

*Setting the Seal (1915)*  
by Sumner Locke



A doctor is faced with passing fit for military service the dissolute husband of the woman he loves.

The story is essentially a domestic melodrama, harkening back to fraught emotional novels of the late nineteenth century: mistaken marriages, secret bigamy, love triangles, and silent yearning. But the presence of World War I in the background adds a distinctly modern frisson to the emotion: the international conflagration provides an unexpected opportunity to break domestic ties even when the courts and the church declare them inviolate.

*About the Story ...*

The story is framed by tight third-person narration from military doctor Major Buckridge, but unfolds through a succession of embedded first-person narratives that seem to contradict one another. Is the wife correct in saying that her conjugal unhappiness does not meet the divorce courts' criteria? Is her husband, who claims to have openly given her grounds for divorce, correct in saying that his wife's religious faith holds her back? Is Bunny's mother as naïve as she seems, or is she

wilfully blind to her situation? The story builds not to one incontrovertible truth but to a series of entangled perspectives that each bear their own truth.

Major Buckridge, M.D., D.S.O., noticed that the clock in his surgery was right on one, as the orderly ushered in another man for medical inspection. Just one glance from the major, and he decided to suspend the appointment till after lunch, though it was hardly the thought of the meal that made him do so.

Something about the man who had "signed on" to go with the next contingent, gripped him as tightly as if he had been stayed by an iron hand ... the face? He scarcely knew, but there was that about the general bearing of the man which called up warm blood in the major's face and held him long enough to make a final decision.

"I'm afraid that I must ask you to come back after ... lunch," he said, quietly scanning his visitor.

"I've been waiting, my turn to ... to get through since ten o'clock," said the man, and the major smiled calmly.

More than ever he wished to take this case easily. First because this fellow had come into his life at a time when it was going to make things vitally interesting, and secondly because even in his walk through the open door he showed something peculiarly unlike all the other applicants for a medical certification.

With eyes set on the recruit the major smiled again. "I can take you at two o'clock, if that will suit you," he said, and, far from comfortable, the man turned to go. He did not appear to like the super-polite tone of the medical man, it savoured of sarcasm ... but the major had his side to the question as well.

Immediately the door closed, Major Buckridge called up a number on the telephone. Almost nervously he did it, with that clear cut, decisive action that marks a man to whom duty is a creed, no matter what his feelings might be in the matter. Then came the short, sharp sentences of a woman answering at the other end.

The major said, "Is that you, Helen ... ? I want to see you at once ... can you make it convenient to have lunch with me? I'll be in Collins-street in twenty minutes; and I have a particular appointment at two o'clock ..."

In answer, he got the soft breathed words of the woman. "Of course, I'll be there ... is it ... is it something serious?"

"Something we didn't expect," shot from the major to the receiver. "Your husband may go to the front."

"May ..." It was almost a sharp retort. The woman took a fraction of a minute longer, then said, "... Thank

God he sees his duty at last. Are you there, Herbert? Have you passed him for health?"

"Not yet. I purposely postponed his appointment till I had seen you."

"Why?"

"Meet me in twenty minutes for lunch and I will be able to explain."

The 'phone conversation finished, and Mrs. Brooks met the grey-haired medical man twenty minutes after in the city.

