

Augustus Does His Bit A True-to-Life Farce

by

George Bernard Shaw

***Free*editorial** 

The Mayor's parlor in the Town Hall of Little Pifflington. Lord Augustus Highcastle, a distinguished member of the governing class, in the uniform of a colonel, and very well preserved at forty-five, is comfortably seated at a writing-table with his heels on it, reading *The Morning Post*. The door faces him, a little to his left, at the other side of the room. The window is behind him. In the fireplace, a gas stove. On the table a bell button and a telephone. Portraits of past Mayors, in robes and gold chains, adorn the walls. An elderly clerk with a short white beard and whiskers, and a very red nose, shuffles in.

AUGUSTUS [hastily putting aside his paper and replacing his feet on the floor].
Hullo! Who are you?

THE CLERK. The staff [a slight impediment in his speech adds to the impression of incompetence produced by his age and appearance].

AUGUSTUS. You the staff! What do you mean, man?

THE CLERK. What I say. There ain't anybody else.

AUGUSTUS. Tush! Where are the others?

THE CLERK. At the front.

AUGUSTUS. Quite right. Most proper. Why aren't you at the front?

THE CLERK. Over age. Fifty-seven.

AUGUSTUS. But you can still do your bit. Many an older man is in the G.R.'s, or volunteering for home defence.

THE CLERK. I have volunteered.

AUGUSTUS. Then why are you not in uniform?

THE CLERK. They said they wouldn't have me if I was given away with a pound of tea. Told me to go home and not be an old silly. [A sense of unbearable wrong, till now only smouldering in him, bursts into flame.] Young Bill Knight, that I took with me, got two and sevenpence. I got nothing. Is it justice? This country is going to the dogs, if you ask me.

AUGUSTUS [rising indignantly]. I do not ask you, sir; and I will not allow you to say such things in my presence. Our statesmen are the greatest known to history. Our generals are invincible. Our army is the admiration of the world. [Furiously.] How dare you tell me that the country is going to the dogs!

THE CLERK. Why did they give young Bill Knight two and sevenpence, and not give me even my tram fare? Do you call that being great statesmen? As good as robbing me, I call it.

AUGUSTUS. That's enough. Leave the room. [He sits down and takes up his pen, settling himself to work. The clerk shuffles to the door. Augustus adds, with cold politeness] Send me the Secretary.

THE CLERK. I'M the Secretary. I can't leave the room and send myself to you at the same time, can I?

AUGUSTUS. Don't be insolent. Where is the gentleman I have been corresponding with: Mr Horatio Floyd Beamish?

THE CLERK [returning and bowing]. Here. Me.

AUGUSTUS. You! Ridiculous. What right have you to call yourself by a pretentious name of that sort?

THE CLERK. You may drop the Horatio Floyd. Beamish is good enough for me.

AUGUSTUS. Is there nobody else to take my instructions?

THE CLERK. It's me or nobody. And for two pins I'd chuck it. Don't you drive me too far. Old uns like me is up in the world now.

AUGUSTUS. If we were not at war, I should discharge you on the spot for disrespectful behavior. But England is in danger; and I cannot think of my personal dignity at such a moment. [Shouting at him.] Don't you think of yours, either, worm that you are; or I'll have you arrested under the Defence of the Realm Act, double quick.

THE CLERK. What do I care about the realm? They done me out of two and seven—

AUGUSTUS. Oh, damn your two and seven! Did you receive my letters?

THE CLERK. Yes.

AUGUSTUS. I addressed a meeting here last night—went straight to the platform from the train. I wrote to you that I should expect you to be present and report yourself. Why did you not do so?

THE CLERK. The police wouldn't let me on the platform.

AUGUSTUS. Did you tell them who you were?

THE CLERK. They knew who I was. That's why they wouldn't let me up.

AUGUSTUS. This is too silly for anything. This town wants waking up. I made the best recruiting speech I ever made in my life; and not a man joined.

THE CLERK. What did you expect? You told them our gallant fellows is falling at the rate of a thousand a day in the big push. Dying for Little Pifflington, you says. Come and take their places, you says. That ain't the way to recruit.

AUGUSTUS. But I expressly told them their widows would have pensions.

THE CLERK. I heard you. Would have been all right if it had been the widows you wanted to get round.

AUGUSTUS [rising angrily]. This town is inhabited by dastards. I say it with a full sense of responsibility, DASTARDS! They call themselves Englishmen; and they are afraid to fight.

