

**THE KINGDOM  
ROUND THE CORNER**

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**CONINGSBY-DAWSON**

# **The Kingdom Round the Corner—*A Novel***

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*"I'm sorry," Tabs apologized. "I didn't mean anything unkind."*

# ***The Kingdom Round the Corner—A Novel***

**By CONINGSBY DAWSON**

*Illustrated by W.D. Stevens*

*"To every man the woman whom he loves is as Mother Earth was to her legendary son: he has but to kneel and kiss her breast to know that he is strong again."—Michelet*

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**The Illustrations by W.D. Stevens**

"I'm sorry," Tabs apologized. "I didn't mean anything unkind."

Tabs extended his hand. Braithwaite made no motion to take it.

"Mrs. Lockwood, why can't you let Adair alone?"

"I was afraid you had left"

# ***THE KINGDOM ROUND THE CORNER***

## **CHAPTER THE FIRST**

### **AN ALTERED WORLD**

#### **I**

It was on a blustering March morning in 1919 that Tabs regained his freedom. His last five months had been spent among doctors, having sundry bullets extracted from his legs. He walked with a limp which was not too perceptible unless he grew tired. His emotions were similar to those of a man newly released from gaol: he felt dazed, vaguely happy and a little lost. He felt dazed because he hadn't remembered that the world was so wide and so complicated. He felt lost because he was discovering that this wasn't the same old world that he had left in 1914. It hadn't paid him the compliment of marking time during his absence; it had marched impolitely forward. He would have to hurry to overtake it. What made him feel most lost at the moment was the fact that he had only just realized how his bravest years had been escaping. The reason for this realization was Terry. He had been accustomed to think of himself as in the first flush of manhood, with all life's conquests still lying ahead; it was therefore a little disconcerting to be told, as a matter of course, that he had only four more years to go till he was forty. "I'll be there at the station to meet you," Terry had written him. And then, she had added laughingly, "Father orders me to say that he only gives his permission because you're such an old friend and nearly middle-aged."

Middle-aged! He, Tabs, middle-aged! The thought was appalling. It was a slander so almost true as to be incapable of disproving. He had to-day, to-morrow, and the next day; after that people would have the right to say of him that he was middle-aged. That was the real sacrifice that he had made in



the war—he had given to it the last of his youth. And he had not been aware of this until he had received that letter.

Now that he was aware of it, he rebelled against the sacrifice. He refused to be robbed. He would not allow himself to become middle-aged. Why, he hadn't begun to live yet. He'd only been experimenting up to the point when the war had started. He'd been thirty-one then, a man full of promise, and now he was dubbed middle-aged. He remembered with indignation the theory that men of forty ought to be chloroformed to make room for the younger generation. "But, hang it, one's years have nothing to do with it," he protested; "in my spirit I belong to the younger generation." So, to the rumbling accompaniment of the train, he argued his claims passionately. Had he formed them into a petition he would have prayed, "God, make me young again." It would have been because of Terry that he would have prayed.

And yet he was happy—vaguely happy, as any man must be to whom the right to live has been restored. For the past half decade his horizon, and that of all the men with whom he had intimately associated, had been dwarfed by the thought of dying. Throughout that period he had dared to hope for nothing personal; he had belonged body and soul to unseen forces which had hurried him without explanation from one hell to another. He had had to subdue his pride to their authority and to train his courage to contemplate the shock of annihilation. Now, at the end of almost five years, the will and the body which had been so ruthlessly snatched from him, had been as ruthlessly flung back into his own keeping. All of a sudden, after having been enslaved in every detail, his will and body were set free and no one cared what became of them. They could be his playthings; he was allowed to do with them what he liked. But what did he like? It was a problem. He could so easily spoil them. When he reminded himself of how easily he could spoil them the fear of death, which would never again trouble him, was replaced by the fear of failure. He was furious to find that he was still capable of fearing. He had so confidently believed that, whatever the past five years had stolen from him, they had at least brought him the reward of never again knowing fear of any sort.

That morning by the earliest train he had shaken off the dust of camps and started in civilian dress as his own master on the new journey. It was characteristic of him to start early and to slip out of his latest phase with so

little fuss. For the first two years of his service, while men of his class were gaining high promotions, he had served in the ranks. He had done it as a uselessly proud protest. In the ranks one did the real work, faced most of the danger and won the fewest decorations. He had loved the ranks for their quiet self-effacement and had preferred to be reckoned in their number.