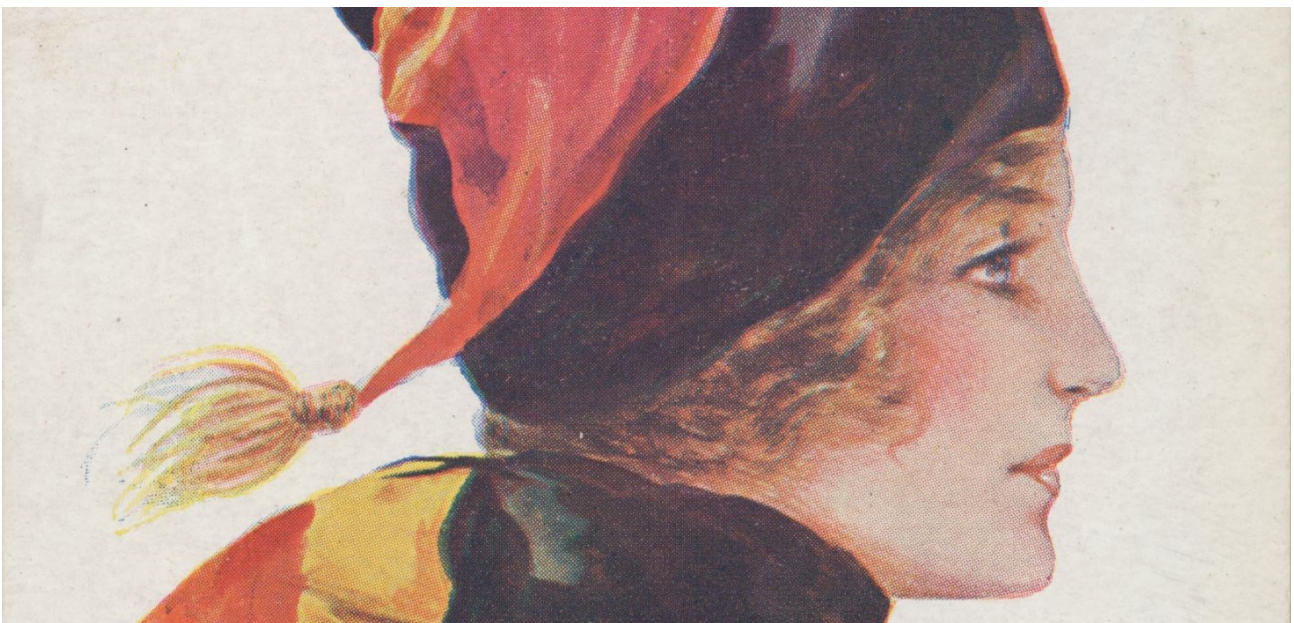
"I've been passing men all the morning," said the major over lunch. "Some of them just tip the scales for decent conditions; but under the existing circumstances when Britain calls for every available man, I feel it a duty on myself to forward as many physically fit, as I can."

"But you would not pass a man if he was ... unsound?" asked Mrs. Brooks.

"That's just what I want to speak to you about, Helen."

There was a slight pause, in which china clattered and glasses rang in the dining room, then the major met the eyes of the woman right opposite him.

*Her face was sweetly beautiful, but there were shades of suffering under the eyes. When the major looked at her she seemed to lift mentally, as a trusting child might . . . but when she turned her head there were set lines of matured womanhood in her face.*



"Sometimes," said Major Buckridge, "there comes to a man in my position a certain chance in which he

may or may not exercise his duty to the limit. I mean, a time in which one has to consider a case differently and to abide by the law of one's right position, to perhaps a greater degree ... for instance. A man may, as I said, just tip the scale for good health. There may be signs of development of organic trouble, but which may never occur in him, and yet he is earnest, keen, determined to go to war. I feel then in my heart that I have no right to withhold that man from doing his duty to his country because he feels it is in him to go and because Britain needs him ... then again, there may be the perfectly fit man of bullock strength leaving a delicate wife and many children ... perhaps I see in him possibilities of doing bigger duty at home ... all the same, he passes his examination, too. Then I come to a case like ... like your husband ... Helen, you know what that means ... to you?"

Helen Brook flushed slightly, then dropped her eyes.

"I have been praying that he would go," she said.

"Because ..."

"Because ... I want him to go." She met the eyes of the major fearlessly, then broke into a feverishness that made the grey-haired man almost lose his breath.

"Let me be frank. Herbert. ... Why at this stage, after five years of suffering, should I withhold from you the truth? Dear God ... how my life has strained to its present limitations. How I've bruised under the lash of that man's cruelty ... with no chance of freedom ... a creature bound by conventions to suffer, suffer ..."

"Caring for another man and eating your heart out in silence," said the major quietly. She could not meet his eyes.

