

I.

Spring 1855

After he had sat for a time with his dead brother, William Gale composed himself and took out his small silver pocket knife and with it began to cut. Close to the neck the hair was darkened with mud or blood or some mixture of the two, so William cut several pieces from around the crown, where the hair remained bright. It was soon done. He could have sworn that Algie's body was yet warm, sure he discerned the heat of life through the thick stuff of his coat. But in the while he had attended his brother, the fingertips, the nose and cheeks had with stealth assumed the pallor of death, yellow and somewhat waxen, like a stale candle. As William cut, the head lolled suddenly forward, but William was able to keep possession of his fright at this and did not recoil.

He had seen before what death did. He was familiar, now, with the sudden weight of a human head, cradled in the crook of his own arm, as a man took his leave of this life. This was something he had never hoped to learn. These past months had brought terrible lessons, sights and sensations which could not be unknown, much less forgotten. There was little difference between the weight of a head and that of a 12-pound round shot, for all that one carried all the dreams, memories and most tightly cherished hopes of a man within itself, while the other brought only carnage.

William summoned the presence of mind to judge that their mother would require sufficient of his brother's hair to mount

in the glass behind a brooch, and perhaps extra for a locket. He considered too their sister, Caroline. She would be sure to wish to commemorate their brother in like fashion. Then there was Algernon's fiancée, poor Emily Norris. Would their mother begrudge her a lock of Algie's hair, as she had already begrudged her the boy's love? Even as he cut he was sensible of the fact that there could not be more of that hair: what was needed must be now obtained, for there could never be a further supply of it.

There being no clean paper to hand, William took from his pocket the last letter he had had from his wife Alice – a missive which had not pleased him, though he kept it near – and folded the pieces of hair into it. It was a sad and curious thing to consider that those same locks which had shone around a young man's living face only hours before would now sit encased in gold and glass upon the breasts of three women. Though its weight was negligible – little more than a dab of sealing wax – the sorrow it brought would ever more weigh heavy upon them.

His work finished, William lifted Algie's head in both his hands and laid it back gently. With his thumbs he closed the green-blue eyes which would never more open upon a morning, nor look upon a day.

William Gale, at nine-and-twenty, had not been in the expectation of finding himself on the field – or, rather, the rocky hillside – of battle. Yet here he was, some two thousand miles distant from his home. His father, like his own father before him, had after the purchase of a commission been for a number of years a soldier; but the family estate and other interests had drawn each away from a full military life. William and Algernon's father had nevertheless fought bravely in the Peninsular and in the action at Albuera, where an injury to his foot saw an end to his service. It was expected that his sons would also, in due course, serve the 23rd Regiment of Foot. But Britain had been at peace since Waterloo

in 1815 and no one in the Gale family had expected William's time in the uniform of the Welsh Fusiliers to be spent away from home.

If the truth be said, William was not a natural officer. Affable, accomplished, handsome, with a strong sense of justice, there was a streak of stubbornness and of pride woven deep within his nature. He had no desire to command men. Military strategy did not absorb him. Such appetite as he had for firearms or for blood was easily satisfied by the modest exertions of the partridge shooting season. He did not care very much for a life among soldiers, preferring his own bed and the comforts of home. He enjoyed also the civilian freedom to express whatever opinions he cared to form. But filial duty could not be lightly dismissed. To serve the Crown was an honour the Gales were proud to undertake. A commission was obtained. Thus it was that, two years later, he had found himself on board a ship bound for the Black Sea. A number of his fellows had sold out, rather than face the skirmishes which may have lain ahead. But this had seemed to William dishonourable. Algernon had joined only at the end of the last year. If William was not by inclination a soldier, Algernon was by temperament entirely unsuited to the martial life. He was dreamy, somewhat slow, with the sweet smile of a much younger fellow.