It had been dawn when he had started. From the top of the hill above the camp he had gazed back at the huddled, sleeping rows of hutments. How lacking in individuality they were! How wilfully ugly! You could see their like in the rear of all armies. The military mind seemed incapable of appreciating differences and beauty. How stereotyped the past five years had been; yes, and, while the danger had threatened, how ennobled with duty! So ennobled that there had been times when it had almost seemed that he was on the point of finding his kingdom.

What he hadn't expected was that he would be alive to-day. With that thought gratitude had bubbled up and he had limped away, whistling, through dim lanes and budding hedgerows to the little wayside country station.

But once on board the train to London, he began to feel more like a fugitive escaping than a hero returning. This wasn't the end of soldiering that imagination had painted. There had been strident bands and hysteric shouting to start him on his way to the conflict. There had been pictorial challenges to his courage pasted on every hoarding. There had been extravagant promises of the welcome which would await him if he survived. Who remembered them to-day? He hummed over the words of the latest promise, "If you come back, and you will come back, the whole world's waiting for you." Was it? He doubted. There was something unpleasantly furtive about the way in which men were being stripped of their outward signs of valor and dribbled back into civilian life. It almost seemed that statesmen had discovered something to be ashamed of in the unforeseen heroism by which the world had been rescued.

What did it matter? The world had been saved, and he had helped to save it. No one could deprive him of that knowledge. His joy leapt up. What did it matter if other people considered him nearly middle-aged? He and Terry must prove to them the contrary. He was free; that was what counted. Free to reckon his life by more than stretches of twenty-four hours. Free to rise or go

to bed when he liked. Free to travel to the ends of the earth. Free to speak his mind without the dread of a court-martial. Never again would he be compelled to issue orders which he knew to be unwise; never again would he be compelled to obey them. He was free. And there was Terry——

## II

Across the carriage-windows landscapes went leaping: the bleak clearness of brisk March skies; the shining grayness of meadows from which mists were slowly rising; the faint flush of greenness which was gathering in hedges; the shy pageant of spring unfolding, with the promised certainty of new summers which are never ending. The world looked young. As the train dashed by, new-born lambs, unused to such disturbances, tottered, bleating, after their mothers. Buds were bursting. Sap was rising. The chapped scars of winter were vanishing. Things which had seemed dead were being convulsed with life. He watched it all gladly and yet impatiently; it was for the end of the journey that he was waiting.

On nearing London the train slowed down as though reluctant to leave the country. Twice it halted and he consulted his wrist-watch with a frown. Then it crept through Battersea, wound snake-like across the gleaming Thames, and came to rest in Victoria Station. Despite his lameness, he was the first passenger to alight. He had no luggage to attend to, save the newly-purchased bag which he carried. He lost no time in hurrying down the platform; when he hurried his limp became more pronounced. As he passed through the barrier he slackened his pace. By reason of his greater height he could glance above the heads of the crowd; his eyes went questing in all directions. They failed to find what they sought. He delayed until nearly all the people from the incoming trains had scuttled into the holes of the Underground; then, masking his disappointment, he wandered out into the station-yard to hail a taxi. An Army Staff car was drawn up against the curb. A thrill of hostility shot through him. How often, in the old days, when marching up to an attack, had he and his comrades huddled to the side of the road like sheep that these khaki-colored collies of the shepherds, who had driven them up to die, might splash arrogantly past them! He eyed it casually and was passing on, when a girl in the back seat stood up frantically waving. She was dressed in the latest whim of fashion; but it was her that he saw rather than her appointments. Her gold bobbed hair was like a Botticelli angel's. Her eyes were clear and deep

as violets. She was exquisitely vibrant and alive—scarcely beautiful; her nose turned up and was too short for that. One sought for the right words to express her attraction. Perhaps it was due to her light-hearted health and girlish freshness.

As he came up eagerly, limping with the effort, she reached out her hand. "Tabs, fancy you not knowing me! I don't need to call you Lord Taborley, do I? Between us it's still Tabs."

"Terry dear! My dear Terry, at last!" He spoke queerly as though he had been running. Then, seeing how his intensity startled her, he let go her hand and laughed. "You can't blame me for not having spotted you. Where's all your beautiful hair that was so blowy?"

