécamps. They were ship-owners, too, and sent out to sea *St. Peter*, *Nostre Dame* and *La Nave Dieu*. Stephen Alard held half a knight's fee in the manors of Stonelink, Broomhill and Coghurst, while William Alard lost thirty sailors, thirty sergeants-at-arms, and anchors and ropes, in Gascony.

In the fifteenth century the family had begun to dwindle—its power was passing into the hands of the Oxenbridges, who, when the heiress of the main line married an Oxenbridge, adopted the Alard arms, the lion within a border charged with scallop shells. Thus the trunk ended, but a branch of the William Alards had settled early in the sixteenth century at

Conster Manor, near the village of Leasan, about eight miles from Winchelsea. Their shield was argent, three bars gules, on a canton azure a leopard's head or.

Peter Alard re-built Conster in Queen Elizabeth's day, making it what it is now, a stone house with three hipped gables and a huge red sprawl of roof. It stands on the hill between Brede Eye and Horns Cross, looking down into the valley of the river Tillingham, with Doucegrove Farm, Glasseye Farm and Starvecrow Farm standing against the woods beyond.

The Alards became baronets under Charles the First, for the Stephen Alard of that day was a gentleman of the bedchamber, and melted down the Alard plate in the King's lost cause. Cromwell deprived the family of their lands, but they came back at the Restoration, slightly Frenchified and intermarried with the Papist. They were nearly in trouble again when Dutch William was King, for Gervase Alard, a son in orders, became a non-juror and was expelled from the family living of Leasan, though a charge of sedition brought against him collapsed from lack of substance.

Hitherto, though ancient and honourable, the Alards had never been rich, but during the eighteenth century, successful dealings with the East India Company brought them wealth. It was then that they began to buy land. They were no longer content to look across the stream at Doucegrove, Glasseye and Starvecrow, in the hands of yeomen, but one by one these farms must needs become part of their estate. They also bought all the fine woodlands of the Furnace, the farms of Winterland and Ellenwhorne at the Ewhurst end of the Tillingham valley, and Barline, Float and Dinglesden on the

marshes towards Rye. They were now big landowners, but their land-hunger was still unsatisfied—Sir William, the Victorian baronet, bought grazings as far away as Stonelink, so that when his son John succeeded him the Alards of Conster owned most of the land between Rye and Ewhurst, the Kent Ditch and the Brede river.

John Alard was about thirty years old when he began to reign. He had spent most of his grown-up life in London—the London of gas and crinolines, Disraeli and Nellie Farren, Tattersalls and Caves of Harmony. He had passed for a buck in Victorian society, with its corruption hidden under outward decorum, its romance smothered under ugly riches in stuffy drawing-rooms. But when the call came to him he valiantly settled down. In Grosvenor Square they spoke of him behind their fans as a young man who had sown his wild oats and was now an eligible husband for the innocent Lucy Kenyon with her sloping shoulders and vacant eyes. He married her as his duty and begat sons and daughters.

He also bought more land, and under him the Alard estates crept over the Brede River and up Snailham hill towards Guestling Thorn. But that was only at the beginning of his squireship. One or two investments turned out badly, and he was forced to a standstill. Then came the bad days of the landowners. Lower and lower dropped the price of land and the price of wheat, hop-substitutes became an electioneering cry in the Rye division of Sussex and the noble gardens by the river Tillingham went fallow. Then came Lloyd George's Land Act—the rush to the market, the impossibility of sale. Finally the European war of 1914 swept away the little of the Alard

substance that was left. They found themselves in possession of a huge ramshackle estate, heavily mortgaged, crushingly taxed.

Sir John had four sons—Hugh, Peter, George and Gervase—and three daughters, Doris, Mary and Janet. Hugh and Peter both went out to fight, and Hugh never came back. George, following a tradition which had ruled in the family since the days of the non-juring Gervase, held the living of Leasan. Gervase at the outbreak of hostilities was only in his second term at Winchester, being nearly eighteen years younger than his brother George.

Of the girls, only Mary was married, though Doris hinted at a number of suitors rejected because of their unworthiness to mate with Alard. Jenny was ten years younger than Mary—she and Gervase came apart from the rest of the family, children of middle age and the last of love.

## § 2

A few days before Christmas in the year 1918, most of the Alards were gathered together in the drawing-room at Conster, to welcome Peter the heir. He had been demobilised a month after the Armistice and was now expected home, to take on himself the work of the estate in the place of his brother Hugh. The Alards employed an agent, and there were also bailiffs on one or two of the farms, but the heir's presence was badly needed in these difficult days. Sir John held the authority, and the keenness of his interest was in no wise diminished by his age; but he was an old man, nearly seventy-five, and honourably afflicted with the gout. He could only seldom ride

on his grey horse from farm to farm, snarling at the bailiff or the stockman, winking at the chicken girl—even to drive out in his heavy Wolsey car gave him chills. So most days he sat at home, and the work was done by him indeed, but as it were by current conducted through the wires of obedient sons and servants.

This afternoon he sat by the fire in the last patch of sunlight, which his wife hankered to have shut off from the damasked armchair.