Here outside Sebastopol, William could not let himself recall the companion of his boyhood, their childish games on the long afternoons; how they had played together, raced together, fished together. He and his brother and sister full of fun at nursery tea, taking their buttered bread and sprinkling tiny amber crystals of demerara sugar upon it, purloined from the sugar-bowl, whenever their nurse was not looking. Algie's small freckled limbs, as a child of seven or eight, splashing in the clear brown shallows of the stream. How his teeth had chattered, his lips paled, the first time he had fired a gun. That had been their

father's 20-bore, when they had set out to shoot pigeons in the fields one afternoon. Although Algie had not hit a bird, still the force of it, the noise, had shaken him. There came into William's mind those times – oh the pity of it! – when he had remonstrated with Algie, found fault with him for being too slow, too timid, too fond of remaining indoors. Oftentimes the boy had preferred to sit on the window seat in the nursery with Caroline, drawing, than to come outside and play rough and tumble. William remembered the incline of Algernon's head, as he had concentrated on his drawing book. The thought of his youthful seriousness was inexpressibly tender. Yet he must not think of these things.

He stood and stepped back, pausing to be sure that the eyes stayed shut. Here was another thing he had never thought to know: how to close the eyes of the dead. More dreadful still, that it was uncertain whether the lids would remain closed. He had seen before that if they were not weighted down, the lids could rise a little over the now clouded, unseeing eyes, like an ill-drawn blind across the darkening glass of a window. But William had no coins for the task and he had not the heart to find stones. Not the stones of this place of death.

Algie had missed the worst of the fighting, arriving as a reinforcement only in December, some four months earlier. He had not seen the clamour above the Alma River; nor, after the great battle at Inkerman Heights, the fallen as numerous as a whole hillside's worth of sheep. He had not known the increase in weight of a bayonet as hour after hour of fighting progressed. Nor the force required for the blade to do its terrible work, piercing the coats of the Russians, then their ribs: it was butchery. Shot as thick as hail, all but invisible in the fog and smoke, until it found a man's flesh.

Yet there had been beauty. Frequently at night William had watched the shells flying in their graceful curves and marvelled

that destruction could wear so lovely a coat. Seeing a star, it was easy to take it for a shell also and to wonder that it moved so slowly across the blackness of the sky. In the vineyards by Alma, before the fighting began, finches and larks had congregated in flocks. There had been buntings, gold-crested wrens and yellow-hammers. The song of linnets had hung in the soft air. The first sight of the little harbour at Balaklava had been delightful, scarcely two ships' breadths at its entrance, with magnificent high cliffs along each side, higher than any he knew of on the English coast. It had put him in mind of Clovelly.

But a siege was unrelenting work and this was what Algernon had come out to. There was no verdure here at camp; only mile upon mile of mud. In the cold the trampled ground had frozen into hard deep ruts that caused men and horses to stumble. The privations, especially those endured by the men, had been very hard. Every day men were lost in the trenches from grape and shell, but more had fallen from exhaustion, starvation, ague, cholera. Algie had been much afraid, though he had tried to conceal it, even from William. Perhaps especially from William.

He felt tired. His limbs ached from lack of sleep. When presently he emerged from the trench where his brother's body lay, a furore of sound met his ears. Yellow smoke filled the air. There was the smell of burnt sugar, like toffee apples, which hovered wherever black powder had been expelled from the guns. It struck him that all the noise – the cries and shouts of men, the sporadic report of guns, the boom of occasional cannon fire across the ridge – must have been just as loud within the hollow as it was without; yet he had been conscious of none of it. While he had been sitting with poor Algie there seemed to have been no sound at all.

It came to him that he must now write to his father. It grieved him that the news would reach them at home before his letter could, in the lists of the wounded and the dead published in *The*

Times and the *Illustrated London News*. How terrible to thus discover their poor boy's demise! And Lord Raglan's next despatch would likely be printed sooner than the mail could carry his missive. How his mother would greet the news he could not bear to consider. At least he would be able to say in truth that his brother had died as the direct result of wounds, while fighting alongside his company. That Algernon's last words had demonstrated a selflessness which would surely commend him to his Maker. Gale could say, too, that the boy had died under enemy fire. Algie had been about to go back to camp after a night in the trench when a stray shell burst some way in the air and one piece came down and struck him just below the left shoulder. There had been a great deal of blood, the wound too deep to staunch the flow of it. The fellow beside him told William that Algie had surely been insensible as to the severity of his injury, for he was reported to have said: 'If there is anyone worse hit than me, he had better be taken first,' the lad having seen that there was only one stretcher at hand. He was not heard to speak again. During all the time it took for someone to run back to camp and fetch his brother the bleeding had gone on. By the time William arrived at his brother it had stopped.