She glanced up through her lashes at the tall man. "I'm growing such a big girl now'—you remember the refrain from the song at the Gaiety? That's why. When you were a young man, girls put their hair up to show they were of age; nowadays they bob it."

"So that's the explanation!" He climbed in and took his seat beside her. "That's another thing that disguised you. How was I to guess that you'd wangle a Staff car to meet an ex-lieutenant?"

"It belongs to a friend at the War Office." She nodded her permission to the trim girl-soldier at the wheel to start. "He lent it to me when he heard that I was to meet you this morning. Taxis are so scarce, and I didn't know how well you could walk, so——" She turned from the subject abruptly. "You're so changed. I scarcely recognized you at first. I was expecting that you'd still be in uniform."

"I was demobbed yesterday. So you find me changed! For better or for worse? Confess, Terry."

She was aware that beneath his assumption of gayety he was hiding something—something that pained. He had been hurt too much already. With impulsive sympathy she laid her hand on his arm. "It isn't a case of better or worse. Between people like ourselves appearances don't matter. I think to me you were handsomest of all as a Tommy. How proud I was of you, Tabs, when you first joined up! Do you remember how I used to strut along beside you—— And that last night, when you went for the first time to the Front?"

He remembered, and waited with boyish expectancy. She had stopped suddenly and glanced away from him. For the second time his intensity had frightened her. He said nothing—did nothing to help her. She mustered her courage to turn back with a smile. "It's long ago, isn't it. Tabs? I've grown such a big girl now."

He brushed aside her attempt to divert him. "But you find a difference in me?"

"A difference! You mean the difference between a man in uniform and in mufti? Why, yes. A uniform made you look younger. It did that for most men."

"But more for me than for most." He was pitiless towards himself now that he had forced her to answer. "I've aged more than the five years since you slipped your arm into mine as we marched through the darkness to the troop-train. You never shed a tear, Terry. You kept your promise. Often and often when I was afraid in the trenches I remembered you, a white and gold slip of a girl with dry eyes, waving and waving. And then, somehow, because you'd kept your promise not to cry——"

"Don't," she whispered. "Please don't. It's all ended. Everything's new and beginning afresh."

"Beginning with you," he questioned, "where it left off?"

If she heard him, she ignored the interrogation in his voice.

### III

The girl-soldier at the wheel relieved the situation. Since leaving the station she had been running slower and slower, glancing back across her shoulder and trying to catch their attention. Just short of the great cross-roads at Hyde Park Corner she brought the car to a halt.

"What's the matter, Prentys?" Terry asked. "Anything wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, miss; but you've not told me where to go."

The girl spoke so reproachfully that Terry laughed. "Awfully sorry, Prentys. It's Lord Taborley's fault. He didn't tell either of us. What are your plans, Tabs? Where do you want to go?"

"To go?"

He caught at her question and examined it. To go—where did he want to go? He had been so certain when he had boarded the train to London early that morning. Ever since he had said good-by to her, nearly five years ago, he had known quite definitely. Each time that he had had a glimpse of her on those brief leaves from the Front, he had been more and more sure of the desired direction. Her letters coming up to him under shell-fire had made him even more certain—those letters compassionate with unashamed sincerity, written with a girl's admiration for a man who was jeopardizing his all that she might live in safety.

And now, when he was free at last to go where he chose and she herself asked him, he could find no answer to her question. Why couldn't he? He looked at her thoughtfully with the frown of his problem in his eyes. What change had come over her? Or was it he who was altered? She had seemed so absolutely his while the terror of battle had kept them apart. She had written and acted as though she was his right up to—— Yes, right up to the point when he had been in a position to claim her.

Between him and Terry there had been no engagement—only a wealth of interchanged affection; interchanged for the most part on paper. Once and only once had marriage been mentioned—on the night that he had set out for the first time for the Front. "You won't ask me, Tabs; I know that. You're too honorable. So I've got to say it. When you come back I'm going to marry you."

"*If* I come back, little Terry," he had corrected.

"But you will—you must," she had pleaded, "for my sake."

"I'll try. I'll try so hard," he had promised. "But I won't marry you till I'm out of khaki or the war is ended."

"And I'll meet you at the train the moment you're free and we'll be married that very day."