THE CLERK. Afraid to fight! You should see them on a Saturday night.

AUGUSTUS. Yes, they fight one another; but they won't fight the Germans.

THE CLERK. They got grudges again one another: how can they have grudges again the Huns that they never saw? They've no imagination: that's what it is. Bring the Huns here; and they'll quarrel with them fast enough.

AUGUSTUS [returning to his seat with a grunt of disgust]. Mf! They'll have them here if they're not careful. [Seated.] Have you carried out my orders about the war saving?

THE CLERK. Yes.

AUGUSTUS. The allowance of petrol has been reduced by three quarters?

THE CLERK. It has.

AUGUSTUS. And you have told the motor-car people to come here and arrange to start munition work now that their motor business is stopped?

THE CLERK. It ain't stopped. They're busier than ever.

AUGUSTUS. Busy at what?

THE CLERK. Making small cars.

AUGUSTUS. NEW cars!

THE CLERK. The old cars only do twelve miles to the gallon. Everybody has to have a car that will do thirty-five now.

AUGUSTUS. Can't they take the train?

THE CLERK. There ain't no trains now. They've tore up the rails and sent them to the front.

AUGUSTUS. Psha!

THE CLERK. Well, we have to get about somehow.

AUGUSTUS. This is perfectly monstrous. Not in the least what I intended.

THE CLERK. Hell—

AUGUSTUS. Sir!

THE CLERK [explaining]. Hell, they says, is paved with good intentions.

AUGUSTUS [springing to his feet]. Do you mean to insinuate that hell is paved with MY good intentions—with the good intentions of His Majesty's Government?

THE CLERK. I don't mean to insinuate anything until the Defence of the Realm Act is repealed. It ain't safe.

AUGUSTUS. They told me that this town had set an example to all England in the matter of economy. I came down here to promise the Mayor a knighthood for his exertions.

THE CLERK. The Mayor! Where do I come in?

AUGUSTUS. You don't come in. You go out. This is a fool of a place. I'm greatly disappointed. Deeply disappointed. [Flinging himself back into his chair.] Disgusted.

THE CLERK. What more can we do? We've shut up everything. The picture gallery is shut. The museum is shut. The theatres and picture shows is shut: I haven't seen a movie picture for six months.

AUGUSTUS. Man, man: do you want to see picture shows when the Hun is at the gate?

THE CLERK [mournfully]. I don't now, though it drove me melancholy mad at first. I was on the point of taking a pennorth of rat poison—

AUGUSTUS. Why didn't you?

THE CLERK. Because a friend advised me to take to drink instead. That saved my life, though it makes me very poor company in the mornings, as [hiccuping] perhaps you've noticed.

AUGUSTUS. Well, upon my soul! You are not ashamed to stand there and confess yourself a disgusting drunkard.

THE CLERK. Well, what of it? We're at war now; and everything's changed. Besides, I should lose my job here if I stood drinking at the bar. I'm a respectable man and must buy my drink and take it home with me. And they won't serve me with less than a quart. If you'd told me before the war that I could get through a quart of whisky in a day, I shouldn't have believed you. That's the good of war: it brings out powers in a man that he never suspected himself capable of. You said so yourself in your speech last night.

AUGUSTUS. I did not know that I was talking to an imbecile. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. There must be an end of this drunken slacking. I'm going to establish a new order of things here. I shall come down every morning before breakfast until things are properly in train. Have a cup of coffee and two rolls for me here every morning at half-past ten.

THE CLERK. You can't have no rolls. The only baker that baked rolls was a Hun; and he's been interned.

AUGUSTUS. Quite right, too. And was there no Englishman to take his place?

THE CLERK. There was. But he was caught spying; and they took him up to London and shot him.

AUGUSTUS. Shot an Englishman!

THE CLERK. Well, it stands to reason if the Germans wanted to spy they wouldn't employ a German that everybody would suspect, don't it?

AUGUSTUS [rising again]. Do you mean to say, you scoundrel, that an Englishman is capable of selling his country to the enemy for gold?

THE CLERK. Not as a general thing I wouldn't say it; but there's men here would sell their own mothers for two coppers if they got the chance.

AUGUSTUS. Beamish, it's an ill bird that fouls its own nest.