"At least I can be truthful, Herbert. You've watched this tragedy going on. The law gives me no grace ... no redress. I am bound by chains as heavy as those which bind darkness to the earth at nights, I can see no daylight ... and my disgraceful husband is the suffocating sting in it all ..."

There was a moment's pause, then the woman broke out again.

"If I had cared I should have wished him to go as little as I now wish him to remain behind ... but as he is the obstacle in my path, the milestone that adds to the length of my heavy journey through life, a thousand times I must be fair to the woman in myself. He must go. I've prayed for it."

"And yet there is every chance that he may not go."

The woman held her breath.

"Why ... Herbert?"

"He may be physically unfit. I am the person now to set the seal on his chances and ... yours ..."

"Y — e — s." Her voice was only a whisper. Her eyes burned like the globes of strong electric lights.

"I am the man to set the seal, Helen, on your chances, and I love you."

With icy fingers the woman toyed with her fish knife and fork. "You never said so, Herbert."

"Dear, I've waited until I had a right. Perhaps now I am a bit too forward, but it all seems too good to be true."

As if to salute the things that might be he lifted his glass of claret and looked at her through it.

"I drink, Helen, to the best that I can do for you. If it be to send your rascally husband to the fight — then he goes. If it be that I must keep him here ..."

"Don't!" The woman forced his hand down to the cloth.

"Herbert, don't play — why should you keep him here? Can't you see that this chance has come from God? I may be released, and that poor wretch who has harmed my whole life, be given a chance to face his Maker differently. Oh, he must go — he must go — out there where life is all the giving up of personal things; he will be as other men. Perhaps he may even regret his dissolute existence, may find greatness in handing his wretched life to save others, Herbert. Whatever happens my husband must be allowed to go to the war."

The major looked steadily at her.

"Suppose I find him physically unfit. He has been a heavy drinker, a waster, his muscles may have lost their full play through sheer idleness."

Helen Brook touched him on the arm ever so gently, but her fingers met together in a firm grip.

"You spoke just now — just now — of a time when duty had to be exercised to its full limit, when you, as a man, had sometimes to judge. Herbert, you must not fail my husband, for his own sake he must be allowed to do the first thing of unselfish sacrifice he has ever undertaken. And because of our two lives being crowded down to painful endurance also, you must not fail him. Can't you see that in being selfish for ourselves we are also giving him his chance?"

The major pushed away his glass and answered her slowly.

"Helen, my dear, it was for this reason that I altered that appointment an hour ago. The whole thing came to me like a flash, even though at first I did not recognise the man as your husband. I have seen him so little and he has — altered."



“Yes — shockingly.”

*“He looks to me well played out. The luxury of life has sapped him of any special individuality. He may have consumption.”*



“But all the same, Herbert, he must go to the front. He wishes it evidently for some reason; though I thought him the slacker — the shirker.”

Carefully the major rose as she had done so.

“I think that he must go to the front; there is a duty to you, Helen, as well as to him. It is very unlikely that he will return.”

“That is as God wills,” said Helen Brook. “But it is my chance as his — remember.”

“I will not forget it, dear” said Major Buckridge, as he went off with the sternness of unrelenting duty in his face.

Just as the major entered the barracks a little pink and white faced girl interrupted him. She was almost a child with big soul-eating eyes and hands that quivered on his coat sleeve. With crimson lips and a face pale to the pink spots in her cheeks, she started talking rapidly. Most of it was incoherent to the major, so he managed to get her into his rooms by practically guiding her.

Then she talked more reasonably.

“Major Buckridge — there is only you I could come to. Will ought to be here by now, he has an appointment for medical inspection and I wanted to see you first. Please could you stop him from going to the front? There is only him and Bunny in my whole life, and Bunny is such a small child that it would be years before he would be of any use at all.”

"Is Will your husband?" asked the major.

"Yes," came the halting from the young, sweet lips. "Major Buckridge, perhaps I ought to tell you that we've had no trouble in our family. I mean there is no law binding us by that of our own beautiful love. Will is everything to me, and because I cared so much, I gave up the whole of my life."