All this five years ago on a murky station in the tragedy of parting, while Belgium was being trampled and the troop-train waited. She had eluded the vigilance of her parents and had met him outside the barracks, without forewarning. Through the gloom of streets and the blur of the accompanying crowd, he had seen her face loom up. Her arm had slipped through his; she

had marched beside him like any Tommy's sweetheart. She had been seventeen at the time; to-day she was two-and-twenty. In the years that had followed he had taken no step to make that girlish promise binding, yet increasingly its fulfillment had been the goal towards which he had struggled.

After she had joined Lady Dawn's Nursing Unit and had gone to France he had missed her on his leaves; by some fatality they had been always missing. She had existed for him only in their correspondence and in his vivid imagination. And now, after so much hoping, she had become again a reality. He had been prepared for strangeness, but not for—— Was it her youth, which was to have flung wide all doors, that formed the barricade? Her youth which, if shared, would have put back the hands on the face of Time! Her relentless, flaunting youth! Youth which is forever hostile to age!

Her growing and puzzled expression of impatience forced him to narrow his answer to the requirements of the moment. "What are my plans, you asked? I haven't any. I'm a man at a loose end and at a beginning—like all the world, as you yourself just stated."

"Yes, but——"

"I know what you're going to say—that every one has to live somewhere. I have a place all right—my old place."

"Shall I tell Prentys to drive you there?"

He shook his head and thrust out his long legs, throwing his weight more heavily against the cushions. "Not unless you didn't read my letter."

Her habitual sunniness clouded. "Tabs, you're trying to be beastly. If I hadn't read it, I shouldn't have known to have met you, or when, or where."

"Then you remember that it reminded you of——"

She cut him short, glancing furtively at the girl at the wheel to see whether she had been listening. "I don't forget easily. Where do you want to go? Would a run into the country suit you?"

"Excellently."

"In what direction?"

"Makes no difference."



She whispered something to the girl; the car semi-circled and gathered speed, shooting through the traffic which was lumbering towards the Fulham Road and Surrey.

Now that he had gained his point, he didn't seem inclined for conversation. He lolled back with his eyes half-shut; she sat bolt upright, ignoring his presence.

He recalled to-day as he had pictured it. Terry was to have been still the girl-woman who had wanted him so badly that she had been brave enough to ask for him. She was to have been precisely and in every detail the girl from whom he had parted. She was to have been on the platform waiting for him, and he....

Pshaw! What a sentimentalist and how easily disappointed! The old fight was still on in another form. It was never ended. Life was a fight from start to finish, calling for new and yet newer courage. He refused to be defeated. He would not be embittered. He would win his kingdom round the corner, even though it proved to be a different kingdom from the one he had expected. Terry couldn't have stayed seventeen always, which was the miracle he had demanded. She was a woman. He would have to teach her to love him afresh. There was no time to be lost. For all he knew there might be a rival—perhaps the mysterious some one at the War Office who had lent her this car. He leant forward good-humoredly, touching her hand to attract her attention, "Terry."

#### IV

She turned slowly, almost reluctantly. What new and disturbing question was he going to ask? She hadn't been prepared for this altered man with his limp and his gauntness and his strained intensity. She couldn't bring herself to believe that this grave, spent, unlaughing person at her side was Tabs, the gallant, care-free comrade she had asked to marry her. She was shocked both at him and at herself. And she had wanted to be so glad—to make him feel that every one was so happy at having him back——

"Terry."

At the sound of her name, spoken like that, a little thrill of his old-time power stirred her; it traveled up to her eyes, so that she had to press back the tears before she turned.

"Terry, it was sentimental blackmail. I'm sorry."

"What was? I don't understand."

"That last letter. I oughtn't to have reminded you. What one promises at seventeen doesn't hold good. It was sporting of you to keep the promise by meeting me this morning, but—— What I'm trying to say is this; I'm forgetting everything that you would like me to forget."

"But I'm not sure that I want you to forget anything." She widened her lips into a smile from which the trouble was only half dispelled. "It sounds horrid and unfriendly, this talk of forgetting, as though—— It sounds so much worse when it's put into words, as though we had something of which to be ashamed."

"No, it's not like that. May I be terrifically honest—just as we used?"

She eyed him doubtfully. It was evident that she was still timid of the truth. Then she nodded.