THE CLERK. It wasn't me that let Little Pifflington get foul. I don't belong to the governing classes. I only tell you why you can't have no rolls.

AUGUSTUS [intensely irritated]. Can you tell me where I can find an intelligent being to take my orders?

THE CLERK. One of the street sweepers used to teach in the school until it was shut up for the sake of economy. Will he do?

AUGUSTUS. What! You mean to tell me that when the lives of the gallant fellows in our trenches, and the fate of the British Empire, depend on our keeping up the supply of shells, you are wasting money on sweeping the streets?

THE CLERK. We have to. We dropped it for a while; but the infant death rate went up something frightful.

AUGUSTUS. What matters the death rate of Little Pifflington in a moment like this? Think of our gallant soldiers, not of your squalling infants.

THE CLERK. If you want soldiers you must have children. You can't buy em in boxes, like toy soldiers.

AUGUSTUS. Beamish, the long and the short of it is, you are no patriot. Go downstairs to your office; and have that gas stove taken away and replaced by an ordinary grate. The Board of Trade has urged on me the necessity for economizing gas.

THE CLERK. Our orders from the Minister of Munitions is to use gas instead of coal, because it saves material. Which is it to be?

AUGUSTUS [bawling furiously at him]. Both! Don't criticize your orders: obey them. Yours not to reason why: yours but to do and die. That's war. [Cooling down.] Have you anything else to say?

THE CLERK. Yes: I want a rise.

AUGUSTUS [reeling against the table in his horror]. A rise! Horatio Floyd Beamish, do you know that we are at war?

THE CLERK [feebly ironical]. I have noticed something about it in the papers. Heard you mention it once or twice, now I come to think of it.

AUGUSTUS. Our gallant fellows are dying in the trenches; and you want a rise!

THE CLERK. What are they dying for? To keep me alive, ain't it? Well, what's the good of that if I'm dead of hunger by the time they come back?

AUGUSTUS. Everybody else is making sacrifices without a thought of self; and you—

THE CLERK. Not half, they ain't. Where's the baker's sacrifice? Where's the coal merchant's? Where's the butcher's? Charging me double: that's how they sacrifice themselves. Well, I want to sacrifice myself that way too. Just double next Saturday: double and not a penny less; or no secretary for you [he stiffens himself shakily, and makes resolutely for the door.]

AUGUSTUS [looking after him contemptuously]. Go, miserable pro-German.

THE CLERK [rushing back and facing him]. Who are you calling a pro-German?

AUGUSTUS. Another word, and I charge you under the Act with discouraging me. Go.

The clerk blanches and goes out, cowed.

The telephone rings.

AUGUSTUS [taking up the telephone receiver.] Hallo. Yes: who are you?... oh, Blueloo, is it?... Yes: there's nobody in the room: fire away. What?... A spy!... A woman!... Yes: brought it down with me. Do you suppose I'm such a fool as to let it out of my hands? Why, it gives a list of all our anti-aircraft emplacements from Ramsgate to Skegness. The Germans would give a million for it—what?... But how could she possibly know about it? I haven't mentioned it to a soul, except, of course, dear Lucy... Oh, Toto and Lady Popham and that lot: they don't count: they're all right. I mean that I haven't mentioned it to any Germans.... Pooh! Don't you be nervous, old chap. I know you think me a fool; but I'm not such a fool as all that. If she tries to get it out of me I'll have her in the Tower before you ring up again. [The clerk returns.] Sh-sh! Somebody's just come in: ring off. Goodbye. [He hangs up the receiver.]

THE CLERK. Are you engaged? [His manner is strangely softened.]

AUGUSTUS. What business is that of yours? However, if you will take the trouble to read the society papers for this week, you will see that I am engaged to the Honorable Lucy Popham, youngest daughter of—

THE CLERK. That ain't what I mean. Can you see a female?

AUGUSTUS. Of course I can see a female as easily as a male. Do you suppose I'm blind?

THE CLERK. You don't seem to follow me, somehow. There's a female downstairs: what you might call a lady. She wants to know can you see her if I let her up.

AUGUSTUS. Oh, you mean am I disengaged. Tell the lady I have just received news of the greatest importance which will occupy my entire attention for the rest of the day, and that she must write for an appointment.

THE CLERK. I'll ask her to explain her business to me. I ain't above talking to a handsome young female when I get the chance [going].

AUGUSTUS. Stop. Does she seem to be a person of consequence?