When it had fallen to him to write other such letters to the families of his special friends, his pen had faltered. *'We are all in great affliction at the present time, Death having snatched from us one whom we all loved. We struggle to conceive how the sad news of such a loss will be met at home, by those whom poor so-and-so held in the dearest regard . . . Your son, from the day he joined the 23rd, proved himself to be a credit to us, and a most determined soldier. I have every reason to believe that he is now in that place where you would not wish to have him back from.'*

But how to lessen the great blow to a father or a widow when a man had died not from gallantry, not among the flash of bayonets and the terrible glory of battle, but from cold or sickness,

lying groaning like a beast in his own ordure? This was how his dear friend Lockwood had met his end. The cholera. He had known that his time was coming: he handed his pocket watch to Gale. It had been his last wish that William should visit his widow and the two little daughters he was to leave behind, to offer them some crumb of comfort. It was a meeting William did not anticipate with any gladness, for how could he in honesty convey the facts of Lockwood's death in such a way as to ameliorate their loss? They would ask questions and how was he to answer so as to preserve the honour of his friend? The press were heartless, listing the cause of death next to a fellow's name: debris, dysentery, diarrhoea. Did the men who compiled these cruel lists never consider the mothers, the sisters, the wives whose dreadful shock and sorrow were by their cruel enumeration made so much the heavier? If their men were to be taken from them, would it not be kinder to allow them to cherish the hope that each had died a hero? Small wonder the press were not popular here.

Algie had done his best, but his brother knew that he had not shown dauntless intrepidity. His face had often had the look of fright upon it. The sight of blood had always alarmed him, from his boyhood. When at home as a lad of eleven or twelve he had cut his hand while whittling he had cried out: 'Don't let me see!' and shut his eyes, holding out his arm for their nurse to attend. The boy had come as one of some two hundred and thirty reinforcements, many of them too young to be of much use. They were not hardy. One officer had joined straight from his lessons at Winchester School, having asked leave of his headmaster. More than forty of their number were dead of cholera before Christmas.

There were times when Gale wondered how noble a cause this Crimean affair could truly be said to be. Many times. He had not been alone in the view, which he had formed while camped at

Varna, that the Turks were a horrid set of people to fight for: in the early days, many had averred that they would gladly go over to the Russians and help them against this wretched nation, if that were only the policy of England. In any case, their masters at home seemed to be bitterly inept. The Commissariat was almost criminally inefficient. Supplies were utterly inadequate, if they came at all. During the long months of the winter, watching men die from sickness, fatally weakened by the lack of food or warmth or shelter; seeing horses eating each other's tails in the cold for lack of forage, he had privately questioned whether this was a campaign worth the fighting. It was a question which was not resolved by hearing some of the younger men call out for their mothers in the hours before death, with nothing to help them.

William had seen sights no civilized man should witness. He had seen men's bodies hanging from the branches of trees, like broken umbrellas. In the height of battle men and horses had fallen in swathes, like grass before a scythe. The numbers seemed impossible. After Alma he had seen a wounded Russian, offered an easeful sip of brandy from an Englishman's flask, reward his helper with the blade of a bayonet. And it had been sickening to a man's soul to witness the women who appeared like vultures after each battle, shears in their hands, harvesting gold braid and buttons from the bodies of the still unburied fallen with no more pity than if they were shearing sheep. Down by the harbour, now, those same women sold snuffboxes carved from the bones of the dead horses.

And how were they rewarded for their courage, those who lived on to fight again? It was reported in the journals at home that the men were often drunk, but William knew that they were very much more often hungry, and cold besides. Illustrations in *Punch* or the *Illustrated London News* showed men in fur caps and great sealskin coats standing before little wooden huts,

warming their hands by merry braziers. In truth there was often no wood to get up for building shelters, nor even for a fire to heat a pot: the men lived on biscuit, the officers on ham. When there was a fire, there were not enough mess-tins to go round, for most of the men had thrown their camp-kettles away on the march after the battle of the Alma River, supposing more would be sent out. They slept on, or more generally in, the wet ground, some – like Gale – in bell tents, others in holes in the ground, lined with sailcloth. Men's toes came off from frostbite; even their very feet. When at last came hay and oats for the horses, vegetables and provisions for the men, all lay rotting in the mud close to the harbour: the mules to fetch up stores were all dead, the ways impassable from constant freezing rain. A consignment of much-needed boots were all in too small a size to fit the men. Accordingly, no man nor officer was ever buried with his boots on, their seniors looking away while the men removed the boots from the dead. The Government sent out not the tea which all desired, but coffee: unroasted beans which they had no fire to make good. The pallid beans could no more be made into a reviving drink than could the soil they stood on.