"Well, you know how it was between us before I went away. You were of an age when most people still thought of you as a child. You *were* outwardly, but inside you were almost a woman. The little girl did things and promised things that the woman wouldn't approve to-day. And then take my side of it. I went out to a place where life seemed at an end and where, because of that, one became selfish in the demands he made on the people whom he had left behind—especially on the women. It was impossible to be normal; probably I'm not quite normal now. But the point is this: every man in khaki thought intensely of some one girl. It didn't matter whether he had the right to think of her; he just thought of her, and wrote to her, and carried her photo with him up to an attack, as if he had the right. He wasn't even much disturbed as to whether, in allowing him to love her, she loved him in return or was merely being patriotic; he didn't expect to live to put things to a test. All he wanted was the belief that one woman loved him. You understand, she was very often only a makeshift—a symbol for the woman he would have married if death hadn't been in such a hurry. Well, for some of us Death has had time to spare and we've come back—come back starved, emotional, tyrannic—passionate to possess all the things for which our hearts have hungered and of which they have been deprived so long. It was easy to strip ourselves of everything when we thought we were going to die. But now that we know

we're going to live we're tempted to recover some of our lost years by violence. You must be patient with us, Terry; we're sick children, querulous, eager to take offense and over-exacting. I was like that when I blackmailed you into meeting me this morning. It was unworthy of me to have treated that child's promise as binding."

"But I was seventeen; I wasn't a child. And I wanted to meet you—I did truly."

"Letting me down lightly?" he smiled.

"No, an honest fact."

When he gazed at her with kindly incredulity, she edged herself closer and bent forward in a generous effort to persuade him.

"Don't you see that what you've said of yourself was true of me as well?"

"I wasn't talking in particular of myself," he parried; "I was including all the other men."

"Yes, but especially of yourself. It was of yourself that you were talking. What you've said of yourself is true of me and—oh, of almost all women. We saw you men march away; you seemed lost to us forever. Everything seemed at an end. So we did what you did—chose one man who would embody all our dreams and become especially ours. We wrote to him, shopped for him, placed his portrait on our dressing-tables, were anxious for him and, oh, so proud of him. We didn't stop to ask whether he was the man with whom we could live for always. There wasn't any *always*. It didn't look as though there was ever again going to be any *always*. And then the horror stopped and we found ourselves with a man on our hands—a man who, though we had known him so well, would come back to us different. We hadn't meant to cheat him when we made all those promises; but now that he's really ours, we're not sure that we—— All the ecstasies and tears that we wrote to him on paper——" She made a helpless gesture with her hands. "They don't seem real. It's not our fault. They belonged to the part of nurses and soldiers that we were acting. And now we've slipped out by the stage-door and we've become ourselves. Don't you see, Tabs, we men and girls have got to find out afresh who we are? We've almost forgotten."

She seemed to have made an end, when something else occurred to her. She

recommenced hurriedly, "We women have been spendthrifts, too; we've given away more than was wise—little bits of ourselves, not always to the one man—sometimes in the wrong directions. But which is the right direction? When people who were risking so much for us begged for a little of our affection, we never thought of that. We simply gave recklessly—little bits of ourselves. Now that we've regained a future, with room for remorse and things like that, we've become suddenly cautious. The swing of the pendulum——" She turned to him, as though proffering a smile for his forgiveness, "It's our sudden caution that makes us seem mean and ungracious. But I *was* tremendously interested about meeting you."

"Interested! Not glad or ecstatic. It's a long road from dreams to facts."

"Yes."

She said it humbly. He tried to catch the expression in her eyes, but all he saw was the flickering gold of her hair as the wind tossed it against the rounded whiteness of her neck. His brain kept muttering, "Little bits of herself! What did she mean by that?"

A barrel-organ was grinding out a tune; children danced in the sunshine on the pavement. As they flashed down the street the music followed them. She twisted to look back and he caught her eyes. "Tabs, do you know what it's playing?"

"Can't say I do."

"It's out of the Elsie Janis revue at The Palace. I think it was written especially for this moment." She listened till the air reached the refrain and then sang the words, "*Après la guerre, there'll be a good time everywhere.*"

His stern face relaxed at her childishness. "Will there, Terry? I hope so. Musical chaps aren't reliable authorities. They're——"

"You must *know* so," she interrupted valiantly. Then, forgetting her caution, she slipped her small gloved fingers into the palm of his big brown hand. "You *must*. Even though I disappoint you ever so badly, you must know so, dear Tabs. You must seize your own good time at whatever cost. One girl isn't all the world."

