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NOVEL ***

The Kingdom Round the Corner—*A Novel*

BOOKS BY MR. DAWSON

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FLORENCE ON A CERTAIN NIGHT

THE WORKER AND OTHER POEMS



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"I'm sorry," Tabs apologized. "I didn't mean anything unkind."(Page 33)

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

NEW YORK
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M C M X X I

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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."

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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

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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."

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"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."

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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.

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"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.

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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.

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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—"

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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."

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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."

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"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."

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"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

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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."

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"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."

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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.

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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."

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"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-snobbishness. 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."

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"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."

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"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."

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"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."

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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.

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"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.

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"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."

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"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."

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"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!

"Terry," he spoke with a show of patience, "do you think it's a matter about which to jest? There's your sister and her kiddies; their future's at stake. If I'm to be of any help—" He broke off, for a voice inside his brain had started talking, "You're old. That's exactly the way in which her father speaks to her." Was it her thoughts that he had heard? Her face was lowered; he could see nothing but the top of her golden head. Youth radiated from her; even in his anger it intoxicated him.

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"So if I'm to help," he picked up his thread, "you mustn't mock. It isn't decent, Terry; the situation's too serious. Let me have the facts. How does she come by all these different names? Does she call herself something different with each new dress?"

Terry's eyes were wide and sorry. "No, with each new husband, but—" There came a break in her voice, "Oh, Tabbs, I can't bear that you should be cross with me. You've been disappointed in me from the moment we met. We're not the same. And I know it's not all my fault. And—"

Her lips trembled. He was in terror lest she would give way to crying. If it hadn't been for the table that parted them with its unromantic débris of dishes— As it was he leant across and assured her earnestly, "I'm not cross with you, my dearest girl. I'm— Terry, how is it that we've drifted so apart? I keep groping after the old Terry; for a minute I think I've found her, and then she's no longer there."

Drying her eyes, she nodded. "It hurts most frightfully. That's what I keep doing, barking my shins in the dark, trying to follow the old Tabbs. He's always going away from me—"

"I think it's the laughter that I miss most," she said presently; "you've grown so stern."

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"I've seen stern things happen—a kind of Judgment Day. It's remembered things that are so silencing."

"I know what you mean. I saw some of those things in our hospital in France." She shut her eyes as if the memory was unbearable. "But don't be hard on people who have a right to be young and who want to forget. It isn't that they're ungrateful." Then she surprised him, "People like Maisie and myself."

"Don't couple yourself with her." He spoke more sharply than he had intended.

"But she was with me out there," she expostulated. "That was how she met her second husband,

Gervis. She nursed him."

"It makes no difference how she met him; she's not in your class—a woman who has been divorced three times."

"But she hasn't. Whatever made you think that?" Terry shot upright on her chair, for all the world like a startled rabbit.

"You told me she'd had three husbands." He was once more puzzled and uncertain of his ground. "You as good as said that she wouldn't be averse to making a fourth of Adair. I therefore conjectured——"

"You conjectured all wrong," she cut him short. "They died for their country."

"All of them?" He was making a rapid calculation as to how long could have elapsed between each re-marriage.

"One at a time, of course," she added. "She was married to the first the first week of the war." [Pg 38]

"Even so it was quick work. May I light a cigarette? Three husbands in four years! She must be a very alluring person!"

Terry laughed nervously. "She is, though you mayn't think it. I can see you don't; you think she's horrid. But let me tell you it takes a smart woman to bring three men to the point of matrimony when the world's so full of unmarried girls. And they were every one of them more or less famous—the kind of men of whom any woman would be proud. You'll remember Pollock—Reggie Pollock; he was one of the earliest of our aces—the man who brought down the Zeppelin over Brussels and got killed himself a few days later, no one quite knew how. There was a mystery about his death. He was the man to whom she was first married."

"A splendid chap! And I recall her now. Her portrait was in the illustrated papers at the time of her third marriage. It was headed *A Conscientious War-Worker* or something like that. And I don't forget the name the soldiers called her when they read the papers in the trenches."

"Did they call her something?" She was gazing at him intently. "Was it something brutal that you wouldn't like to tell me?"

"It was something true," he said, pinching out his cigarette with quiet fierceness.

"Oh, I don't know——" She broke off to ask the waitress whether the car had arrived and was answered in the affirmative. "I don't know about its being true. After all, she made three men happy before they went West. I don't see that she'd have been any more to be admired if she'd allowed the last two to go wretched." [Pg 39]

Tabbs half-rose and then reseated himself. "An awful woman! Insatiable! A Lucrezia Borgia, without Lucrezia Borgia's excuse."

"I knew you'd say that." Terry spoke hopelessly in a tone that dragged. "How do you or I know what excuses she had? How do we know why anybody does anything—what hidden reasons they have? And yet we're always so eager to condemn! I wanted to be the first to let you know about Adair because you always used to understand. You would have understood if you'd been the *you* that you were. I thought that if I explained to you about Maisie—— But what's the use!"

She rose from her chair and stood leaning against the table, looking wilted and pathetic. When she spoke again the heat had gone out of her words and was replaced by an appealing tenderness. "Don't you see what it is—why it is that I don't condemn? I'm so sorry for them—so sorry for you, for myself, for everybody. It hurts me here, Tabbs." She laid her hand against her breast. "We all want what we've spent in the lost years. We want it so impatiently. We can't get it; but we want it at once—*now*. The things one wants are always in the past or the future, so one cheats to get them *now*."

He hadn't the remotest idea what she was trying to tell him. She was stirred by some deep emotion—some overwhelming loneliness. For a moment it crossed his mind that she also was tempted—fascinated by some lurement of dishonor kindred to Adair's. He put the thought from him as preposterous and disloyal. Yet it recurred. Ever since they had met she had been talking curiously—talking about having given away bits of herself to people who were hungry, little bits of herself in wrong directions. She had coupled her own case with this unspeakable Maisie's. What was her problem? [Pg 40]

She stood there with her head bowed, like a child self-accused of wrong-doing, with all the flaunting joy of spring tapping against the window on which she had turned her back. Then it dawned on him why she was standing; he was between the door of escape and herself. He stepped aside. As she moved eagerly forward, he caught her by the points of her elbows and arrested her going. The wild violet eyes fluttered up to his fearfully and fell as he towered over her.

"My very dearest!" He spoke gently in a voice from which all passion had been purged. "Don't blame me if I simply can't understand. Though I never become any more to you than I am now, I shall always be your comrade, believing in you and loving you. Remember that."

When he released her she fled from him, leaving him alone in the shabby room.

When he found her, she was talking to the girl-soldier in the yard of the inn. "But do you think that you can manage it, Prentys? It'll be all right in the open country, but I'm not sure that I want to risk it in the London traffic. We're merely joy-riding and, if anything happened to the car when you weren't on military duty——"

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"I don't see that we've got much choice, miss," the girl answered. "The General's orders to me were explicit, and you know what he is: obedience and no explanations. We've barely time to do it."

Their backs were towards the inn. Tabs strolled up and made a pretense of inspecting the new tire.

"Anything I can do?" he asked casually.

It was Prentys who answered him. "I sprained my left wrist, sir, back there along the road." She held it out to him painfully as proof. It was all bound up and puffy. "It isn't very much use, sir; so I've only one hand and I don't know whether I'll be able——"

Terry interrupted and took up the running. "I thought that the car was ours for the day. Prentys has just told me that General Braithwaite ordered her to pick him up at the War Office this afternoon at three-thirty. Now that she's sprained her wrist, she'll have to drive so carefully that there's scarcely time to do it."

Tabs couldn't help smiling at the pompous importance of little people in this newly enfranchised world. It was only yesterday that for him also the foibles of Generals had been sacred. Generals had been gods whose tantrums and mental rheumatics had thrown whole armies into a fume and fret. For him that day was ended, but it still existed for this slim girl-soldier. He was sorry for her.