THE CLERK. A regular marchioness, if you ask me.

AUGUSTUS. Hm! Beautiful, did you say?

THE CLERK. A human chrysanthemum, sir, believe me.

AUGUSTUS. It will be extremely inconvenient for me to see her; but the country is in danger; and we must not consider our own comfort. Think how our gallant fellows are suffering in the trenches! Show her up. [The clerk makes for the door, whistling the latest popular ballad]. Stop whistling instantly, sir. This is not a casino.

CLERK. Ain't it? You just wait till you see her. [He goes out.]

Augustus produces a mirror, a comb, and a pot of moustache pomade from the drawer of the writing-table, and sits down before the mirror to put some touches to his toilet.

The clerk returns, devotedly ushering a very attractive lady, brilliantly dressed. She has a dainty wallet hanging from her wrist. Augustus hastily covers up his toilet apparatus with *The Morning Post*, and rises in an attitude of pompous condescension.

THE CLERK [to Augustus]. Here she is. [To the lady.] May I offer you a chair, lady? [He places a chair at the writing-table opposite Augustus, and steals out on tiptoe.]

AUGUSTUS. Be seated, madam.

THE LADY [sitting down]. Are you Lord Augustus Highcastle?

AUGUSTUS [sitting also]. Madam, I am.

THE LADY [with awe]. The great Lord Augustus?

AUGUSTUS. I should not dream of describing myself so, Madam; but no doubt I have impressed my countrymen—and [bowing gallantly] may I say my countrywomen—as having some exceptional claims to their consideration.

THE LADY [emotionally]. What a beautiful voice you have!

AUGUSTUS. What you hear, madam, is the voice of my country, which now takes a sweet and noble tone even in the harsh mouth of high officialism.

THE LADY. Please go on. You express yourself so wonderfully!

AUGUSTUS. It would be strange indeed if, after sitting on thirty-seven Royal Commissions, mostly as chairman, I had not mastered the art of public expression. Even the Radical papers have paid me the high compliment of declaring that I am never more impressive than when I have nothing to say.

THE LADY. I never read the Radical papers. All I can tell you is that what we women admire in you is not the politician, but the man of action, the heroic warrior, the beau sabreur.

AUGUSTUS [gloomily]. Madam, I beg! Please! My military exploits are not a pleasant subject, unhappily.

THE LADY. Oh, I know I know. How shamefully you have been treated! what ingratitude! But the country is with you. The women are with you. Oh, do you think all our hearts did not throb and all our nerves thrill when we heard how, when you were ordered to occupy that terrible quarry in Hulluch, and you swept into it at the head of your men like a sea-god riding on a tidal wave, you suddenly sprang over the top shouting "To Berlin! Forward!"; dashed at the German army single-handed; and were cut off and made prisoner by the Huns.

AUGUSTUS. Yes, madam; and what was my reward? They said I had disobeyed orders, and sent me home. Have they forgotten Nelson in the Baltic? Has any British battle ever been won except by a bold initiative? I say nothing of professional jealousy, it exists in the army as elsewhere; but it is a bitter thought to me that the recognition denied me by my country—or rather by the Radical cabal in the Cabinet which pursues my family with rancorous class hatred—that this recognition, I say, came to me at the hands of an enemy—of a rank Prussian.

THE LADY. You don't say so!

AUGUSTUS. How else should I be here instead of starving to death in Ruhleben? Yes, madam: the Colonel of the Pomeranian regiment which captured me, after learning what I had done, and conversing for an hour with me on European politics and military strategy, declared that nothing would induce him to deprive my country of my services, and set me free. I offered, of course, to procure the release in exchange of a German officer of equal quality; but he would not hear of it. He was kind enough to say he could not believe that a German officer answering to that description existed. [With emotion.] I had my first taste of the ingratitude of my own country as I made my way back to our lines. A shot from our front trench struck me in the head. I still carry the flattened projectile as a trophy [he throws it on the table; the noise it makes testifies to its weight]. Had it penetrated to the brain I might never have sat on another Royal Commission. Fortunately we have strong heads, we Highcastles. Nothing has ever penetrated to our brains.

THE LADY. How thrilling! How simple! And how tragic! But you will forgive England? Remember: England! Forgive her.