All of this had led William Gale to question the wisdom of the politicians at home and of the generals here on the campaign. It was much discussed that Lord Cardigan had departed with indecent haste from the ruinous Balaklava affair during which such numbers of the Light Brigade had fallen. It was said that he had made for his yacht, with a French chef, safely anchored in the bay. His supporters insisted that he had stayed by the camp fire consoling those who remained of his men, for all of that sad night. No one knew what to believe. Gale fancied that their Commander, poor old Lord Raglan, recognized the fruitlessness of the affair and that this accounted for his protracted absences from the encampments of men. When he did ride out, there were some officers who were said to run away to

avoid having to salute him. It was whispered that he had been heard to refer to their allies the French as the enemy, a remnant of his Waterloo days. Nevertheless, word of his acts of kindness spread through the camps and he was generally much liked. It was known he had sent blankets and even lent his own rubber sleeping bag to a corporal's wife, who was giving birth in the snow. He wrote warm letters to the friends of men whose lives had been taken. The story of how he had lost his arm at Waterloo and never once cried out as the surgeon removed it was oftentimes retold. He had endured in silence, only broken in order to ask that a ring his wife had given him be retrieved from the lifeless hand. Such courage was admirable, albeit now at some remove in time from the present. William was in any case grateful to Lord Raglan, for it had reached his ears that the old man had made special mention of his actions at Alma. This would likely bring him a decoration.

Yet for all his private reservations as to the wisdom of the campaign, he would not concede to Alice.

It was most confounding that the qualities which had at first drawn him to his wife were now those very self-same traits which so much vexed him. He had liked her spirit, her independence of thought: she had seemed very alive to him, when compared to the docile young women he had met before. Her parents had both died before she came of age: she had had no father to check her. She spoke her own thoughts, gleaned from her own reading, where most of the young ladies of his acquaintance seemed only to parrot the opinions of their older brothers or fathers. Alice laughed frankly, where propriety had it that young ladies more properly hid their amusement behind their hands, or the flutter of a fan. If she did not possess a certain womanly softness, he had not at first rued its lack. To those who cared for her, Alice was deemed captivating; a flame of a woman. To those who did not, she was thought to want the reticence becoming of her sex.

It was not in any case only Alice's character which he had admired. Her neck was pale and slender and there was a little dark mole upon it, just below one ear: he could still remember how he had thought to have been driven to madness if he could not kiss her in that place. The particular tilt of her head spoke to him of merry complicity and a delightful sense of mischief. To marry her – to possess her – had been the one object of his life.

But a Radical! There was no crime in a woman holding an opinion, provided she kept it to herself; but it was unseemly, at best, for the wife of an officer to speak out against the campaign in which her husband was actively engaged. It was impossible. A man's prospects would be dashed if it were to come out that his wife held such views. Promotion would be out of the question. Discretion was essential. Some dreadful stories confided within private letters sent back from Crimea had been finding their way into the press, to the contempt of the commanders here. It simply did not do.

In Alice's last letter – those pages which now enfolded the locks of poor Algie's hair – she had described a meeting she had attended while up in town, a meeting at which the Member of Parliament for the West Riding of Yorkshire, Mr Cobden, had spoken. The Liberal Cobden had become notorious. In truth, William did not find himself in disagreement with every one of the man's views, for all that he was himself a traditionalist and, by birth and belief, a Tory. He privately acknowledged that Cobden's notion that the British should have sent only naval vessels to oppose the Russians and no soldiers whatsoever was not unsound, especially given the parlous conditions in which the men on land had found themselves over the past winter. Cobden's views on British society and its urgent need of reform were another matter. Gale had hardly known how to respond to Alice's letter. To think of his wife going out in the evening, unchaperoned; consorting with heaven knew what kind of

people! Mercifully this gathering had taken place in Holborn: no one in the Gales' circle could have seen her there. She was all for Cobden, who, said Alice, had called the British 'the most sanguinary nation on earth'. The politician had gone on to pronounce that this thirst for blood was fuelled by an irresponsible aristocracy. It was his conviction, furthermore, that the campaign against the Russians should be halted forthwith. He called on Government to cease the war on the grounds that Turkey needed no protection from Russian force. It was in Cobden's view certain that the Mahometans could not prevail. He was convinced that over time that faith would wither and die, and Turkey would come to be governed once more by Christians. This William Gale did not believe.