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"You needn't be upset," he said kindly. "I haven't renewed my license, but I can drive. No one's likely to interfere with me in an Army car. Jump in and I'll get you there with a quarter of an hour in hand."

"But——"

It was Terry who had spoken. Her brows puckered with thoughtfulness, she was gazing far away into the green distance. He waited for her to amplify her objection. When she maintained silence, he prompted her. "If it's me and my bag that's the trouble, you don't need to worry. After I've driven you both to the War Office, I can fudge round for a taxi. One can usually wangle one in the neighborhood of Whitehall."

Before he had ended, he knew that his guess had missed fire. It wasn't his comfort that was disturbing her.

"All right," she said reluctantly. "I suppose there's no other way. Get into the back, Prentys; I'll ride in front with Lord Taborley."

He was glad to have something to occupy his attention—to be able to talk without the necessity of regarding her. They were both embarrassed by the memory of their recent tempest of emotion. "Braithwaite! So that's the name of the good fairy who gave us our day in the country. I don't remember him; but that's not remarkable. Generals at the Front were as common as policemen in London; you found one at every street corner. As for trenchdwellers like myself, we never came in touch with them except when we were in for a wiggling. We came in touch with them all right then."

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She made no remark. He had the feeling that she was annoyed with herself for having let the General's name escape her. Up to that point she had referred to him anonymously as "a friend at the War Office." Tabs tried to switch to another subject without making the change offensively apparent. "Now that I'm a free man, I've got to reorganize a household."

She kindled into interest, "Taborley House is still a hospital, isn't it?"

"Yes, I handed it over to the Americans. I was glad to do that for my mother's sake. After all, I'm half American. At least a third of my boyhood was spent in the States. But they're sending most of their wounded home now, so I shall soon have it back on my hands. But that wasn't what I meant. It was too big for me; I never lived there."

"Then what did you mean?"

He realized that she was encouraging him to continue talking because the topic was safe—not because it held much attraction for her.

"What I meant was that I'll have to try to collect up my old servants. I don't know where they all are, or who's alive and who's dead. There's one man I'm particularly anxious to discover."

He slowed down, tooting his horn vigorously as they rounded an awkward corner. When they were again on the level she reminded him: "You were saying that you were anxious to discover ——"

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"Oh, that man of mine! There isn't much to tell! He looked after me while I was up at the 'Varsity; when I left, I carried him off. I was always wandering, so I made him my body-servant. When we

were leading civilized lives in cities he acted as my valet-butler-secretary. When we were adventuring in the remoter parts of the world, he was my companion-friend. I had a real affection for the chap; he was so genuinely distinguished and quick to learn. He'd have gone far if things had kept on. As it is, he's probably gone farther."

"Gone farther?" She sounded half-asleep—politely lackadaisical.

"Gone West," he explained shortly. "His letters became fewer. We joined up together in the ranks. You know all about my end of it. I suppose it was my mother's democratic Americanism that made me do that. We got drafted into different regiments. After the fighting had been going for a year, he stopped corresponding. The funny thing was that none of my letters to him was returned."

She was so bored that she was scarcely listening. He cut the matter short by adding, "It was your mention of General Braithwaite that started me gossiping."

She pulled herself together with a jerk and instantly became all attention. "How? How could my mentioning General Braithwaite do that?"

He noticed again her unreasonable suspicion of hostility each time he made a reference to this man. Thinking it the wiser policy to overlook it, he answered evenly, "Because his name also happened to be Braithwaite."

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Fully fifteen minutes elapsed. "She's quite fed up with my valet," he told himself. He hadn't been able to contrive any fresh topic which was sufficiently innocuous, so he'd been keeping silent. They were again passing over the bridge beneath which, like a gleaming sword, lay the Thames, barriered on either bank by the little bow-windowed houses, with their shining brasses and whitened steps. They were already catching up with the throng of London traffic when she shook herself out of her self-absorption by saying, "There must be thousands of Braithwaites in the world."

He glanced at her out of the corners of his eyes. Her latest conversational effort tickled his sense of humor—it was so wholly inadequate. He laughed outright. "That's better; the high spirits will soon be coming back— Thousands of Braithwaites! My dear Terry, there must be hundreds of thousands." Then in a graver voice, "But though there were thousands of millions, it wouldn't restore to me my one loyal man."

"You loved him?" She uttered her guess softly.

"Yes, and I—it's a queer thing to say about one's valet—I admired him tremendously."

It was the best part of five years since Tabs had driven a car. He hadn't yet regained his old dexterity. He wasn't expert enough to attend to the wheel and at the same time to carry on a conversation. As he left the bridge he had to pass a coster's barrow which was drawn up beside the curb. The coster was dressed in the soiled khaki of a man recently released from the Army; his barrow was piled high with narcissi and daffodils, and a drowsy donkey drooped between the shafts. In avoiding a suicidal pedestrian, Tabs misjudged the room that he had to spare. He felt a jolt, guessed what had happened, and jammed on his brakes. A policeman in front of him was holding up a magisterial hand. Behind him a stream of familiar trench profanity was gathering in volume; under other circumstances he would have found a certain enjoyment in the sound. He looked back and saw what he expected: the barrow overturned; the flowers scattered, the donkey surprised out of its drowsiness, thrown on its back and kicking in its harness; the coster straddling the sudden ruin and calling down all the rigors of the law. A crowd was running together; it hesitated between the coster and Tabs, uncertain as to which would provide the more exciting entertainment. When the policeman waving his note-book approached the car, it plunked for Tabs.

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The policeman was a stout, fat-fingered, immovable kind of person. He said nothing till he had penciled down the car's official number. Tabs gave his name and address. "Lord Taborley, etc." The policeman lifted his slow eyes to judge for himself whether the Lord part of his information looked probable. The lean aristocratic face which he encountered seemed to correspond with the specifications recorded. He asked to see his Lordship's license. Tabs embarked on explanations, pointing to the bandaged wrist of Prentys as a confirmation of his facts. While he was explaining the coster joined them, having got his donkey on to its legs. He was violent with anger and burning to expound the justice of his cause. Suddenly he struck out a convincing line of argument, "Look at 'im, the bloomin' slacker—the pasty h'aristocrat. 'E didn't see no fightin'. Not 'im. But now the war's been won by poor blokes like meself, 'e ain't ashamed ter go banging abart in h'Army cars."

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"I know how you feel," Tabs said. "But you're mistaken; I served in the ranks two years myself. I was only demobbed yesterday; to-day's my first day out of uniform. I'll pay you whatever you think fair; so you don't need to work yourself up."

The man's attitude changed completely. He removed his cap and scratched his head. "Served in the ranks, did yer? Then you and me was pals out there!" He turned to the policeman, "'E ain't done me as much damidge as if one of them there Big Berthas 'ad landed."

The policeman let his fat eyes wander from the coster to Tabs, from Tabs back to the coster. "I wuz too old ter go," he said inconsequently; "but me son's out there and won't ever come back." He crossed out the particulars he had written down so laboriously; when that was done, he

fumbled his note-book back into his pocket. "If your mate 'ere says that it's h'all right, sir, it's h'all right so far as I'm consarned. Your fust day h'out of the h'Army! Well, well!" He looked at Terry with a world of understanding, wheeled about slowly and went ponderously back to his corner.

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"That was sportsmanly of you." It was Tabs speaking. "I'd like to know how much——"

The coster shook his head. "It don't cost you nothink. Me and you used ter share."

Tabs protested. The man climbed the running-board and pushed his grime-stained hand into the car. "Call it quits, mister, and shake for luck. And now the little lady, if she don't h'object."

Terry shook his hand daintily. So there wasn't going to be a fight after all! Everything had been settled amicably! With an air of disappointment the crowd dispersed.

"Came pretty well out of that!" Tabs remarked as the car started forward.

"You're not to talk." Terry's voice was high-strung and emphatic. "You can't talk and drive—and you've got to drive like mad."