"You mean that you are only bound by the law of yourselves?"

Great timid eyes met his.

"Just by that and Bunny — my little son. Oh, Major Buckridge, did you never feel as if you would die to have something really human to hang on to? That's how I felt when I was alone in the world earning my living. Then Will came — and I knew that there would have to be just baby before I could really call it life at all. And when Bunny came just everything seemed to have fallen at my feet: there was nothing I wanted, the law or the Church didn't seem to matter, and Will seemed happy, too, but —"

"And he wished to go to the front like a good fellow?"

Slowly the girl walked from her chair right to his desk.

"Once upon a time Will never wanted anything but me, then he went crazy for a child and there was Bunny. It just seemed as if God knew every little thing to do to help two ordinary people along. We were so happy till this week. Oh, you can't send Will away from me. There would be nobody to understand the position as it is — nobody who would quite look at it in our light."

The major smiled. She seemed so childish.

"I'm afraid, child, there would be no one. That is one of the penalties of breaking the conventional laws of humanity."

"But I did not break any laws. We loved each other so much and we could never have existed without Bunny."

The major moved his chair a trifle to look in her face.

"Might I ask why you never married according to the proper rules of society?"

Just for a moment the eye-lids flickered over her sweet face then she spoke quietly and half ashamedly.

"I never thought there were any ... I just thought that caring was what made things Holy ... Will said so when he asked me to come to him ... besides you see he had been married ever so long before ... he could not have me as his wife as well, though he said she wouldn't have minded ... it's all so funny when you start pulling it to pieces, but please ..."

“And the name of your ... I mean, the name you carry?”

“Everybody calls me Mrs. Brooks ... that’s Will’s name of course, and we thought it better to use it ... why ...?” Almost as if shot the major sprang to his feet.

“The ... coward ...” he said, scarcely holding himself in control. Then he shifted some papers on his desk and let the confusion pass.

“I don’t think Will is a coward at all,” said the girl.

“It’s because he’s so brave and loving that he is going to the war. Do you know he says it’s for the sake of a woman, and I feel certain he means me.”

“I beg your pardon ...” The major was measuring this.

She walked over very close to him. Two childish eyes were raised in mute appeal.

“For the sake of — a woman?” he asked faintly, then seeing that any opinion he might have on the subject would be beyond her simple mind, he went on with the business. “What is it you wish me to do?”

Almost hysterically excited the girl bounced to his side again.

“Oh, please — if you could just refuse to pass Will. You see he is not really a strong man, and his nerves are shocking at times. One day he actually slapped his little son ... ah, he would never have done it, but he had had some wretched business worries ... If you could only ... only see that he doesn’t go, Major Buckridge ... why ... there wouldn’t be one thing worth having in the world if he went, and besides —”

The tears gathered quickly. Almost impatiently angry with the man who was destroying two sweet women’s lives, he bluntly asked:

“Besides what?”

“Besides ... if anything happened that he got killed, the whole future of our little son would be ruined. Don’t you see, there is always a chance if we both live that someday that ... that Will and I might marry, and then —”

Carefully and decisively the major cut her short.

“We are dealing with the present. You ask me to prevent your, your ... well, call him Bunny’s father, from going to the front?”

“Oh, please ...”



"I can't say what I can do. I have a duty to my position, and one to my ... I mean, one perhaps to the man himself to consider. Will you please wait in the next room?" ... He opened a door near him and passed her in. "I will call you when I have settled what is best to do."

"For Bunny's sake ..." came from the weak little throat as he closed the door, and the major nearly staggered to his chair.

Immediately the orderly came through the main entrance with word that William Brooks had been waiting twenty minutes and was inclined to leave without his certificate. The major put up a hand. "One minute ... keep him but one minute longer ... and shut that door ... please."

Alone once more the medical man fought at a desire to break through the door and commence immediately an onslaught on the dissolute man waiting for inspection.

He took up the phone and called Helen quickly.

"I want to tell you," he said hurriedly and sharply as a man might who can only control himself by giving way to a certain amount of tightened tension.