Alice wrote that she had lingered, after the Peace meeting, to speak with one or two of those other ladies present. They told her of an occasion in January in Trafalgar Square at which a group of agitators – not all of them males – had borne placards and banners with Stop the War emblazoned upon them. It was thought that some one and a half thousand had participated; and upon a Sunday. A service in the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields had had to be halted, because of the commotion without. Snowballs had been thrown at omnibuses and even in the direction of the constabulary. Alice had been told that the ringleaders had appeared before a police magistrate at Bow Street and each had been fined forty shillings, or fourteen days' imprisonment. Gale considered the punishment woefully insufficient. It was clear to William that such people were little more than rabble. Interrupting worshippers at prayer! Parliament was the proper place for debate, not the public streets and squares of London. And such gatherings were most certainly no place for a woman. For Alice to describe this with evident approval was quite wrong.

It struck him, not for the first time, that the campaign here

was a more tolerable thing for the unmarried. Those who had wives at home only pined for them and fretted about their welfare. In his case there was the further concern that his wife might by some rash words imperil the family name; or indeed compromise her husband's advancement. These were fears he must perforce keep to himself. And then knowing the comfort, the warmth and the tender pleasures of a married bed, as he did, made the cold nights especially hard to bear. He missed Alice, the weight of her arm around him as she slept, the quiet sounds as she turned in the night. She was a much more gentle presence beneath the counterpane than the animated face she showed upon the day would have indicated.

He was fortunate here at least in his tent-fellow, Derrington, who was an amiable fellow and hardly snored. Derrington had been one of a group from Gale's other companies with whom he had found himself at Varna, last August. How distant that time now seemed! Men who had been there before his arrival had had a bad time of the cholera; a dreadful fire had ravaged through the town and much of the camp, taking supplies in its flames. Lord Raglan's entire travelling library had been incinerated. But the little town itself, its green wooded coasts, the bay full of vessels: all had charmed him. In order to avoid the fever they had moved camp again and then again, the horses – some eighty-five in all belonging to their regiment – picketed in rows in the rear of the tents. One such encampment found them beside a lake, and after they had bathed in the mornings, the subalterns often amused themselves hunting the wild dogs that were about the place. Races were put on. When they were closer to Varna, those who knew how to swim rose at six and went out in little boats to bathe. The days at Varna had been spent most agreeably, getting up parties to go quail shooting in the hills on the sturdy local ponies, or rowing about the fleet. In the evenings there had been to-ing and fro-ing between camp and the yachts and

steamers ranked in the bay, for dinners and easeful sitting with glasses of port afterwards, beneath the stars. After a great ball at the French Ambassador's, all the talk was of Prince Napoleon, who had been seen there: it was said that he was dressed like his uncle and resembled him to a wonderful degree. A few fellows had sisters or cousins who had come out, so there was occasional pleasant company at table. The warm air hung heavy with the scent of Turkish tobacco and cigars.

Sailing from Varna towards their goal had afforded Gale some of the greatest spectacles of his life. At about one hundred miles from Sebastopol the fleet – some one thousand strong – had had the order to cast anchor. On every side were ships, and such ships! There was the *Trafalgar* and the *Himalaya* and the *Golden Fleece* and countless others besides, four-masted ships and steamers and transports and rafts, siege-trains and magazines and steam tugs; all stretching away in every direction for what seemed to be miles into the distance. They lay entirely out of sight of land. Providence had seemed to favour their designs, for there was uninterrupted calm over those days while they waited in the Black Sea: not so much as a breath of wind disturbed them. During the clear nights the waters were splashed by stars. In the evenings all the bands played, their gay music echoing out across the still, dark water. Gusts of men's laughter rippled sometimes across the deep. The lamps on each vessel had shone with such brightness, like brilliants laid out against a jeweller's black velvet. The sight was so affecting that he had almost fancied himself in the midst of some highly lighted town. '*It was more like the view from one of the London bridges at night than anything else,*' he wrote to Alice. '*A lovelier sight you cannot conceive.*'