"Why? What's the hurry?"

"The hurry! We've wasted twenty minutes; we've barely time to get there."

"Oh, the General! I'd forgotten. Well, it won't do the old boy any harm to wait. Lord, the hours he and his sort have kept me waiting on parade-grounds in France!"

Then he remembered that this General wasn't an old boy. If he wasn't old, there was all the less reason for making so much effort not to be late. Nevertheless, to please Terry—— He could feel her body twitching. Every time he had to slow down for traffic he was aware of her impatience. Why was it of such vital importance to her that they should arrive in time? She wasn't too punctual by habit. A thought struck him; it was like a searchlight pointing out many things that had been dark. Her anxiety wasn't that they should arrive in time, but before time. She didn't intend, if she could prevent it, that he should meet the owner of the car. Had it not been for the double accident of Prentys spraining her wrist and having failed to mention that the car must be back by three-thirty, he would never have been allowed to know that there was a General. Terry had been compelled to let him drive if the borrowed car was to be returned; but her main object now was to reach the War Office a few minutes early and to smuggle him off before an introduction would be necessary. If they arrived punctually or late, the General might be already on the pavement—— Tabs bit his lip. He hated petty intrigue. He demanded a man's code of honor from the woman he adored and made no feeble excuses for feminine dishonesty. This was the worst disappointment she had given him.

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As they approached Hyde Park, when it was too late to turn off into a side-street, he saw that the road ahead was blocked. He worked the car as far forward as possible and then had to halt. Terry was nervously consulting her watch. "The time?" he asked.

"Three-twenty-three."

"Then this puts the lid on it." He beckoned to a policeman, "What's holding us up?"

"The Queen's expected, so I'm told, sir, though us didn't 'ave no proper warning."

At that moment the crowd out of sight commenced cheering. The cheering spread and drew nearer. It was taken up by people who were strung across the road immediately in front. A carriage flashed by in which two ladies were sitting, one of whom was bowing from right to left. Despite her irritation at the delay, Terry stood up so that she could get a clearer view above the clustered heads. The cheering grew deafening, then lessened, and sank to a hoarse murmur beneath the trees of the Park. As she reseated herself and the traffic lurched forward, she turned to Tabs, "You noticed who it was?"

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"The Queen."

"Yes, but the lady who was with her?"

"I didn't see."

"It was Diana—Lady Dawn with whom I nursed. She's supposed to be the most beautiful woman in England."

"Don't know her. So I shouldn't have placed her if I had seen her."

They made a clear run of it from Hyde Park Corner to Whitehall and drew up quite marvelously before the War Office on the second.

"Done it," said Tabs as he shut off the engine. "It's zero hour exactly."

But Terry wasn't there to listen to him, as he discovered when his attention was free and the engine had ceased to throb. Almost before they had halted, she had nipped out of the car and was hailing a taxi which was on the point of moving off. His bag was already in process of being whisked from one vehicle to the other. This indecent haste to be rid of him roused his obstinacy; he sat still where he was and watched.

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She returned a little breathless and self-congratulatory. "There! Wasn't that clever of me? Taxis are scarce. If I hadn't collared you that one you might have— Come on, Tabs, if you're stiff in your lame leg, give me your hand and I'll—"

At that moment the dingy swing-doors of the War Office flew open and a red-tabbed, handsome figure of a man, with gold braid on his cap and crossed swords on his epaulettes, came briskly out on to the steps. He caught sight of Terry and, throwing her an airy salute, came with an eager stride towards her. He wasn't the old foggy Tabs had so persistently imagined. He was young, barely thirty, lean, tall and swift-moving as an arrow—very much what Tabs had been before he had spent himself at the war.

"Hulloa, Terry! This is ripping. I didn't expect you— But what's all this? An accident! What have you been doing to Prentys?"

The voice was glad and frank, though its habit of command was unmistakable. Every gesture bespoke authority and arrogance of body. Even in this moment of geniality, "Obedience and no explanations" was written all over him. He was a man who believed his acceptable importance to be a verity established beyond the pale of challenge. Yet there was something lacking—a sureness of refinement, a last considerateness. With the first word he had spoken, Tabs had detected that he wasn't quite the part.

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Terry had hurried forward to meet him. She was saying something in a voice so subdued that it did not carry. She had so contrived their grouping—or was it an accident?—that the General's face was hidden.

Tabs waited, then turned to Prentys, "My taxi-man's getting impatient. Will you give my thanks to the General for his kindness and make the explanations?— And I hope that your wrist will soon be better."

He had given the driver his address and was stepping into the taxi, when he heard Terry's voice, "Why, you're running away! You mustn't go without meeting the General. General Braithwaite, I want to introduce you to Lord Taborley, of whom I've spoken to you so often."

Tabs limped back to the pavement and found the General regarding him intently. "I'm glad to make Lord Taborley's acquaintance," he said formally. And then to Terry, "You didn't tell me that it was for Lord Taborley you were borrowing my car."

Before Terry could reply, Tabs was answering for her, "Then I have to apologize to you, sir, as well as to thank you. But we've used the same car often, haven't we? In fact, I'm certain that we've met many times."

"Never to my knowledge." The General drew himself up stiffly. "You mistake me. It's the first time I've had the pleasure."

The two tall men stood glooming at each other. Tabs had it on the tip of his tongue to say something more, but glanced at Terry and thought better of it. Instead he addressed her, "Do I drive you home?"

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The General interrupted. "It'll be out of your way. I'm going right past Miss Beddow's house."

For the first time since they had been introduced Terry came between their hostility. "How did you know where Lord Taborley lived and that it would be out of his way? You said that this was the first time you had met him."

Tabs refused to make her the witness of a quarrel. "Since General Braithwaite knows where I live, perhaps he will call and explain that to me later. I can't keep my cab waiting longer—are you riding with me, Terry?"

She avoided his eyes. "With the General." And then, "You won't forget that you're dining to-night with father?"

"To-night. At seven-thirty, I suppose, as usual?"

"At seven-thirty."

He raised his hat. As he drove away he felt compelled to look back just once to assure himself. He caught the General's features in full sunlight; he had not been mistaken.

"So that's why my letters to him weren't returned, and that's why he didn't write! He's gone farther than far with a vengeance." He clenched his fists and frowned savagely at his crippled leg. "I felt so sure of her—and to have to compete with my own valet!"

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CHAPTER THE SECOND

RETRIEVERS OF YOUTH

The taxi had scarcely drawn up before a small, prim house in Brompton Square when the door was opened by a neat maid in immaculate cap and apron. She was so neat and respectful as to appear almost passionless. She had the high complexion of a Country girl, good gray eyes, a slim, attractive figure and dark, wavy hair which escaped rebelliously from beneath her cap. One wondered how she looked in her off-duty moments, when she wasn't saying, "Yes, your Lordship" and "No, your Lordship." Tabs mustered a smile and called to her, "Thank you, Ann. I'll be with you in a moment."

As he paid the fare, he let his eyes wander. The outside of the house had been painted white, evidently in honor of his home-coming. The work had been only recently completed, for the chalked warning on the pavement was not yet obliterated, "Wet Paint Beware." He had given no orders; it was Ann's doing—her accustomed, tactful thoughtfulness. The steps were speckless as a newly laundered shirt, the brasses polished to the brilliancy of precious metal. His window-boxes— He glanced along the fronts of his neighbors' houses; they hadn't put theirs out yet. His were ahead of everybody's; they made a cheerful splash of red, with their soldierly upstanding tulips, above the long serried line of area-railings. Again Ann's doing! And the snow-white curtains behind each row of panes were also Ann's.

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The driver clicked his "For Hire" sign into the upright position and chugged away to join the flow of traffic which thumped orchestrally past the end of the Square. Tabs climbed the three low steps separately; he had been used to take them at a bound. He tried to climb them slowly as though from choice, and not from necessity. He was very conscious that Ann was watching. As she closed the door behind him he said, "So you knew I was coming? You received my telegram?"