V

"I wonder whether what we've been saying explains Adair."

They were crossing one of the bridges over the Thames. He wasn't sure which one. Moreover, he didn't care; it was enough for him that, wherever they were going, they were going together—racing into a sun-crazed world where spring romped and shouted like a hoyden. Above lazy chimney-pots trees patched the sky-line with sudden greenness. At a greater distance soft contours of hills lay shadowed beneath stampeding clouds. Coldly silver beneath the bridge the river flashed, dimpled here and there by rapid feet where breezes, like adventurous children, rushed across it. He noted the bowed windows of little houses along the banks, their whitened steps and shining brasses. He caught the far-blown fragrance of hyacinths; it set him dreaming of drifting bloom and flower-strewn ways of woodlands. A happy world, whatever the mental state of its inhabitants! A world which was doing its bravest best to play the game by mankind! A world which was whispering at every portal of the senses that the business of living was immensely worth while! A world which——! He had reached this point, when the mention of Adair brought him back to the cause of his philosophizing—the inscrutable tenderness of the girl, half sorceress, half penitent, seated at his side. She had recovered her calmness by withdrawing her thin fingers from his enclosing hand.

Adair Easterday! He didn't want to discuss him; he had more important things to talk about. Speaking absent-mindedly, "Adair doesn't need any explaining," he said.

"Oh, doesn't he?" she laughed softly and looked away, creating the impression that she was leaving volumes unexpressed.

Her air of wisdom provoked him. "Well, I've known him since we were boys at school together and I've never found him much of a conundrum. He's brilliant, and lazy, and kind. I think of all the men I've known he's the one who's most truly a gentleman; he's the one who has given most promise and who has fewest accomplishments to his credit. He may have puzzled you as his sister-in-law; but to me, a man of his own age, he presents no mystery. If anything he's too obvious; that and the fact that he allows himself to be too much absorbed by his wife are two of the reasons for his lack of success."

"He doesn't allow himself to be too much absorbed by his wife now." She had

turned deliberately that she might watch the effect of her words. "He doesn't even pretend to care for Phyllis any longer."

"Not care for her—his own wife! Nonsense! You can't make me believe that." Then he reined himself in, for he suddenly realized that he was unconsciously adopting the tones of an elder. "That was a terribly modern accusation for you to make, Terry, just as if loyalties and affections were ostrich-plumes and ermine to be worn or discarded with the fashion."

"That's just what they do seem to have become since we've all stopped fighting," she persisted. "And please don't look at me like that, Tabs, as though you were my commanding-officer. I'm not trying to be a cynical young person; I'm simply stating facts. Look at all the men for whom the war was a social leg-up. They were plumbers and bank-clerks and dentists in 1914; by the end of 1918 they were Majors and Colonels and Brigadiers. They didn't know where the West End was till they got into uniforms. Since then they've learnt the way into all the clubs and fashionable hotels; they've spent money like water; they've been the companions of men and women whom they couldn't have hoped to have met unless the war had shaken us all out of our class-snobishness. But now that the war's ended, these men whom every one flattered for their bravery and whose social failings they excused while there was fighting to be done, have become worse snobs than ourselves. They've been educated out of the class for which they were fitted. War was their chance; it's ended, and now they have to go back to their humble jobs, which are the only ones by which they can gain a livelihood. Worse still, they've got to go back to their wives, who haven't shared their grandeurs, but who've played the game by them, taking care of their children and standing by the wash-tub. Some of them can't face up to the change. Peace has turned the world up-side-down. We're walking on our heads. You're just out of hospital, but you'll know what I mean when you've been a week in London."

"But nothing of what you've been saying applies to Adair Easterday," he objected. "He wasn't a profiteer in khaki; he wasn't even in khaki. He made nothing; he lost nearly everything he had. Moreover, whatever faults he may have, he's always been a thorough-bred—a stickler for honor; the kind of chap who, if he had to sink, would go down with all his colors flying. Where his wife is concerned, he's a lover-for-all-time kind of fellow."

She shook her head obstinately. "He isn't now. He's standing on his head like the rest of us."

"I'm certain you're mistaken." He paused, half-minded to let the matter rest. He hated this contending. In the old days he and Terry had never argued. He glanced at her; she was smiling in a sorry, amused fashion. It made him feel that in accusing Adair she had cast suspicion on every man's constancy—his own included. Reluctantly he set himself to prove to her that she was incorrect.