Derrington had been by his side then as they looked out across the illuminated fleet, its brilliance doubled by the myriad spots of reflected light dancing gently on the sea. Now his friend greeted him as he returned to their tent, the sombre task of

attending Algernon's remains completed. He could tell from the younger man's expression that he already knew the worst. 'I daresay you'll be needing to write some letters,' he said. 'I'm going to go and see if I can beg a hen's egg from Bourke, to fortify you.' Bourke had somehow managed to procure three or four hens and had spent two whole days in constructing a miniature camp for them. The eggs secured him extra tobacco, porter and much else besides. As Derrington made off, he felt his eyes quicken: kindness had a way of bringing a fellow closer to tears than any barbarity. He was grateful that he would have a moment alone, to himself. He felt he could not have borne to answer, just now, any questions about his brother.

This morning he had been planning to write to his mother and father about the Tsar's death. The news of it had reached the English through the telegraph, before it could get to the Russians. Lord Raglan had sent Lord Burghersh into Sebastopol, a white flag ahead of him, with the intelligence. It was said that the Cossacks had not believed him, suspecting a ruse until he took out his betting book and offered to wager them £50 apiece that it was so. At this he was given credence. It was rumoured that the Emperor's demise might hasten the end of the war. This was the story William had meant to tell his parents.

Derrington had lately been sent from a London supplier a small campaign table, which served them both as desk and dining table. Upon it Gale had before him several handfuls of the bulbs which he had collected. These were the source of the dearest little white flowers, tiny lanterns which hung at the end of tender green stems, their faces drooping down like shy children. These snowdrops covered the ground beyond the camp, together with crocus and small wild hyacinths. It had become something of a craze, among the officers, to send quantities of the bulbs home. He had thought to enclose some of the bulbs – each no bigger than a peppermint – in his next letters home.

The empty page over which his pen hovered must now contain sadder things. In all his letters home, he had tried to maintain a levity which, to say the truth, seldom matched the circumstances in which he found himself. Only to his father did he occasionally confide the more sober sentiments he was sometimes prey to; even to his wife he had held back from describing the true horrors of this past winter. To his family he outlined the barest sketches of those battles he had participated in and the occasional skirmish, without dwelling on the losses incurred. Such reticence was somewhat in vain, for the wretched *Times* correspondent supplied more unpleasant detail than William ever cared to; and made many errors besides.

The boy's hair he would not consign to the treachery of the seas, but keep with him until he came home. But the letter he must write and with haste, for he guessed there could be no rest for his parents, nor his sister besides, until they knew the end of poor Algie.

My dearest Father,

It is with a grief which cannot be diminished by the certainty of his having been removed to the Heavenly Kingdom, that I now impart to you the Dreadful news, that my brother has in the small hours of this morning met his end of this life. A more distressing intelligence I know it would be impossible for you to receive, than that you should never see again one of those whom we all of us loved dearest on earth. You may be assured that Algie was gallant indeed. He rose this morning still a boy, but by his fortitude and courage he died a man. With his final breath he expressed the wish that someone more severely wounded should be brought back to camp before himself.

The only consolation I may offer is that he knew no suffering. He stood, he fell, all in one instant. Enemy fire took him with such swiftness that he cannot have been sensible of it. His cerement will . . .

Here he faltered. How could he tell his father that the boy lay still unburied, where he fell? That an armistice for burial might be two days off, or more? Nor could he bear to let them know at home that his brother would be buried without a coffin. Lacking timber enough to build shelters for the living, and fires to heat their food, there was no wood spare to make cradles for the dead. At the rear of the camp, where gabions and fascines were in constant production, a mere handful of rough coffins had been nailed together; but these boxes were only for more senior occupants than Algernon Gale. Instead, William would supply one of his own blankets as a makeshift shroud, for he could not let earth fall on the boy's uncovered face.

2.

Alice was in an agitation. It was her habit to keep abreast of the accounts of what was said in Parliament, lest any debate therein should shed light on what was planned concerning the Russian war, for it seemed to her that her husband's fate was just as likely to be decided at Westminster – or more latterly, at the Conference at Vienna – as on the shores of the Black Sea. Thus it was that Mr Cobden's speech of the 5th of June had come to her attention and within it a warning which troubled her greatly. It was that gentleman's contention that any man, if well clothed, well fed and sheltered, may survive a winter. But, he went on:

The best authorities tell you that it is hardly possible for an Englishman in the Crimea, unless he take every possible precaution, to escape infection in the summer months of July, August and September. You sin against the law of nature if you go out in the sun in the day, and you equally sin if you go out in the night dews. Such, again, is the effect of the climate, that if you partake of new corn or of fruit in undue measure, these things will bring on intermittent fever. Now, these precautions our soldiers disregard, and therefore is it that I dread the months ahead, for all our troops in the Crimea.