"Yes, your Lordship."

"I was sorry I couldn't tell you the exact hour. I didn't know it myself. I hope you didn't trouble to prepare lunch."

"It was no trouble, your Lordship."

"Then you've managed to get some one in the kitchen? They tell me that all the cooks have become bus-conductresses or lady-secretaries."

"I did, your Lordship. My sister—the one who lost her husband at Mons. I thought you wouldn't object—"

He cut her short. "Ann, you know I never object; you never need to go into details. Whatever you've done is right. From what I've seen already you've done splendidly."

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Under his praise she flushed and became a little less the servant. "I was afraid you might think I'd taken too much upon myself, what with the flower-boxes and having the house repainted. I wanted to have things nice for your Lordship after—" She hesitated for a word, and then burst out, "After all the dirt and beastliness! Your Lordship ought never to have gone in the ranks, begging your pardon; you weren't fitted for it. You ought to have gone as a General. Then you wouldn't have come home with that poor leg and—" She saw him wince and changed the subject. "But about doing things without orders, I knew that if Braithwaite—if Braithwaite—" Her voice sagged and her eyes misted over. At last Tabs saw how she looked in her off-duty moments, when she wasn't occupied with being respectful. The sudden memory came back of intuitions he had had that she and his valet might one day marry. From time to time he had twitted them on their fondness, taking an idle pleasure in forwarding the match. And Braithwaite had kissed her before he marched away. Ridiculous to remember it now! It signified nothing. People in their station kissed when they felt kindly, and on that occasion they had had an epoch-making pretext.

Her eyes were searching his with a hungry wistfulness. "What I was meaning, your Lordship, was that if he had been spared, he'd have done things on his own and gone ahead, the same as he always did. So I, seeing as how he wasn't—"

Tabs touched her shoulder gently. "It's all right, Ann. I appreciate your motives. I'm glad you went ahead. But you haven't shaken hands yet."

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He glanced in at the dining-room before he went upstairs. The table was spread for dinner. Cut flowers were standing about in vases. The very silver had a festive shine.

"Again I have to be sorry," he told her. "I'm dining with Sir Tobias Beddow."

"And Miss Terry," she inquired, "is she well?"

When he went to climb the narrow stairs she refused to permit him to carry his bag. He guessed the reason—that he might be freer to support himself by the rail of the banisters. On the first small landing, which looked out at the back on to the Oratory and the graveyard of the Parish Church, there were still more flowers. When he reached his bedroom, three flights up, he found that his evening clothes had been all laid out and just as carefully as if Braithwaite—the old Braithwaite whom he had loved—had been there before him.

As she unpacked his bag, opening and closing drawers, "I shall have to look round for another valet," he said.

"Please don't." Her tone was sharp with earnestness.

Tabbs felt sorry for her. She, too, like all the world was wanting the thing that she could never have. He wondered whether it wouldn't be kinder to tell her and let her know the worst. "But sha'n't I, Ann?"

With simple pathos, which was the more touching because it was so unconscious, she clasped her hands, "He might come back. He was never reported. My letters were returned unopened. I've not given over hoping. I shouldn't like him to find that your Lordship—— If he found another man in his place, he might feel like he hadn't been wanted. Me and sister can manage——"

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"But——"

He got no further, for her eyes were meeting his with an appeal that was desperate. "A strange man—his ways would be different. He'd make one know that everything—everything was ended."

She glanced hurriedly round for a last time to make sure that there was nothing she had omitted—collar, tie, silk socks, dress-shoes, shaving-water, razor. "I'll be listening for the bell in case there's anything that I've forgotten, sir."

With that she closed the door between himself and her emotion. As she rustled discreetly down the stairs, he thought he heard a sound of sobbing.

II

It was too early to dress—not five o'clock yet. He made an estimate of the time he had to spare. If he walked across the Park to Sir Tobias Beddow's, that would take him from a half to three-quarters of an hour. At the earliest he wouldn't have to leave the house till six-thirty. So he had the best part of two hours during which to think out his line of conduct and to dress. At dinner he would meet Terry—how would she act? And what was the right thing for him to do as her family's trusted friend? He felt very tired. It took a tremendous lot out of one pretending to other people that one wasn't tired. He was ashamed to have to own to himself how quickly nowadays he could use up his physical reserves. For the moment there was no one to watch him; he stretched himself out at full length on the couch.

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He was glad to be back in this friendly house with its narrow stairways and endearing littleness; it had been his American mother's before him. Within its walls were the exquisite traces of a temperament and taste that had been hers. She hadn't always been a great lady; to the end of her days there had remained with her the love of small things which one finds in nun-like New England towns. There had been times when the ostentation and entertaining at Taborley House had become too much for her; this nest of refuge had been her secret—her place of retreat where she had regarnered her sincerities. She had loved the Square's old-fashioned primness, its tininess, its unchanging atmosphere of rest. It was scarcely invaded by the strum of London. In the cloud of greenness which drifted above its communal garden, one could still listen to the country sounds of birds. At the back gray religion spoke in the tolling bell of the Parish Church; through Sabbath stillnesses one could catch the pealing of the organ in the Oratory and the mutter of worshipers at prayer. Tabbs had kept the house as she had left it. It was something faithful to which to return, however much he failed in the search for his kingdom and however far he wandered.

However much he failed! This first day of freedom had been anything but successful. He felt as though every hope that he had had had been blotted out; that morning he had had no plan for the future which had not included Terry. What would be the upshot? Would Braithwaite accept his challenge to visit him? If he did, what then? He, Tabbs, couldn't very well ask his ex-valet, merely because he was his ex-valet, to desist from loving the same girl. He had no doubt that Braithwaite, in his new incarnation as a General, did dare to love her. He had little doubt that Terry had shown herself at least susceptible to the glamor of his infatuation. How far had the matter gone between them? There lay the guess.

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He searched back, trying to piece together phrases which would indicate the correct answer. There was her disturbing confession about having given away bits of herself, little bits of herself in wrong directions. There was her reticence as to the ownership of the car and the way in which she had tried to prevent a meeting. There was her sympathy for Maisie's matrimonial excesses; her unnatural tolerance for Adair; her reiterated excuse for the current love-madness, that people had the right at any cost to be happy; and the eagerness with which she had seized on his own words, "to recover our lost years by violence." In the silence of his brain he heard her voice pleading, urgent with pain and underlying terror, "Don't you see why I don't condemn? I'm sorry for you, for myself, for everybody." His knowledge of the world told him that impassioned latitudinarians were most frequently found among those who had themselves offended the conventions. Whatever Terry knew or did not know, she was certainly aware that a match between herself and General Braithwaite was completely off the map and would be regarded by every one who counted as a *mésalliance*.

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And what did she know? Not that Braithwaite had been a valet—most decidedly not that he had been *his* valet; at most she suspected that they had been acquainted when Braithwaite had moved in humbler circles. Had she been possessed of the exact truth, she would never have borrowed a car from that quarter to meet her ex-lover on his home-coming. She had been testing—trying to discover. She had scented a mystery—one for the solving of which none of the General's explanations had proved convincing. Then had come the unforeseen encounter outside the War Office and Braithwaite's falsehood, which even Terry had detected. "You mistake me. It's

the first time I've had the pleasure." What was the man's game? Did he hope to erase his old identity? Did he think—

At this point Tabs' patience broke down. "Dash it all," he muttered, "if there hadn't been a war, the fellow would have been running my bath-water at this moment."

If there hadn't been a war! But there had; and this was only one of the many preposterous situations which had resulted from it. Terry was right in at least one thing that she had said—the world was upside down and walking on its head.