"I want you to understand, Helen ... that in the case ... of Brooks ... there may be complications that will prevent me from exercising my full license ... I mean that there may be things to prevent him going which are beyond me ... in that case I want you to know that I have done my duty as far as anyone in my present position could."

Down the wire came the soft sure breathing of a woman who has herself under perfect control.

"I ... understand ... and Herbert, I want you to know that because of that sentiment between us, unless my husband goes to the war, I myself will leave the country."

"I see no reason," the major spoke quickly.

"I'll tell you ..." again Mrs. Brooks's calm voice. "One of us has to go out of the tangle ... it doesn't happen to be a case for the divorce courts, because Will has never done me any more harm than to marry me. He would not even desert me for some reason ... perhaps he cares a little ... but ..."

"Why should you go and where?" The Major was impatient. "Tell me Helen ... it means so much to me."

"Because of that, Herbert ... I must go. If Will does not go to the front and take the chance God has given us to perhaps settle the dreadful chaos of our lives, then I must go."

"What do you mean — to the front."

"To the front ... you have influence ... you can get me there in charge of a motor kitchen or in the nursing

capacity. I've served several years in that line so ... there is nothing to prevent me."

"But —"

"Don't make obstacles, Herbert. Don't you see that we must find a way out?"

"But that is scarcely a way out."

"There maybe a chance that I may be able to give my life for some poor wretched soul ... who knows ... women as well as men are now in the danger zone ..."

Before hanging up the receiver the major asked one more thing.

"Helen ... would you give up your happiness ... your real life, your everything — to save one poor soul?"

*"Willingly ... if that soul has suffered as I have."*



Without further explanation the telephone rang off and the major turned to meet the orderly who had ushered in the impatient William Brooks.

Just for a minute the elder man scanned his patient then roughly spoke to him. "You wish very much for this chance to serve your country, Brooks, yet so far you seem to have abused all opportunity. By the look of you I should say that you were neither fitted physically nor mentally to cope with the size of the trouble that a mere school boy would laugh at."

The man scowled at the major and took the thrust as it had been meant.

"Your business, major, I should say is to pass me as fit, or throw me out as not suitable. It hardly gives you the right to question whether I meet the game properly afterwards or not, does it?"

A clever return the major thought, but he passed it over. He started an examination of the man's eyes which met his without flinching.

"I must ask you to strip," said the major and after a time Brooks began to speak again.

"You can't find anything organically wrong with me doctor, because I'm as strong as a horse really. That little quiver of the hand perhaps makes you think I'm nervy — so I am, but it won't bar me from taking my chance."

The major was taking a minute scrutiny of his whole clean cut body and he talked casually the while.

"I won't say that it would not, were I to fail you."

"You can't fail me!" doggedly from Brooks.

"Don't be too sure. The Empire wants men badly, but still it might just suit the country to keep you in it."

"Keep me in it. There is nothing under Heaven that will keep me in it if I want to go to the front."

"No? Well, perhaps your heart may prevent you from going to the war, anyway."

"Heart? My heart is the strongest part of me. Say, doctor, there is some trouble up against me that you've got wind of. I could see this morning that you had it in for me."

Slightly nervous as a cowardly person generally is when he thinks he is found out, Brooks steadied himself against the table with his white, fine skin glistening under the bright afternoon sunlight.

"As I said," the medical man went on, "If anything fails you, it will be your heart."

"I think you are evading the question. Come now, what's this up against me? You are trying to pass me out."

For a moment the major made a keen examination of his heart, then he said quietly:

"No, I am not trying to pass you out. I am just going to do it."

"What? you are going to fail me? By — you shan't."

"I cannot, under the existing circumstances, Brooks, pass you as fitted to join the ranks."

With a trembling hand the man dragged on his clothes. He did it with the quivering fingers of a woman,

then he turned and almost flew at the major.