She knew it did not soothe her husband for her to express her fears too forcibly, and yet Alice was convinced that she must apprehend him as to the forthcoming dangers of exposure to the hot climate. It was known that there had been greater casualties as a result of infection than of battle wounds. Alice had felt a lifting of disquiet that the cold, wet season was over, with its hostile vapours and fogs. This fresh danger she had not foreseen.

She set about composing a letter in which she hinted at the caution William must now attempt as regards the perilous outdoor heat of the weeks ahead. This she must convey, yet without appearing to scold. She worked hard at her writing. By the inclusion of some mention of his family and of one or two amusing little occurrences of recent weeks, she was satisfied. In answer she received from William:

4th July 1855, Camp before Sebastopol

My dearest One

Yesterday was the funeral procession of poor Lord Raglan and a more splendid sight you cannot conceive. Hardened and accustomed as we all are to death and horrors out here, I shall never forget my feelings as we uncovered our heads to honour the good old man's remains – the simplicity of the gun carriage that bore his coffin, covered with a Union Jack and on it his cocked hat and a little wreath of Eternelles (placed there by old Pelissier) formed the most touching contrast to the magnificence of the pall bearers' dress and that of the numberless staff who followed. One felt that all this wondrous spectacle was a labour of love, not costing a farthing, a whole Army just turning out to do honour to one whom, whatever his shortcomings, all loved who knew. I know that your fellow Cobden spoke in Parliament against Lord Raglan only a month ago, but here the feeling was very different. I think those who served under him are better placed to know the true character of the man. I fear that the failure of the assault on the 18th of last month weighed most heavily upon him and indeed hastened his demise.

For five full miles the way was lined with our Infantry, leaning on their arms reversed, and where we ended the French Zouaves took up, then the French Imperial Guard and at last the French regiments completed the seven miles that the cortege traversed. At Kazatch the cavalry defiled to the left and the artillery to the right, and formed long lines along the sea shore. Then the coffin came straight through the marines and sailors, brilliant in their white dresses, and with their hats off. The boat

which bore the coffin went off under a salute of nineteen guns and we were not back here much before 10 o'clock, it having been a fine day and a cloudless, warm evening.

While waiting on the shore I had a good view of our Celebrities here. Omar Pasha looked splendid. It is most curious to imagine his passage from his youth to his present position as Commander of the Ottoman forces here. I expect you know that he was born in Austria, a Christian, and as a young man served as a tutor and a writing master: he is known to have the most beautiful handwriting to this day, and his signature is said to have a great deal of flourish. He is a most intelligent looking old man with a fine, noble head, and his dress was more gorgeous than I can describe: one blaze of gold, and on his Fez was a single great diamond like a star. On any other man one would only have seen the dress. However, you will see all these things much better told in the papers – though with less truth I daresay.

I have been taking advantage of the very lovely weather that we have been enjoying lately by going for long rides into the new territory we have got. (Your warnings as to the dangers of exposure I have not heeded, for I am grown accustomed to the climate here and fear it not.) Arthur Derrington and I rode out to Baidar the day before yesterday and found it a delightful spot, in the midst of a very smiling fertile valley. Quantities of the jolliest children I ever saw were running about, the smallest chaps imaginable wandering freely in little gangs, giving chase to a merry assortment of dogs and the oddly long-legged fowl they keep. They have had to furnish labour and bullocks, indeed all they had, to support the Russian Army, yet they still maintain their friendliness and hospitality. We got some milk there which we enjoyed, the first milk, by the way, that I have tasted for nine or ten months. These little excursions form the bright spots of one's life here.

Might I ask a small favour, my darling? As you already know, my poor friend Lockwood met his end here, leaving a widow and two children: I wonder if you would be kind enough to call on Mrs Lockwood, in Cheltenham? I know your aunt is there and it was my idea that perhaps you might pay the call when next you visit that good lady?