As he lay there thinking, with the topmost branches of the trees in the Square weaving a tracery of green shadows against his windows, a sudden inspiration came to him. He sat up. "By Jove, I've got it. Terry's proud as Lucifer. I can stop this nonsense at any time by telling her who her lover was. Braithwaite will have to call to see me; I can force him to it. When he calls, the door will be opened by Ann. I can hold the threat over him that, if he doesn't promise to break with Terry, I'll expose him."

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He went across to his writing-table, selected a pen and wrote:—

*General Braithwaite,
The War Office,
Whitehall,
London.*

Sir:

*I shall be pleased to see you any time to-morrow at my house in Brompton Square,
which you know so well. The matter which we have to discuss is urgent.*

*Yours truly,
Taborley.*

He addressed the envelope, sealed it and rang the bell. When Ann appeared, he handed it to her. "Please see that it's posted immediately."

He had done something decisive. For the time being he felt happier. "Nothing like getting a thing off your chest!" He took a bath and, having slipped into his dressing-gown, commenced to shave. Between these acts he whistled snatches of street-songs to prove to himself his genuine light-heartedness. It was while he was drying his razor that he started on the wrong air. Where had he heard it? Oh, yes, the sunlit street, the children dancing and a voice at his side murmuring the words of the refrain, "Après la Guerre, there'll be a good time everywhere."

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The old argument commenced again, but with a new justice. "What have I really got against this chap? To rise from a private to a General is no crime; it's to his credit. We all had his chance and some of us had more influence; yet he got there."

He tried to eliminate his own desires and wounded pride from the problem. For five years he had been nothing and had been glad to be nothing, that the cause which he believed to be righteous might triumph by his self-effacement. What sickness of soul had overtaken him that, on this, his first day of freedom, he had immediately surrendered to this orgy of outrageous selfishness? It was Terry that mattered and only Terry. The stronghold of her happiness was threatened by Braithwaite's lie. There was a kingdom for everybody, his old theory. As for himself, if he had been mistaken and his kingdom was not Terry, then he must press on, for it lay further up the road round some newer turning. Meanwhile, at whatever cost to himself he must rescue Terry's happiness.

His heroic state of mind lasted no longer than it takes to set down. He was demanding too much of his exhausted capacity for self-abnegation. He was starving for her. His old hunger to win her swept over him ravenously. Only by winning her could his lost youth be regained.

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III

He had almost completed dressing when there came a tap at the door. Finishing what he was doing in front of the mirror, he answered, "Yes, what is it, Ann?"

"Before you go, I should like to speak with your Lordship."

"Is it important? I've not got too much time."

"It's—it's something to do with myself."

"All right. Half a second."

On opening the door, he saw at once that her face was disturbed.

"What is it?"

"It's something to do with him, sir."

"With whom?"

"With Braithwaite."

It was evident that for Ann there was only one *him* in the world.

"Well, what of him?"

Ann commenced speaking slowly. Under the stress of her nervousness she forgot the correct demeanor for a high-class parlor-maid and became a country girl, twisting the corner of her white, starched apron in her hands.

"I was noticing the address on that letter your Lordship gave me to post." Tabs thought quickly, "Hullo, we're in for it. That was foolish of me. She's put two and two together."

But Ann reassured him in her next sentence. "It was to a General at the War Office and I was thinking that he might help. Braithwaite and I had an understanding. I'm not saying we were engaged; we weren't. We didn't tell anybody. But we'd made up our minds to get married if he ever came back. If I'd been engaged to him, I'd have a right to make enquiries; but now, in most people's eyes, I was nothing to him. That's—that's the hardest part of it. You see, sir, he was never reported dead or missing or anything. I just stopped hearing from him. So I thought that if this General was your Lordship's friend——"

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Tabs' brain had been working. He already had a plan. "You thought that I might persuade him to use his influence to have the records searched?"

She glanced up hopefully. "That's what I was thinking. Would he do it for your Lordship? I don't know how to set about things myself. It's this—this," she almost broke down, "this uncertainty that's a-killing of me. Sister knows about her man, but I——"

Tabs saw the redness of sleeplessness in her eyes; it was true—the uncertainty was killing her. "Don't upset yourself by talking about it," he said kindly. "I'll write to the General and post my request on my way out."

He had supposed he had dismissed her and had seated himself at his desk. A sound behind him warned him; he looked across his shoulder to find her still hovering in the doorway.

She answered his unspoken question as to why she was delaying. "Aren't there any particulars that your Lordship ought to have? Things like his regimental number, and his birthday, and where he was born, and all that? And wouldn't this help?"

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"What's that?"

She pulled out from her apron-pocket an envelope. "It's one of his letters. If the General was to see it, he'd know I had the right."

"May I glance through it?"

Tabs unfolded the scribbled sheets of paper. They were torn from an Army note-book.

"My darling Ann:

The jolly old war drags on and seems as though it were never going to end. Not that I've much to kick about, for it's proved a chance for me. Here's the great news. I'm in for my commission and shall soon be 'an officer and a gentleman.' Don't tell his Lordship if you write to him or see him; he's still in the ranks and might not like it. It's funny to think that I shall be his military superior before many weeks are out and that, were he and I to meet, he'd have to salute me. If I come through the war, I sha'n't go back to being a valet. Once having been a gentleman——"

Tabs ran rapidly through this sheet and turned to the next:—

"You're wonderfully good. I got the socks that you knitted and the two parcels of food from Harrods. You mustn't spend so much of your money on me. When it's all ended, I'll pay you back. We'll get married and have a little cottage in a little town, the way the song says that we heard together at the Comedy on my last leave. You remember how it goes.

*'And we'll have a little mistress in a silken gown.
A little doggie, a little cat,
A little doorstep, with WELCOME on the mat.'*

"My dearest sweetheart, I love you.

"Yours, in the pink, etc."

Tabs looked up. "May I keep this for the present?—And, by the way, how many more of them have you?"

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"Nearly a hundred from the day he enlisted. That's one of the last—I never heard from him whether he lived to get his commission."

When she had vanished, he reread the letter more carefully, made a copy of it and slipped the copy into another envelope addressed to General Braithwaite, together with a note from himself, which read, "*One of the important reasons why I am insistent that you shall call on me is contained in the enclosed copy of one of your many letters, the originals of all of which are in my*

IV

At the red pillar-box, at the foot of the Square, he posted this second missive. "He'll receive them both by the first delivery to-morrow," he thought. "I wonder what he'll— Rotten! But it can't be helped." Then he turned to the right by the Tube Station, going up the narrow old world passage, behind the backs of houses, through the graveyard of the Brompton Parish Church to Ennismore Gardens and the sudden, railed in solitudes of Hyde Park.

There were few pedestrians about. Until he reached the Park they were for the most part men in evening-dress, going to dinner-parties, like himself. Sometimes they were accompanied by their wives or sweethearts, whose little high-heeled shoes made a sharp tap-a-tap against the pavement. Lamps were lighted. The reluctant twilight was gradually fading; the sunset still glowed faintly above clustered chimney-pots to the west. "I'm going to meet Terry," he told himself. "If the day had worked out as I'd planned, I should be going to ask for her hand in marriage— When I planned that, I still believed that I was young."

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Then he thought forward. Sir Tobias, from the moment he entered, would be scheming to get him to himself. Sir Tobias must be avoided. Directly dinner was ended, he would try to hurry him off and imprison him in his library to discuss this Maisie woman and Adair. Still he was going to see Terry; merely to see her was a compensation which stirred his blood.

He crossed the Serpentine, stretching like a phantom lake, rose and slate-colored, through the Peter Pan haunted glades of Kensington Gardens. Then he emerged from the Victoria Gate and found himself ringing a bell and being admitted by a butler, who relieved him of his coat and hat with the velvet-plush manner of a fashionable surgeon feeling a patient's pulse.

"If you will come this way, Sir Tobias is waiting for your Lordship in the library."

It was happening precisely as he had foreseen; it was being taken for granted that he had come as her father's friend, and therefore in some absurd measure as his contemporary.