"When you were in France with Lady Dawn's Nursing Unit, I spent most of my leaves with Phyllis and Adair. We went about together. I lived in their house, got to love their kiddies, knew all that went on there. I think a part of my motive was that being with your sister seemed to bring you nearer. I'm not going to pretend that I didn't notice frictions and irritations. Adair was humiliated at being rejected by the Army because he wasn't up to physical standards. He tried every trick, but was always turned down. He didn't like to be seen about town; he felt that people were accusing him of being a slacker. He looked so well that he had always to be explaining why he wasn't in the trenches. It tried his temper. Wherever he went soldiers were being treated as heroes. Women were pleased to be seen escorted by a uniform—his own wife as well. And I'm bound to say Phyllis didn't help him. She prided herself on having held on to her man as though it were something that she'd done herself. Adair used to flare up in a passion and tell her not to be a fool; then, because her foolishness was all because she loved him, her feelings were hurt. But to say that he doesn't love her is an exaggeration. If there's anything the matter, the trouble is not with his heart but with his nerves."

"Then you really haven't heard? I thought everybody——" She stifled a yawn. "It's the wind against my face. It always makes me sleepy," she apologized. "Since you haven't heard, I suppose I oughtn't to tell you. He's become the sort of skeleton in our family cupboard—— You're still incredulous! That will please mother. She'll be almost happy when she learns that there's at least one person who hasn't been told about it. She thinks that all the world talks of nothing else. As for Daddy, Phyllis was always his favorite and he adores her children. He goes about trying to find some one who'll volunteer to horsewhip Adair. I can't say that I feel that way myself."



Her hand stole out and touched his arm caressingly; it seemed as though she were appealing for herself. "We've all either done or are on the verge of doing something foolish that we're sure to regret. It's not a time to be hard on anybody. To-morrow we may stand in need of sympathy ourselves. Horror has shell-shocked every one, civilians as well as fighting-men. The blackness of insecurity——! We're all convalescing." She halted abruptly, biting her lip and peering at him, suddenly aware that she had been confessing herself. When he only looked puzzled, she finished lightly, "So, you see, Tabs, though you'll think me terribly immoral, I keep a soft place in my heart for our skeleton."

"But you don't tell me anything positive," he complained. "What has Adair done?"

"Done!" She stared at him. "That's what I have been telling you. He's fallen in love with some one else."

He was unwilling to believe what he had heard.

"Some one else! Impossible!—— I'm sorry, Terry; I didn't mean that I doubted your word. You mustn't be offended, but—— I'm picturing Phyllis. At her best she was good and sweet and pretty enough to hold any man. She was such a loyal little pal——only second best to you, Terry. And Adair——he was such a white man, so patient with her and so devoted to the kiddies. I can't see him in the rôle of a runaway. And what on earth would he gain by it that he hasn't got already? I don't want to think that what you've told me—— It makes all fidelity seem so contemptibly temporary."

Terry spoke gently. "Not that. It's infidelity that is temporary. A lot of us are unfaithful for the moment——it's a symptom of our illness. You said something a little while ago about trying to regain one's lost years by violence——that's what he's doing. He's mislaid the knack of happiness with Phyllis; he's trying to recover it with some one else."

Tabs was still rebelling against the facts. "But he was such a staid old fellow."

Terry ignored his discursiveness. "I don't think I've done wrong in letting you into our family secrets. You'll be made a part of them as soon as you meet Daddy. When he heard that you were coming to town and that I was going to

see you, he said, 'Thank God for that. Taborley will be able to do something.' He has a pathetic belief in you, Tabs. One of the reasons why I was at the station this morning was that I might have the chance to tell you first, before any one else had prejudiced you with bitterness. Daddy wants you to dine with him to-night. He expects you to be the kind of moral policeman who makes the arrest. But it can't be done with morality. I don't think even you could manage to persuade Adair at the present—not with moral arguments, anyhow."

"Why not?"

"Because I've seen *her*."

## VI

It was at this moment that a sound like a pistol-shot occurred. The car commenced to bump. The girl-driver applied the brakes, guided the car to the side of the road and jumped out.

"Quite like the Front," Terry cried cheerfully; "I expect you feel at home when you hear a noise like that."