AUGUSTUS [with gloomy magnanimity]. It will make no difference whatever to my services to my country. Though she slay me, yet will I, if not exactly trust in her, at least take my part in her government. I am ever at my country's call. Whether it be the embassy in a leading European capital, a governor-generalship in the tropics, or my humble mission here to make Little Pifflington do its bit, I am always ready for the sacrifice. Whilst England remains England, wherever there is a public job to be done you will find a Highcastle sticking to it. And now, madam, enough of my tragic personal history. You have called on business. What can I do for you?

THE LADY. You have relatives at the Foreign Office, have you not?

AUGUSTUS [haughtily]. Madam, the Foreign Office is staffed by my relatives exclusively.

THE LADY. Has the Foreign Office warned you that you are being pursued by a female spy who is determined to obtain possession of a certain list of gun emplacements?

AUGUSTUS [interrupting her somewhat loftily]. All that is perfectly well known to this department, madam.

THE LADY [surprised and rather indignant]. Is it? Who told you? Was it one of your German brothers-in-law?

AUGUSTUS [injured, remonstrating]. I have only three German brothers-in-law, madam. Really, from your tone, one would suppose that I had several. Pardon my sensitiveness on that subject; but reports are continually being circulated that I have been shot as a traitor in the courtyard of the Ritz Hotel simply because I have German brothers-in-law. [With feeling.] If you had a German brother-in-law, madam, you would know that nothing else in the world produces so strong an anti-German feeling. Life affords no keener pleasure than finding a brother-in-law's name in the German casualty list.

THE LADY. Nobody knows that better than I. Wait until you hear what I have come to tell you: you will understand me as no one else could. Listen. This spy, this woman—

AUGUSTUS [all attention]. Yes?

THE LADY. She is a German. A Hun.

AUGUSTUS. Yes, yes. She would be. Continue.

THE LADY. She is my sister-in-law.

AUGUSTUS [deferentially]. I see you are well connected, madam. Proceed.

THE LADY. Need I add that she is my bitterest enemy?

AUGUSTUS. May I—[he proffers his hand. They shake, fervently. From this moment onward Augustus becomes more and more confidential, gallant, and charming.]

THE LADY. Quite so. Well, she is an intimate friend of your brother at the War Office, Hungerford Highcastle, Blueloo as you call him, I don't know why.

AUGUSTUS [explaining]. He was originally called The Singing Oyster, because he sang drawing-room ballads with such an extraordinary absence of expression. He was then called the Blue Point for a season or two. Finally he became Blueloo.

THE LADY. Oh, indeed: I didn't know. Well, Blueloo is simply infatuated with my sister-in-law; and he has rashly let out to her that this list is in your possession. He forgot himself because he was in a towering rage at its being entrusted to you: his language was terrible. He ordered all the guns to be shifted at once.

AUGUSTUS. What on earth did he do that for?

THE LADY. I can't imagine. But this I know. She made a bet with him that she would come down here and obtain possession of that list and get clean away into the street with it. He took the bet on condition that she brought it straight back to him at the War Office.

AUGUSTUS. Good heavens! And you mean to tell me that Blueloo was such a dolt as to believe that she could succeed? Does he take me for a fool?

THE LADY. Oh, impossible! He is jealous of your intellect. The bet is an insult to you: don't you feel that? After what you have done for our country—

AUGUSTUS. Oh, never mind that. It is the idiocy of the thing I look at. He'll lose his bet; and serve him right!

THE LADY. You feel sure you will be able to resist the siren? I warn you, she is very fascinating.

AUGUSTUS. You need have no fear, madam. I hope she will come and try it on. Fascination is a game that two can play at. For centuries the younger sons of the Highcastles have had nothing to do but fascinate attractive females when they were not sitting on Royal Commissions or on duty at Knightsbridge barracks. By Gad, madam, if the siren comes here she will meet her match.

THE LADY. I feel that. But if she fails to seduce you—

AUGUSTUS [blushing]. Madam!

THE LADY [continuing]—from your allegiance—

AUGUSTUS. Oh, that!

THE LADY.—she will resort to fraud, to force, to anything. She will burgle your office: she will have you attacked and garotted at night in the street.

AUGUSTUS. Pooh! I'm not afraid.

THE LADY. Oh, your courage will only tempt you into danger. She may get the list after all. It is true that the guns are moved. But she would win her bet.

AUGUSTUS [cautiously]. You did not say that the guns were moved. You said that Blueloo had ordered them to be moved.