“God — you top dogs — what a chance you’ve got of pulling a man down. You’ve only got to press your thumb slowly in between a muscle or two or cram your ear to the breast of a strong man and you’ll kill him body and soul in a word. Butchers — you are — by nature. If it isn’t the knife, it’s the cruel, brutal, rotten science of your own mind. This was my opportunity, my only one, too — to do the first thing in my life for — for another person — God, you’ve killed me, but if I can raise enough heart I’ll go yet — yes, I’ll go — because it’s for my wife and not even you with your clever manoeuvring shall stop me.”

Standing there in his shirt and trousers he almost towered above the major, and for the first time since the man had been with him he noticed a subtle change come into his face.

*Just for a moment the sinister gleams of malice and selfishness fled to give place to a shade of softness that started in his eyes and gradually spread to his strong, well shut mouth.*



“Your wife?” he said smiling, and looking straight in the man’s face.

“My wife. Oh, I don’t suppose you’d understand, and if it wasn’t for throwing myself on your mercy now, I don’t suppose I’d bother telling you. Well, I love my wife better than I ever loved a thing in this whole world. Love her with the kind of love that drives a man insane, when it is not returned — that’s the trouble that I couldn’t face, doctor — it sent me to pieces and though it’s years now, and I’ve done everything to kill the real man in myself, I find I’m living a death worse than if I had been finished out there on the battlefield.”

He stopped to watch the older man's face.

"I tell you I'm suffering a brutal living death because I know that she is only waiting for me to finish and let her be happy with the man she loves. I found that out years ago, but she never allowed me to go into the matter with her, and I did all I could to bring her a case to divorce me. But she was pure, white before the God she'd sworn her marriage vows to. Dear little thing, she made a mistake when she took me. I was strong man-beast, and never was fit to link with her."

Again he paused and the major drew the first long breath of certainty.

"And — so this is your reason for wanting to go out to the front?" he said, curiously kind and human.

"Before God it is. I want to give her her chance to be happy, because I can't have her to myself. Oh you don't think that's in a drunkard."

"Hush!" The major lifted a hand. "I think, perhaps, there is a great deal more in what you say than either of us know of, but, may I ask one thing? What in the course of things — that is when your death report comes through, if it so happens — what do you intend to do about — Bunny?"

William Brooks took this without moving.

"Ah! that was my solace. I thought to bring into the world someone who would fill the place I had held sacred until I found my wife could never care as I cared. Bunny, my little son. I should, of course, leave provision for him. I have a little money in land."

"And Bunny's mother?" the major waited silently.

"Bunny's mother? She is a dear little thing, but she scarcely understands a strong man's life."

"Would she understand his death, even on the battlefield?" Brooks caught the glint in the major's eyes.

"You've got a heap up against me, doctor, and it's wonderful how much you know."

"I know your wife."

"Helen?" The reprobate's face gleamed.

"I have known her for years, and — and loved her."

"You." Brooks almost shivered. There was a slight pause, then he went slowly over to the major.

"You will marry her, then, when I'm dead."

"I hoped so."



“Good Lord, how cool you are. If I only had your chance. Doctor, you’ve only got to send me, to pass me to-day and it’s plain sailing for you. There’s not a chance in a thousand that I’d come back. I’d see to that, and yet —”

He was sufficiently excited to have to stop to moisten his hot lips. The major took him up where he had stopped.

“And yet, I am not going to pass you today.”

“Not? Good Heavens. What sort of man are you?”

“Just a perfectly human one the same as yourself. You wanted to give a woman a chance to be happy just now by handing her to the man she loves and who loves her. Well that’s my job also. I want to give a woman a chance to be happy also by handing her to the man she loves, and I can only do this by preventing you from going today, and — and sacrificing myself and Helen.”

“But why should you sacrifice Helen?”

The major looked keenly determined under his heavy brows. He rose to open the door into the next room.

“Because the woman that needs the greatest chance is the one who has given her life for you, the mother of Bunny.” He threw open the door, and a little shining, red, tearful face came peeping round the opening.

William Brooks gasped, and then looked at the doctor.

“It was well stage-managed,” he said with a smile, “but I see you have got the items right in their proper place.”

Then taking the girl’s hand he went through quickly. Once more the major spoke on the phone.

“Helen, I have failed him.”