“It really is a shame to run any risks with that beautiful colour,” she murmured from the sofa. “You know it hasn’t been back from Hampton’s a week, and it’s such very expensive stuff.”

“Why did you choose it?” snarled Sir John.

“Well, it was the best—we’ve always had the best.”

“Next time you can try the second best as a new experience.”

“Your father really is hopeless,” said Lady Alard in a loud whisper to her daughter Doris.

“Sh-sh-sh,” said Doris, equally loud.

“Very poor as an aside, both of you,” said Sir John.

The Reverend George Alard coughed as a preliminary to changing the conversation.

“Our Christmas roses are better than ever this year,” he intoned.

His wife alone supported him.



“They’ll come in beautifully for the Christmas decorations—I hope there’s enough to go round the font.”

“I’d thought of them on the screen, my dear.”

“Oh no! Christmas roses are so appropriate to the font, and besides”—archly—“Sir John will let us have some flowers out of the greenhouse for the screen.”

“I’m damned if I will.”

Rose Alard flushed at the insult to her husband’s cloth which she held to lie in the oath; none the less she stuck to her coaxing.

“Oh, but you always have, Sir John.”

“Have I?—Well, as I’ve just told my wife, there’s nothing like a new experience. I don’t keep three gardeners just to decorate Leasan church, and the flowers happen to be rather scarce this year. I want them for the house.”

“Isn’t he terrible?” Lady Alard’s whispered moan to Doris once more filled the room.

Jenny laughed.

“What are you laughing at, Jenny?”

“Oh, I dunno.”

She was laughing because she wondered if there was anything she could say which would not lead to a squabble.

“Perhaps Gervase will come by the same train as Peter,” she ventured.

“Gervase never let us know when to expect him,” said her mother. “He’s very thoughtless. Now perhaps Appleby will have to make the journey twice.”

“It won’t kill Appleby if he does—he hasn’t had the car out all this week.”

“But Gervase is very thoughtless,” said Mrs. George Alard.

At that moment a slide of wheels was heard in the drive, and the faint sounds of a car coming to anchor.

“Peter!” cried Lady Alard.

“He’s been quick,” said Doris.

George pulled out his watch to be sure about the time, and Jenny ran to the door.

### § 3

The drawing-room was just as it had always been.... The same heavy dignity of line in the old walls and oak-ribbed ceiling spoilt by undue crowding of pictures and furniture. Hothouse flowers stood about in pots and filled vases innumerable ... a water-colour portrait of himself as a child faced him as he came into the room.

“Peter, my darling!”

His mother’s arms were stretched out to him from the sofa—she did not rise, and he knelt down beside her for a moment,

letting her enfold him and furiously creating for himself the illusion of a mother he had never known. The illusion seemed to dissipate in a faint scent of lavender water.

“How strange you look out of uniform—I suppose that’s a new suit.”

“Well, I could scarcely have got into my pre-war clothes. I weigh thirteen stone.”

“Quite the heavy Squire,” said Sir John. “Come here and let’s have a look at you.”

Peter went over and stood before his father’s chair—rather like a little boy. As it happened he was a man of thirty-six, tallish, well-built, with a dark, florid face, dark hair and a small dark moustache. In contrast his eyes were of an astounding blue—Saxon eyes, the eyes of Alards who had gone to the Crusades, melted down their plate for the White King, refused to take the oath of allegiance to Dutch William; eyes which for long generations had looked out on the marshes of Winchelsea, and had seen the mouth of the Rother swept in spate from Romney sands to Rye.

“Um,” said Sir John.

“Having a bad turn again, Sir?”

“Getting over it—I’ll be about tomorrow.”

“That’s right, and how’s Mother?”

“I’m better today, dear. But Dr. Mount said he really was frightened last week—I’ve never had such an attack.”

“Why didn’t anyone tell me? I could have come down earlier.”

“I wanted to have you sent for, dear, but the children wouldn’t let me.”

The children, as represented by George Alard and his wife, threw a baffled glance at Peter, seeking to convey that the “attack” had been the usual kind of indigestion which Lady Alard liked to enoble by the name of Angina Pectoris.

Meanwhile, Wills the butler and a young footman were bringing in the tea. Jenny poured it out, the exertion being considered too great for her mother. Peter’s eyes rested on her favourably; she was the one thing in the room, barring the beautiful, delicate flowers, that gave him any real pleasure to look at. She was a large, graceful creature, with a creamy skin, wide, pale mouth, and her mother’s eyes of speckled brown. Her big, beautifully shaped hands moved with a slow grace among the teacups. In contrast with her Doris looked raddled (though she really was moderate and skillful in the make-up of her face and hair) and Rose looked blowsy. He felt glad of Jenny’s youth—soft, slow, asleep.

“Where’s Mary?” he asked suddenly, “I thought she was coming down.”

“Not till New Year’s eve. Julian can’t come with her, and naturally he didn’t want her to be away for Christmas.”

“And how is the great Julian?”

“I don’t know—Mary didn’t say. She hardly ever tells us anything in her letters.”

The door opened and the butler announced—

“Dr. Mount has come to see her ladyship.”

“Oh, Dr. Mount” ... cried Peter, springing up.