Tabs looked round. He had been too busy talking to notice where they were. To the right, through wind-rumpled, tree-dotted meadows ran the Thames, still intensely silver in the sunshine, but somehow blither and more young than in London. Clouds flew high; everything was riotously spacious. Scattered through the vivid stretch of landscape ivy-covered houses stood squarely in their park-lands. Set down in the level distance, like children's toys, cattle browsed. The quiet greenness had become starred as far as eye could carry with a gentle rain of myriad tinted petals.

"The car's got a sense of beauty," he laughed; "it chooses carefully when it wants to break down."

"And it's all at the Government's expense," Terry smiled, glancing back at him across her shoulder as she scrambled out. "So it's a back tire. How long will it take to put right, Prentys?— Then we may as well walk and let you overtake us. I don't think we're more than a mile from Old Windsor. We'll get something to eat at the little inn by the riverside. You remember the one I mean? We've been there several times when the General was with us."

"What General is that?" Tabs asked as they trudged along between the

hedges.

"The General who lent me the car," she replied.

"Oh, your friend at the War Office! I suppose he's one of the dug-outs who's been there all the time."

"He isn't. He rose from the ranks. He's only been at a desk job since the Armistice." She spoke defensively, with a certain resentment. Tabs was quick to detect the sharpness in her voice. "I'm sorry," he apologized; "I didn't mean anything unkind."

She halted with a sudden gesture of concern. "I *am* inconsiderate. I never thought of it. Won't this walking wear you out?"

"She's changing the subject," he told himself. "I wonder why?" Aloud he said, "Not a bit. But I can't stride along the way we used in the old days."

Branching off to the right, they came down to a little inn by the water-side. It was shabby with the look of disrepair which all inns had at that time. Its paint was chapped and faded; its windows cracked and held together by pasted strips of paper. The putty had perished in places, so that some of the panes were on the point of falling out. Nevertheless, it had a brave look of carrying on triumphantly, for tulips and crocuses were springing neat as ever from the turf and it was over-hung by a green mist of trees just coming into leafage. They entered and took their seats at a table from which they could watch the pale flowing of the river through the spangled peace of the outside world.

"It was lucky we broke down." Terry sat watching him with her square little face cushioned in her hands. "You see I'm training myself to believe," she explained, "that everything happens for the best."

"A comforting philosophy for the lazy," he smiled. "It lets us all out of resisting temptation. Why resist anything, if everything happens for the best? If it were true, it would give us the license to be as flabby as we liked—which rather falls in line with what we were saying about Adair. But who is she—this woman? You say you've seen her."

"You'll know soon enough for your peace of mind—probably you'll see her yourself before the day is out."

"But can't you even tell me her name?"

"Her name's Maisie Lockwood for the present."

"For the present! Why for the present?"

"Because one's never certain about Maisie. She was Maisie Gervis once and Maisie Pollock before that; there must have been a time when she was Maisie Something Else."

Tabbs couldn't quite make up his mind whether he ought to laugh or frown. The suspicion had crossed his mind that this composed imp of a girl, who could look so immensely the young lady when she liked, was playing a sly game with him. However he pretended to take her seriously. "In most social sets names are fairly permanent."

Terry laughed outright and looked away from him, following the river with her eyes. "There's nothing permanent about Maisie. I think that's her attraction; that's what makes people forgive her everything. She starts each day afresh—it really is a new day for her, with no old hates or griefs or dreads to drag her down. She has no regrets because she remembers nothing. Whatever happened yesterday she puts out of mind; she forgets everything except her willingness to be friends."

"Her names as well, according to your account."

"Yes, there's no denying that. Until the war ended, if you'd not seen her for a month, you were never quite sure how you ought to address her. Even now one's liable to make a mistake. To-day she's Maisie Lockwood; to-morrow she may be Maisie Anything—Mrs. Adair Easterday, perhaps."

Under her willful mystifications his calmness was getting ruffled. While he listened to her, he kept comparing this day with the other day that his imagination had painted. The world was to have been so much better and kinder when the agony of the trenches was ended. It was in order that it might be better that so many men had not come back. And this was the kinder world—a world in which men, saved from the jaws of death, met the girls they had loved as strangers, in whose presence, if they were to avoid offense, they must pick their words! A world full of men like Adair, who had been honorable until others had made them safe by their sacrifice, and of women like Maisie of the many names, who forgot her yesterdays that she might seize her selfish personal happiness!