“Herbert, it was his only chance.”

“I think not, Helen. Listen to me. I want your forgiveness for I have taken from you every chance of your ultimate happiness. Dear, I have sacrificed you, and perhaps myself, can you understand? I have set the seal.” A moment of rustling wind in the ‘phone, then Helen Brooks’s voice came again quiet and low.

“You have failed him, why?”

“There was a little doll-faced girl, Helen, with a little son. I have tried to show Brooks just where his biggest chance lies in remaining behind. You see.”

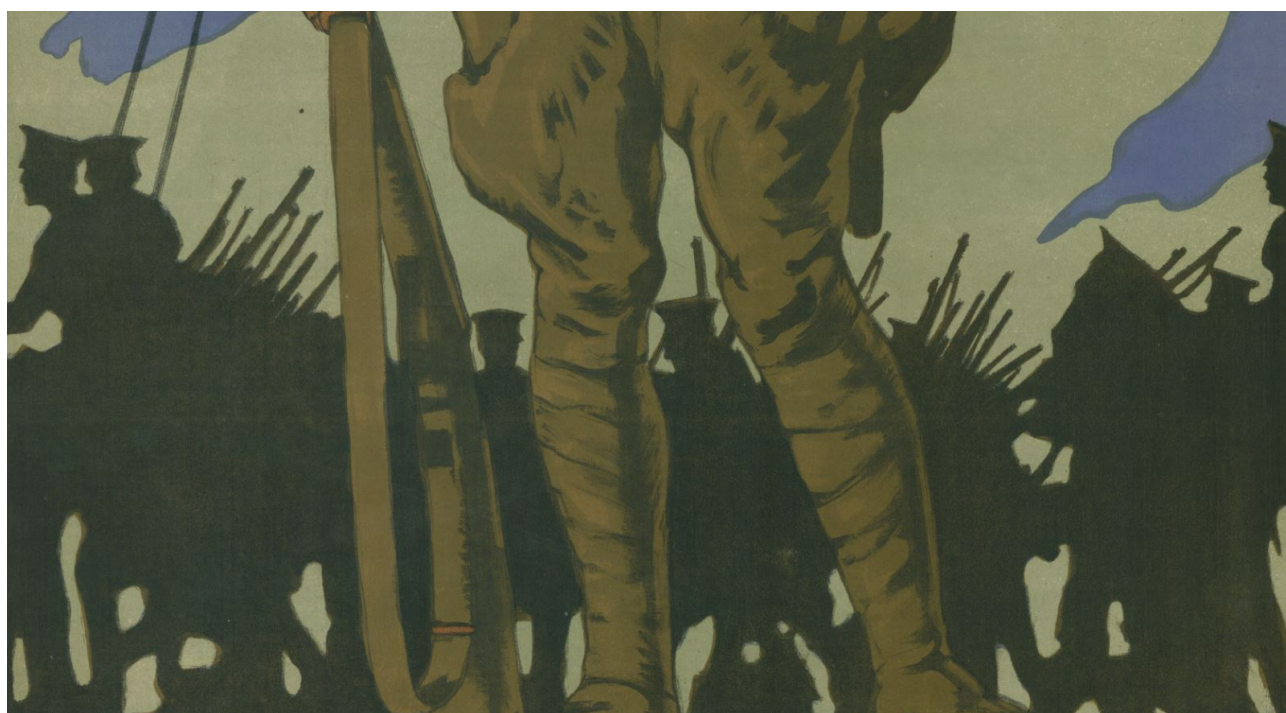
Across the wire came the quick voice of a woman fully determined.

"A doll-faced girl with a little son. Herbert, I never knew, but if it is not too late I will make what reparation I can so that she will have her chance as well. Are you there, Herbert? Hold the line, will you? I wish to speak further, and I want you to arrange for me to leave in any capacity at all for the front."

"You mean it, Helen?"

"I mean it. Please fix things at once."

*Then it seemed to the major as if the telephone was wringing an eternity of jangling, wrangling tunes which went on for an interminable time without ceasing.*



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