“He’s waiting in the morning room, my lady.”

“Show him in here—you’d like him to come in, wouldn’t you, Mother?”

“Yes, of course, dear, but I expect he’ll have had his tea.”

“He can have another. Anyhow, I’d like to see him—I missed him last leave.”

He crossed over to the window. Outside in the drive a small green Singer car stood empty.

“Did Stella drive him over?—She would never stay outside.”

“I can’t see anyone—Hello, doctor—glad you’ve come—have some tea.”

Dr. Mount came into the room. He was a short, healthy little man, dressed in country tweeds, and with the flat whiskers of an old-time squire. He seemed genuinely delighted to see Peter.

“Back from the wars? Well, you’ve had some luck. They say it’ll be more than a year before everyone’s demobbed. You look splendid, doesn’t he, Lady Alard?”

“Yes—Peter always was healthy, you know.”

"I must say he hasn't given me much trouble. I'd be a poor man if everyone was like him. How's the wound, Peter? I don't suppose you even think of it now."

"I can't say I do—it never was much. Didn't Stella drive you over?"

"No—there's a lot of medicine to make up, so I left her busy in the dispensary."

"What a useful daughter to have," sighed Lady Alard. "She can do everything—drive the car, make up medicines——"

"Work in the garden and cook me a thundering good dinner besides!" The little doctor beamed. "I expect she'll be over here before long, she'll be wanting to see Peter. She'd have come today if there han't been such a lot to do."

Peter put down his teacup and walked over again to the window. Rose Alard and her husband exchanged another of those meaning looks which they found a useful conversational currency.

#### § 4

Jenny soon wearied of the drawing-room, even when freshened by Dr. Mount. She always found a stifling quality in Conster's public rooms, with their misleading show of wealth, and escaped as early as she could to the old schoolroom at the back of the house, looking steeply up through firs at the wooded slope of Brede Eye.

This evening the room was nearly dark, for the firs shut out the dregs of twilight and the moon that looked over the hill. She

could just see the outlines of the familiar furniture, the square table on which she and Gervase had scrawled abusive remarks in the intervals of their lessons, the rocking chair, where the ghost of Nurse sometimes still seemed to sit and sway, the bookcase full of children's books—"Fifty-two Stories for Girls" and "Fifty-two Stories for Boys," the "Girls of St. Wode's" and "With Wallace at Bannockburn"—all those faded gilded rows which she still surreptitiously enjoyed.

Now she had an indefinite feeling that someone was in the room, but had scarcely realised it when a shape drew itself up against the window square, making her start and gasp.

"It's only me," said an apologetic voice.

"Gervase!"

She switched on the light and saw her brother standing by the table.

"When did you come?"

"Oh, twenty minutes ago. I heard you all gassing away in the drawing-room, so thought I'd come up here till you'd finished with Peter."

"How sociable and brotherly of you! You might have come in and said how d'you do. You haven't seen him for a year."

"I thought I'd be an anti-climax—spoil the Warrior's Return and all that. I'll go down in a minute."

"How was it you and Peter didn't arrive together? There hasn't been another train since."

"I expect Peter came by Ashford, didn't he? I came down on the other line and got out at Robertsbridge. I thought I'd like the walk."

"What about your luggage?"

"I left that at Robertsbridge."

"Really, Gervase, you are the most unpractical person I ever struck. This means we'll have to send over tomorrow and fetch it—and Appleby has something better to do than tear about the country after your traps."

"I'll fetch 'em myself in Henry Ford. Don't be angry with me, Jenny. Please remember I've come home and expect to be treated kindly."

He came round the table to her and offered her his cheek. He was taller than she was, more coltish and less compact, but they were both alike in being their mother's children, Kenyons rather than Alards. Their eyes were soft and golden-brown instead of clear Saxon-blue, their skins were pale and their mouths wide.

Jenny hugged him. She was very fond of Gervase, who seemed specially to belong to her at the end of the long, straggled family.

"I'm so glad you've come," she murmured—"come for good. Though I suppose you'll be off to a crammer's before long."

"I daresay I shall, but don't let's worry about that now. I'm here till February, anyway. Who's at home?"



“Everybody except Mary, and she’s coming after Christmas.”

“I wish she’d come before. I like old Mary, and I haven’t seen her for an age. Is Julian coming too?”

“I don’t suppose so. He and Father have had a dreadful row.”

“What about?”

“He wouldn’t lend us any of the money he profiteered out of those collapsible huts.”

“Well, I call it rather cheek of Father to have asked him.”

“It was to be on a mortgage of course; but I quite see it wouldn’t have been much of an investment for Julian. However, Father seems to think it was his duty as a son-in-law to have let us have it. We’re nearly on the rocks, you know.”

“So I’ve been told a dozen times, but the place looks much the same as ever.”

“That’s because Father and Mother can’t get out of their grooves, and there are so few economies which seem worth while. I believe we need nearly fifty thousand to clear the estate.”

“But it’s silly to do nothing.”

“I don’t see what we can do. But I never could understand about mortgages.”

“Nor could I. The only thing I can make out is that our grandfather was a pretty awful fool.”

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