As he prepared to follow, his attention was attracted by the scarlet band and gold braid about an officer's cap which was lying carelessly on the hall-table beside a pair of dog-skin gloves.

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V

Sir Tobias was standing astride the hearth-rug with his back towards the fire. As the door opened, he was caught in a last nervous adjustment of his tie.

He was a little man, inclined to be podgy, brimful of a darting kind of energy and dignified with an air of fussy distinction which none of his antics, however grotesque, could diminish. He was Shakespeare as he might have appeared at sixty, after years and a return to Ann Hathaway had quenched the taller flames of his poetic fire. The resemblance was haunting and remarkable: there underlay it a hint of gnome-like agility. One suspected that he affected age as a disguise. The pointed beard was white; the scanty hair had receded from the calm forehead; the eyes were blue and faded, and red about the rims with over-much study. The top part of the face above the cheek-bones was noble; but the lower part fell away to a mouth and chin which were amiable and undecided. At the hour of Tabs' arrival, he was flinging up his hands and spluttering impotently, an inexpert swimmer in the waters of adversity.

"My dear Lord Taborley! My dear fellow!" The moment he discovered his guest in the doorway he came darting forward. "My dear boy, this is real friendship. We missed you and wanted you so much.—So you're out of it at last? I mean the khaki."

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The little, wrinkled hand with its stubby fingers reached up timidly in an attempt to pat the big breadth of shoulders.

"Yes, I'm out of it, Sir Tobias."

Tabs didn't want to be patted. He was impatient of polite evasions. He foresaw that he was expected to spend the next five minutes in replying to questions which required no answers—all this as a conventional preface to a discussion of the delicate position of Adair and Maisie. But Tabs had his own problem, and one question in particular about a hat on the hall-table that he was burning to ask. They stood staring at each other, the big, fair man and the worn version of Shakespeare, both wondering how long it would be decorous to chatter before they clinched with the vital topic.

"May as well sit down. There's time for a cigarette. Terry—" Sir Tobias made a short-winded attempt to push a second arm-chair into place beside the fire; Tabs achieved the desired end with one lurch of his body. "Terry brought some one in to tea; he's not gone yet. They never know when to go, these New Army fellows. Good at their job, they tell me, but no polish. I suppose I oughtn't to say that—ungrateful of me! But I'm sick of it all, the invasion of the classes, the women in trousers, the beggars on horseback, the Jazz music. I want the old world back—the womanly women, everybody labeled, and Beethoven."

He pushed the cigarette-box fretfully across to Tabs, having first selected one for himself.

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"Beethoven," he snorted, "that's what I want, and no bobbed hair and everybody happily married."

"This New Army chap who's with Terry," Tabs paused to make his voice unanxious and ordinary, "does she see much of him? Is she fond of him?"

"Fond of him!" The little man jerked round quickly. He was in a mood to see the shadow of terror in the most far-fetched suggestion. "If I thought she was, I should pack her off to Lady Dawn and keep her with her until the fellow was dead or——"

"What's the matter with him?" Tabs flipped the ash off his cigarette indifferently.

"The matter with him!" Sir Tobias pulled at the point of his beard, making a mental effort to frame the charge. "If you'd asked me that question five years ago I could have told you; but not now. In 1914 we spoke of a man as belonging to our class and meant that he had our standards of conduct, our code of honor, our sense of public duty, our traditions—that he could be trusted to run true to form. To-day any man's a gentleman, provided he killed enough Germans."

"But still you do feel that there's something the matter with him."

"Yes, but I can't tell you for the life of me why I feel it. In many ways he's admirable: I believe he's about the youngest brigadier we have who rose from the ranks. There was no hanky-panky about his promotion either—no petticoat influence; it was all sheer merit and courage. He was a fighting-man from first to last and shared all the chances. But the trouble is that one doesn't know where he came from, and, therefore, one can't be sure where he's going. I know that sounds snobbish. You have the right to tell me that if a man was good enough to be butchered to save an old chap like myself, he ought to be good enough to sit down with me at the same table. But what people don't realize is that men have been wounded in protecting old chaps like myself in coal-mines, and on railroads, and a thousand other places ever since the world started, but until now we never felt it necessary to offer them a bed in our houses. War asked for the simplest gifts from men, physical strength, uncomplaining endurance and courage. The war's ended, and if those same gifts are to continue to secure social advancement, every policeman who captures a burglar ought to be made a bank-president. When I demand that a man shall have traditions to be my friend, I ask no more than when I refuse to buy a dog without a pedigree."

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"But this man, what's he called? If he's as distinguished as you say, I ought to have heard of him."

Before his host could answer, the door was discreetly opened. "Dinner is being served, Sir Tobias."

There was a rush of light footsteps and Terry breezed past the butler. "I know you're going to scold me, Daddy. It's all my fault that you were kept waiting. It took me so long to persuade General Braithwaite. By the time he'd consented—— I had to dress like a hurricane. I'm not at all sure that I'm properly hooked up the back. I know I feel draughty." Then, as though she had not remembered that he was expected, "Why, hullo, Tabs! In a dinner-jacket! You do look peaceful and jolly."

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VI

They had taken their places at the square handsome table, illuminated at each corner by a silver candle-stick, red-shaded and electric-lighted. Tabs and Terry were seated side by side, so that he saw her always in profile, except when she turned to him in conversation. He saw the soft roundness of her shoulder, the satin pallor of her throat and breast, the quivering gold of her childishly wavy hair.

The General sat isolated, opposite and facing them. Sir Tobias and his wife sat at either end—had they known it, for all the world like judges.

Lady Beddow was a proud, unbending woman, gracious to her own sort, unquestioningly respectful to those above her, tender in a practical way to those below her and coldly scrutinizing to any one who tapped at her door claiming to be an equal. Being bred to her finger-tips, she was as ill-at-ease as her husband in the jostling democracy of the moment.

In the hall Sir Tobias rather huffily had introduced his guests. Tabs had relieved the tension by smiling quietly at Braithwaite, "The General and I have met before."

It was an uncomfortable dinner from the moment they sat down. Sir Tobias, although he had shown no signs of it in the library, seemed to have developed a resentment at having been kept waiting. No reference was made to this resentment, but Terry and the General were obviously the culprits. Sir Tobias was vaguely unhappy and had to blame somebody. Under the tacitly implied criticism Terry's rebellious spirits rose higher, but the General's authoritative assurance began to crumble.

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Sir Tobias was continuing the conversation which had started in the library. He seemed oblivious to the fact that it had then concerned the man who was now present. "You can't make the world afresh with a catastrophe. Men are like water: in a storm they rise above or sink below themselves. When the disturbance is ended, they tend to find their own level. War destroys; it never created anything."

"That's not true, if you'll excuse me for contradicting you. You're speaking without knowledge."

Braithwaite uttered himself bluntly as he would have done in his own Headquarters' mess—this despite the fact that it was Tabs whom his host had been addressing.

In his astonishment, Sir Tobias nearly gagged himself with the soup that he was on the point of swallowing. He blinked mildly at this confident young man, his breast ablaze with decorations, whom he had not invited. "Then, in your opinion, what has war ever created," he asked with dangerous courtesy; "this war, for instance, that's just ended?"

"This war that's just ended is the only war of which I have had any experience." Braithwaite glanced across at Terry for encouragement. "I know what it created in me and in thousands like me. It created in us the most valuable of all assets—character. In the bitter test of pain and dirt and despair we *found* ourselves—found ourselves capable of more nobility than we had ever dreamt possible. We sorted out afresh, in hours that we thought would be our last, all our inherited superstitions and servilities; in so doing we discovered that God and life itself are much kinder than we had been informed. Because of that discovery men who had been timid learnt how to face death gladly, shirkers how to shoulder responsibility, selfish people how to become decent through the fine humanity of sharing. Time-servers learnt how to get up off their bellies and confront misfortune with a laugh. I don't know whether I make myself clear; perhaps one had to be a part of the great game to understand its lessons. That we do understand them is the reward of those who have survived. We've come back to you as uncomfortable fellows; we shall be much more uncomfortable before we're satisfied. We intend to fight for the same equalities in peace that you sent us out to fight for in war. You asked me what this particular war has created; it has created a complete new set of social and spiritual values. It's done away with the uncharity of caste."