THE LADY. Well, that is the same thing, isn't it?

AUGUSTUS. Not quite—at the War Office. No doubt those guns WILL be moved: possibly even before the end of the war.

THE LADY. Then you think they are there still! But if the German War Office gets the list—and she will copy it before she gives it back to Blueloo, you may depend on it—all is lost.

AUGUSTUS [lazily]. Well, I should not go as far as that. [Lowering his voice.] Will you swear to me not to repeat what I am going to say to you; for if the British public knew that I had said it, I should be at once hounded down as a pro-German.

THE LADY. I will be silent as the grave. I swear it.

AUGUSTUS [again taking it easily]. Well, our people have for some reason made up their minds that the German War Office is everything that our War Office is not—that it carries promptitude, efficiency, and organization to a pitch of completeness and perfection that must be, in my opinion, destructive to the happiness of the staff. My own view—which you are pledged, remember, not to betray—is that the German War Office is no better than any other War Office. I found that opinion on my observation of the characters of my brothers-in-law: one of whom, by the way, is on the German general staff. I am not at all sure that this list of gun emplacements would receive the smallest attention. You see, there are always so many more important things to be attended to. Family matters, and so on, you understand.

THE LADY. Still, if a question were asked in the House of Commons—

AUGUSTUS. The great advantage of being at war, madam, is that nobody takes the slightest notice of the House of Commons. No doubt it is sometimes necessary for a Minister to soothe the more seditious members of that assembly by giving a pledge or two; but the War Office takes no notice of such things.

THE LADY [staring at him]. Then you think this list of gun emplacements doesn't matter!!

AUGUSTUS. By no means, madam. It matters very much indeed. If this spy were to obtain possession of the list, Blueloo would tell the story at every dinner-table in London; and—

THE LADY. And you might lose your post. Of course.

AUGUSTUS [amazed and indignant]. I lose my post! What are you dreaming about, madam? How could I possibly be spared? There are hardly Highcastles enough at present to fill half the posts created by this war. No: Blueloo would not go that far. He is at least a gentleman. But I should be chaffed; and, frankly, I don't like being chaffed.

THE LADY. Of course not. Who does? It would never do. Oh never, never.

AUGUSTUS. I'm glad you see it in that light. And now, as a measure of security, I shall put that list in my pocket. [He begins searching vainly from drawer to drawer in the writing-table.] Where on earth—? What the dickens did I—? That's very odd: I—Where the deuce—? I thought I had put it in the—Oh, here it is! No: this is Lucy's last letter.

THE LADY [elegiacally]. Lucy's Last Letter! What a title for a picture play!

AUGUSTUS [delighted]. Yes: it is, isn't it? Lucy appeals to the imagination like no other woman. By the way [handing over the letter], I wonder could you read it for me? Lucy is a darling girl; but I really can't read her writing. In London I get the office typist to decipher it and make me a typed copy; but here there is nobody.

THE LADY [puzzling over it]. It is really almost illegible. I think the beginning is meant for "Dearest Gus."

AUGUSTUS [eagerly]. Yes: that is what she usually calls me. Please go on.

THE LADY [trying to decipher it]. "What a"—"what a"—oh yes: "what a forgetful old"—something—"you are!" I can't make out the word.

AUGUSTUS [greatly interested]. Is it blighter? That is a favorite expression of hers.

THE LADY. I think so. At all events it begins with a B. [Reading.] "What a forgetful old"—[she is interrupted by a knock at the door.]

AUGUSTUS [impatiently]. Come in. [The clerk enters, clean shaven and in khaki, with an official paper and an envelope in his hand.] What is this ridiculous mummery sir?

THE CLERK [coming to the table and exhibiting his uniform to both]. They've passed me. The recruiting officer come for me. I've had my two and seven.

AUGUSTUS [rising wrathfully]. I shall not permit it. What do they mean by taking my office staff? Good God! they will be taking our hunt servants next. [Confronting the clerk.] What did the man mean? What did he say?

THE CLERK. He said that now you was on the job we'd want another million men, and he was going to take the old-age pensioners or anyone he could get.

AUGUSTUS. And did you dare to knock at my door and interrupt my business with this lady to repeat this man's ineptitudes?

THE CLERK. No. I come because the waiter from the hotel brought this paper. You left it on the coffeeroom breakfast-table this morning.

THE LADY [intercepting it]. It is the list. Good heavens!

