

"NICKY-NAN, RESERVIST"

When news of War first came to Polpier, Nicholas Nanjivell (commonly known as Nicky-Nan) paid small attention to it, being preoccupied with his own affairs.

This opening sentence of Mr. Quiller-Couch's latest volume, *Nicky-Nan, Reservist*, should be read thoughtfully, because, while at first sight misleading, it really obeys the cardinal rule of fiction in summing up the main substance of the narrative. Although opening with news of the Great War, it is not a war story, but on the contrary a story of Nicky-Nan's personal preoccupations, and the consequences to himself and others through his slow awakening to the fact that a war exists. The scene of the story is a village on the coast of Cornwall; the characters are quaint, diverting types of Cornish fishermen and their narrow-minded scandal-loving wives, whom Mr. Quiller-Couch understands so well how to interpret; and conspicuous among them is old Nicky-Nan, crippled, penniless, and threatened with eviction from the old house that has been his home for the past fifteen years. Until lately he has made a living of some sort from the fisheries, but since a certain queer and painful growth, now the size of a large apple, appeared behind his knee, he has done nothing but drag himself miserably from place to place and lament his hard lot. He has had notice to move,—for the landlord, although not a hard man, wants the site

of the old building for the new village bank, and the final papers will be served on Monday. Nicky-Nan passes a very wretched day of anticipation, until suddenly he remembers two consoling facts: first, that Monday being a bank holiday, no papers can be served on him; and secondly, that the moratorium having gone into effect, he has an extra breathing space before his debts must be paid. Troubles, however, have accumulated, thick and fast; formal notices have been served on him, first and second, to the effect that as a reservist he is liable to duty, and failing to report, will be arrested as a traitor. He knows that he might get a certificate that would excuse him, but is afraid that this may lead to an inquiry about his annual drill duty for the past few years, for which he has drawn pay, although as a matter of fact absent. Now, the ancient house, now a two-family apartment which Nicky-Nan shares with his friend Penhaligon, dates back to Napoleonic times, in which days most old houses had secret hiding-places, in which to escape from press-gangs and revenue inspectors. Nicky-Nan determines to seek for some such place of concealment, and in exploring a closet behind the kitchen, breaks through some rotting boards, when to his amazement out pours a stream of hidden gold, a hoard dating back to the battle of Waterloo. Nicky-Nan, knowing nothing of the law of treasure-trove, assumes that the findings are his by right. And consequently he makes two mistakes: he pays his long overdue rent, without noticing that one of the coins is that rare treasure of collectors, a spade guinea; and secondly, when he learns that the wife and family of his neighbour Penhaligon,—who only yesterday left hurriedly for the front,—are in sore need, he comes forward, with the generosity begotten of what he regards as an endless fortune, and declares that he will see that she and the children shall not want. Such indiscretion in a place like Polpier is fatal. Within the hour evil tongues are wagging fast. Where, ask the men, has Nicky-Nan's sudden wealth

come from? Whom has he robbed? What treasure has he unearthed? Since when, ask the women, has poor Penhaligon's wife given Nicky-Nan the right to look after her? What a false friend to her husband! What a scandal to the village! And so the gossip grows and spreads, until poor, bewildered, crippled Nicky-Nan is glad to restore all but his legitimate per cent. of the treasure-trove, and to go to the naval hospital on the slim chance that an operation may make him fit for active service,—since even war is less of a hell than the evil tongues of Polpier.