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During his last words he had been gazing across the table at Tabs with a fearless challenge, as much as to say, "That's who I am. Now expose me."

But Tabs was remembering the coster's reason for not having dragged him into the police-courts, "Served in the ranks, did yer? Then you and me was pals out there!" Braithwaite, whether he knew it or not, had been doing a piece of special pleading for himself. He and Braithwaite, whatever they might be now, had been pals out there. Silently Tabs had been thinking while he had been listening, "You're right and I'm with you. I'd be with you still more if you'd only live up to your standards by sticking to Ann."

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It was Sir Tobias who took the offensive. The soup-plates had been removed and the fish-course had not yet been served. He had the leisure to talk. "You men who have been in the Army," he said testily, "especially those of you who have gained your promotion rapidly, always speak as if the rest of us had been receivers of stolen goods until you put on uniforms. Armies are composed of youth; for most of you it was the first time you had tasted authority. It's gone to your heads; you want to brush experience aside and dragoon the older world into new formations. You, who were civilians yourselves, have come back despising us civilians; your contempt is three-parts fear lest you'll fail, as you failed before, in the old civilian competitive struggle. You talk about the virtues war has taught; let's grant them and grant them gratefully—they saved us from destruction. But what about the frantic recklessness it encouraged, the cheap views of bodily chastity, the desperate insistence on momentary happiness?" At the mention of bodily chastity, Lady Beddow from the other end of the table had stuttered a "tut, tut!" Her husband dodged it, as a boy might dodge a wheelbarrow upset in his path. Without shifting his glance he ran on. "A complete new set of social and spiritual values! Rubbish! War places an excessive premium on merely brutal qualities—muscle, bone, sinew, all the paraphernalia of physical endurance. What use has it got for old fellows of intellectual attainments like myself? It takes the greatest poet, singer, painter, violinist; all it can do with him is to thrust a rifle into his hands. All brains look alike, Michael Angelo's or a rag-picker's, when they're spattered in the mud of a trench. Take Lord Taborley here, for instance—all that military stupidity could do with him was to keep him in the ranks for two years. You can't make me believe in your complete new set of social and spiritual values. A complete unrest and insubordination to time-honored moralities is the legacy of war."

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Having delivered himself, he tucked his napkin tighter into his waistcoat and attacked the fish-course, as though by this display of gastronomic energy he could somehow strengthen his argument.

It was clear to Tabs that behind all that Sir Tobias had been saying lay his misery over Maisie and Adair. He saw the world always in the personal equation.

"I agree with most of your statements," the General blundered on. "And yet you're wrong. You miss something. I think it's the vision of the stupendous heroism. You never saw it; you don't want to see it. That you never saw it we can understand; but that you shouldn't want to see it, makes us see red. It was something that we did for you, and you take it all for granted. You cheered us and jeered us into going because you were frightened. You handed us white feathers if we hesitated. You dragged us from our jobs and very often we were poor men, who had no such financial security as was yours. You promised that if we would share our lives with you, you'd go fifty-fifty with us on your financial security. There wasn't time to have deeds of agreement drawn up; we took you at your word. And what a lie it was! Why, I passed a blinded officer in Regent Street to-day peddling shoe-laces. The day before a jobless soldier threw himself beneath a train and his last words were, 'Over the top and the best of luck.' There's a Colonel I see by to-night's paper who's gone back to being a policeman. If you see a man in uniform to-day, your unspoken thought is, 'For God's sake take it off.' I tell you it's all wrong. It's that kind of ingratitude that

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leads to revolution. You talk about the brutality of war; it's not a patch on the brutality of peace. You treated men's lives as yours while the danger lasted, but you insist that your possessions are your own now that it's been averted."

He took a breath and glanced round.

Tabbs was nodding unconscious approval. Terry's face reflected the fire of his own passionate indignation and enthusiasm. The butler in the shadows had turned his back non-committally and was making a pretense of fiddling with the next course. Lady Beddow sat very upright and startled, grasping her knife and fork as though they helped to support her. The only person who was still doing justice to the meal was the worn-out version of Shakespeare, who was responsible for the storm.

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The silence seemed to call for a final climax. The ex-valet cleared his throat. And it was to his ex-valet that Tabbs listened; he had forgotten the General. It was as though the grimness of reality had interrupted a piece of play-acting. There was less heat in Braithwaite's voice now and more reproach. "You said nothing about caste in those days, when you hurried us to the shambles. You promised us— What was it that you promised us?"

"A kingdom round the corner," Tabbs suggested. The next minute he felt Terry's warm little hand clinging to his own beneath the tablecloth.

Braithwaite stared at Tabbs to see whether he were jesting; then smiled in relieved friendship at this proof of comradeship from an unexpected quarter. "Yes, perhaps it was that—a future kindness, where we should all be men together, neither free nor bond." Then again to his host, "You sent us out there where everything was censored. Scarcely a whisper of the truth reached you. The very war-correspondents were instructed to delete the horror and to write nothing that would disturb your calm. We've come back, what are left of us; we think you ought to know what really happened. It isn't that we take much pleasure in telling you, but we think that if you knew, you might be persuaded to keep at least some of your promises. And what do you do? You reassert your privilege to despise us. You stuff your fingers in your ears and talk about caste, and forgetting the war, and getting back to work. Sir Tobias, I'm afraid I'm being far too personal, but you're a sample of millions who weren't there. You're living in a totally altered world of whose very existence you're content to be unaware. Your complacency drives men like myself to the point of madness. We hold that you have no right to be complacent until the bill you put your hand to has been settled. I don't know how Lord Taborley feels; he's not expressed—"

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"Tabbs feels exactly the way you do and so do I." It was Terry speaking, like the shrill courage of a bugle answering the slow bass of a trumpet-call. "We're the world that purchased victory—we three, while the rest of the world sat back. It was men like you two who got gassed, and wrenched, and tortured, and girls like myself who patched you up and flirted with you so that we might send you back to the Front cheery—girls like myself who hadn't known love, or children, or anything but a nursery sort of happiness. We three and people like us understand, because we paid the price together."

"Really, Terry, I must confess there are times when you shock me." As Lady Beddow rose from her seat, she was the picture of disapproval. From the door, which the butler held open for her, she glanced back. "I think this discussion has gone *very* far."

As she swept out, she called across her shoulder, as one might call to a pet dog, "Come, Terry."

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VII

But Terry did not come; she sat on tightly, just as if she were a man among men. Until coffee had been served and the room was free from servants, there was a pretense at small-talk in which Sir Tobias did not join. He crouched moodily in his chair, an unlighted cigar between his fingers, looking very old and somehow deserted. With the instinctive tenderness which she always showed when she knew that she had hurt, Terry got up and went to him. She linked her arms about his neck and stooped to kiss the bald-spot on his head. "Cheer up, Daddy dear; it isn't half as bad as it sounded. Don't you want me to light your cigar for you?"

Tabbs, to distract attention from the reconciliation, addressed the General. It was odd that he should feel so much sympathy for a man whom his letters, already beyond recall, would stir into panic in the morning. "Do you intend to stay in the Army, sir?"

"No. But why do you ask? They're getting rid of all of us who aren't Regulars, no matter how brilliant our service. They're making the Army again a social club. I shall soon be out of uniform."

"And then?" Tabbs persisted.

"Oh, then I shall find something else." He spoke airily, but the shadow which crossed his handsome face added plainly as words, "If I can find anything."

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"If it isn't impertinence," Tabbs sank his voice, "may I ask what you intend to turn to?"