THE CLERK [proffering the envelope]. He says he thinks this is the envelope belonging to it.

THE LADY [snatching the envelope also]. Yes! Addressed to you, Lord Augustus! [Augustus comes back to the table to look at it.] Oh, how imprudent! Everybody would guess its importance with your name on it. Fortunately I have some letters of my own here [opening her wallet.] Why not hide it in one of my envelopes? then no one will dream that the enclosure is of any political value. [Taking out a letter, she crosses the room towards the window, whispering to Augustus as she passes him.] Get rid of that man.

AUGUSTUS [haughtily approaching the clerk, who humorously makes a paralytic attempt to stand at attention]. Have you any further business here, pray?

THE CLERK. Am I to give the waiter anything; or will you do it yourself?

AUGUSTUS. Which waiter is it? The English one?

THE CLERK. No: the one that calls hisself a Swiss. Shouldn't wonder if he'd made a copy of that paper.

AUGUSTUS. Keep your impertinent surmises to yourself, sir. Remember that you are in the army now; and let me have no more of your civilian insubordination. Attention! Left turn! Quick march!

THE CLERK [stolidly]. I dunno what you mean.

AUGUSTUS. Go to the guard-room and report yourself for disobeying orders. Now do you know what I mean?

THE CLERK. Now look here. I ain't going to argue with you—

AUGUSTUS. Nor I with you. Out with you.

He seizes the clerk: and rushes him through the door. The moment the lady is left alone, she snatches a sheet of official paper from the stationery rack: folds it so that it resembles the list; compares the two to see that they look exactly alike: whips the list into her wallet: and substitutes the facsimile for it. Then she listens for the return of Augustus. A crash is heard, as of the clerk falling downstairs.

Augustus returns and is about to close the door when the voice of the clerk is heard from below.

THE CLERK. I'll have the law of you for this, I will.

AUGUSTUS [shouting down to him]. There's no more law for you, you scoundrel. You're a soldier now. [He shuts the door and comes to the lady.] Thank heaven, the war has given us the upper hand of these fellows at last. Excuse my violence; but discipline is absolutely necessary in dealing with the lower middle classes.

THE LADY. Serve the insolent creature right! Look I have found you a beautiful envelope for the list, an unmistakable lady's envelope. [She puts the sham list into her envelope and hands it to him.]

AUGUSTUS. Excellent. Really very clever of you. [Slyly.] Come: would you like to have a peep at the list [beginning to take the blank paper from the envelope]?

THE LADY [on the brink of detection]. No no. Oh, please, no.

AUGUSTUS. Why? It won't bite you [drawing it out further.]

THE LADY [snatching at his hand]. Stop. Remember: if there should be an inquiry, you must be able to swear that you never showed that list to a mortal soul.

AUGUSTUS. Oh, that is a mere form. If you are really curious—

THE LADY. I am not. I couldn't bear to look at it. One of my dearest friends was blown to pieces by an aircraft gun; and since then I have never been able to think of one without horror.

AUGUSTUS. You mean it was a real gun, and actually went off. How sad! how sad! [He pushes the sham list back into the envelope, and pockets it.]

THE LADY. Ah! [Great sigh of relief]. And now, Lord Augustus, I have taken up too much of your valuable time. Goodbye.

AUGUSTUS. What! Must you go?

THE LADY. You are so busy.

AUGUSTUS. Yes; but not before lunch, you know. I never can do much before lunch. And I'm no good at all in the afternoon. From five to six is my real working time. Must you really go?

THE LADY. I must, really. I have done my business very satisfactorily. Thank you ever so much [she proffers her hand].

AUGUSTUS [shaking it affectionately as he leads her to the door, but fast pressing the bell button with his left hand]. Goodbye. Goodbye. So sorry to lose you. Kind of you to come; but there was no real danger. You see, my dear little lady, all this talk about war saving, and secrecy, and keeping the blinds down at night, and so forth, is all very well; but unless it's carried out with intelligence, believe me, you may waste a pound to save a penny; you may let out all sorts of secrets to the enemy; you may guide the Zeppelins right on to your own chimneys. That's where the ability of the governing class comes in. Shall the fellow call a taxi for you?

THE LADY. No, thanks: I prefer walking. Goodbye. Again, many, many thanks.

She goes out. Augustus returns to the writing-table smiling, and takes another look at himself in the mirror. The clerk returns, with his head bandaged, carrying a poker.

THE CLERK. What did you ring for? [Augustus hastily drops the mirror]. Don't you come nigh me or I'll split your head with this poker, thick as it is.

AUGUSTUS. It does not seem to me an exceptionally thick poker. I rang for you to show the lady out.

THE CLERK. She's gone. She run out like a rabbit. I ask myself why was she in such a hurry?

THE LADY'S VOICE [from the street]. Lord Augustus. Lord Augustus.

THE CLERK. She's calling you.

AUGUSTUS [running to the window and throwing it up]. What is it? Won't you come up?

THE LADY. Is the clerk there?

AUGUSTUS. Yes. Do you want him?

THE LADY. Yes.

AUGUSTUS. The lady wants you at the window.

THE CLERK [rushing to the window and putting down the poker]. Yes, ma'am? Here I am, ma'am. What is it, ma'am?

THE LADY. I want you to witness that I got clean away into the street. I am coming up now.

The two men stare at one another.

THE CLERK. Wants me to witness that she got clean away into the street!

AUGUSTUS. What on earth does she mean?

The lady returns.

THE LADY. May I use your telephone?

AUGUSTUS. Certainly. Certainly. [Taking the receiver down.] What number shall I get you?

THE LADY. The War Office, please.

AUGUSTUS. The War Office!?

THE LADY. If you will be so good.

AUGUSTUS. But—Oh, very well. [Into the receiver.] Hallo. This is the Town Hall Recruiting Office. Give me Colonel Bogey, sharp.

A pause.

THE CLERK [breaking the painful silence]. I don't think I'm awake. This is a dream of a movie picture, this is.

AUGUSTUS [his ear at the receiver]. Shut up, will you? [Into the telephone.] What?... [To the lady.] Whom do you want to get on to?

THE LADY. Blueloo.

AUGUSTUS [into the telephone]. Put me through to Lord Hungerford Highcastle... I'm his brother, idiot... That you, Blueloo? Lady here at Little Pifflington wants to speak to you. Hold the line. [To the lady.] Now, madam [he hands her the receiver].

THE LADY [sitting down in Augustus's chair to speak into the telephone]. Is that Blueloo?... Do you recognize my voice?... I've won our bet....

AUGUSTUS. Your bet!

THE LADY [into the telephone]. Yes: I have the list in my wallet....

AUGUSTUS. Nothing of the kind, madam. I have it here in my pocket. [He takes the envelope from his pocket: draws out the paper: and unfolds it.]

THE LADY [continuing]. Yes: I got clean into the street with it. I have a witness. I could have got to London with it. Augustus won't deny it....

AUGUSTUS [contemplating the blank paper]. There's nothing written on this. Where is the list of guns?

THE LADY [continuing]. Oh, it was quite easy. I said I was my sister-in-law and that I was a Hun. He lapped it up like a kitten....

AUGUSTUS. You don't mean to say that—

THE LADY [continuing]. I got hold of the list for a moment and changed it for a piece of paper out of his stationery rack: it was quite easy [she laughs: and it is clear that Blueloo is laughing too].

AUGUSTUS. What!

THE CLERK [laughing slowly and laboriously, with intense enjoyment]. Ha ha! Ha ha ha! Ha! [Augustus rushes at him; he snatches up the poker and stands on guard.] No you don't.

THE LADY [still at the telephone, waving her disengaged hand behind her impatiently at them to stop making a noise]. Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh!!! [Augustus, with a shrug, goes up the middle of the room. The lady resumes her conversation with the telephone.] What?... Oh yes: I'm coming up by the 1.35: why not have tea with me at Rumpelmeister's?... Rum-pel-meister's. You know: they call it Robinson's now... Right. Ta ta. [She hangs up the receiver, and is passing round the table on her way towards the door when she is confronted by Augustus.]

AUGUSTUS. Madam, I consider your conduct most unpatriotic. You make bets and abuse the confidence of the hardworked officials who are doing their bit for their country whilst our gallant fellows are perishing in the trenches—

THE LADY. Oh, the gallant fellows are not all in the trenches, Augustus. Some of them have come home for a few days' hard-earned leave; and I am sure you won't grudge them a little fun at your expense.

THE CLERK. Hear! hear!

AUGUSTUS [amiably]. Ah, well! For my country's sake—!

Freeditorial 