The General eyed him suspiciously, wondering whether he was again about to lay claim to the previous embarrassing acquaintance. "I have several things in view," he said sketchily, "from which a man in my position ought to be able to choose."

"Ought! But that hasn't been the story up-to-date. What of the Colonel you were just telling us

about?" Tabs saw that another storm was brewing. He leant across the table and hurried on. "If the worst comes to the worst, I expect your old job's waiting for you. The qualities which have made you what you are to-day, must have been recognized and valued——" Terry had completed her reconciliation with her father and was resting her gaze upon them. Tabs altered his tone. "You put what you said at dinner rather strongly, sir. But I understand what you were driving at—it was the democracy of the front-line where courage, which at its best is unselfishness, was our only standard of aristocracy."

Before the General could make reply, Sir Tobias had raised his bewildered head. "It's a thing that I for one don't want to understand. I don't want to go on living, if what you've said is true."

Tabs turned considerably to the older man. "I think you would if you knew. The difference that war made to all of us who were there was that it taught us to judge men by their good points rather than their defects. It upset all our preconceived notions about society, especially our notions about the extreme value of race and breeding. What we learnt was that there's a breeding of the heart which enables a man from the gutter to run true to the highest form." [Pg 83]

Sir Tobias leveled his weary eyes in challenge. "Then what about Adair?"

The name was out at last—the name which he had been trying to get uttered all evening. It didn't matter that Adair hadn't been at the war and had no proper place in the argument. He had wanted to break through his reticence due to his sense of impending family disaster. At last he had done it.

"I think, Daddy," Terry said, "the General and I had better leave you and Tabs to talk alone."

The next thing that Tabs saw was Terry making her escape with this other man. He had it in his power to settle his suspense for all time by saying, "One minute, Terry. You're choosing between the General and myself. It may help you in making your decision to know that Braithwaite was once——" But the coster's definition of fair-play deterred him. This man had been his pal in the trenches; because of that he allowed himself for the second time that day to be shut out from the company of youth. He hadn't discovered how much or how little she knew. By her withdrawal he was made to feel middle-aged—more nearly her father's contemporary than ever. Yet, as an underlying comfort to his distress, he had the remembered pressure of the little hand that had sought his own in secret friendliness.

He turned to Sir Tobias. "Yes, what about Adair? Terry said that you wanted to consult me. If there's anything that I can say or do——" [Pg 84]

VIII

The door was reopening. Tabs glanced back across his shoulder through the shadows. She was hovering just inside the threshold, hastily clad in her evening-wrap; beyond her in the hall the General stood fidgeting with his cap. Sir Tobias was sitting with his head bowed; he had not heard the sound of her reëntry. He spoke evidently believing that they two were alone. "I don't like that fellow. It's the last time he ever comes to my house. Whatever Terry can see in him—— And he's not good for Terry."

She tiptoed back into the hall, pulling the door softly behind her. A moment later the front door closed with a bang.

"What was that?" Sir Tobias looked up gnome-like and startled.

Tabs guessed what it was; but because, as she had said they three had paid the price together, he kept her secret. "General Braithwaite, probably. But you were speaking of Adair?"

Sir Tobias shivered, betraying his nervous tension. "A disturber," he said irritably, "even in his going. And yet, I suppose it's true; we shouldn't be sitting here comfortably to-night if it hadn't been for his sort."

Now that it had been broached, it was anything to avoid the main topic. He drummed with his fingers on the table, ceased drumming and sighed heavily. "Yes, I was speaking of Adair. I don't understand him. I've grown out of touch; I don't seem to understand anybody. I'm left behind, somehow. People do things to-day that they never used to do. They shout about things from the house-tops which all my life I've mentioned only in whispers. Terry does; you heard what she said to-night about never having been loved and never having had children. The loss of delicacy——" [Pg 85]

"I wouldn't call it a loss of delicacy." Tabs struck a match. "I would call it a loss of prudishness. We all know that girls are born to be married and that the best of them long to have children. Why shouldn't they own it? You owned it long ago when you bought her dolls. The lid is off false reticences. I hope it stays off; we shall be a much honester world."

"The lid's off! That's the phrase I was searching for." Sir Tobias leant forward confidentially. "You haven't been much in England during the past four years or you'd know how badly the lid is off. You men, when you were in the trenches, lived above yourselves; but, the moment you came home on leave, you taught the world that wasn't in khaki how to live below itself. I could tell you stories——"

"I know." Tabs didn't want to hear those stories. "It was pathetic. Men tried to steal in a handful of hours all the passionate experiences that would have come to them beautifully and legitimately

over forty years. It was like snatching from a bargain-counter things that you hadn't time to pay for. You were young and you were so soon to be snuffed out. The unthoughtful took desperately what they believed life owed them. They——"

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It was the turn of Sir Tobias to interrupt. "But so did the women—this Maisie woman, for instance. It was astounding—the women one would least have expected. All the desires we had caged through the centuries broke loose—caged with traditions, with public opinion and scriptural penalties." He was delighted with his image and went on to elaborate it. "They broke loose like wild animals from a menagerie. We'd always known they existed. Sometimes we'd paid surreptitious visits to them in books," the old eyes blinked cautiously, "the way one goes to the Zoo, to remind himself that there is a jungle somewhere. But we'd only regarded them as specimens; we'd never expected to meet them roaming about the streets loose or coming as domestic pets into our houses. Now the war's ended and the jungle's all about us; we can't get the animals back into their cages. Fellows like this General Braithwaite don't help matters by telling us that we oughtn't to want to get them back——"

"Perhaps he's one of the animals," Tabs interpolated. "You couldn't expect him to want to be put back."

"Perhaps he is. In fact that's what I've felt about him. That's what's helped me to make up my mind that he shall see no more of Terry." He reached out and tapped Tabs' hand, taking it for granted that he was his ally. "The sight's becoming far too normal—wild beasts everywhere, sunning themselves in impertinent freedom, as if they were house-cats. Nobody's shocked at it any longer. Terry isn't. Lloyd George isn't—at least he pretends he isn't for fear the wild beasts may lose him an election. No one makes a stand. It's left for private individuals like ourselves, to ——"

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"To do what?"

Sir Tobias lost his stride. He blinked reproachfully. "To get them back into their cages."

For an instant Tabs nearly smiled. "And Adair—is he the first wild beast we tackle? Have we got to get him back into the cage of matrimony? Tell me about Adair."

"It was no cage." Sir Tobias spoke almost resentfully. "His home was a kind of nest and Phyllis was the mother-bird."

The butler had looked in several times to see whether he was free to clear away. For the first time Sir Tobias became aware of him pottering in the shadows. "Perhaps we'd better continue in my library."

He pushed back his chair, dropped his napkin, groped after it feebly, then led the way solemnly across the hall. When he had seated himself before the fire and fortified his courage with a fresh cigar, he plunged headlong into the story of his son-in-law's delinquencies.

IX

"How a man who has a daughter of mine for his wife can find attraction in any other woman is more than I can fathom."

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"I agree with you there, sir." Tabs suddenly found himself carried off his feet and on the point of a confession. "If any man were to play false by Terry, I think—I think I'd brain him."

Sir Tobias half-closed his eyes and regarded his guest with sleepy approval. "I somehow knew," he said slowly, "that that was how you felt." Then he opened his eyes wide and darted forward in his chair, as though to trace exactly the effect of his words. He was full of tricks and contradictions, obstinacies and tenderesses, this Punch-like old gentleman with the head of Shakespeare. "I knew that was how you felt," he continued, "because you've seen all the love that has gone to their making. You were already a big fellow when they were still tiny. Wasn't it Terry who first called you Tabs because her tongue couldn't get round Taborley? Ah, I've been so proud of my girls! They were so little and white when they first came to us. They couldn't walk—not a step. One had to carry them everywhere. Then they began to crawl; they couldn't stand up right unless one gave them his hand. And then at last they walked. They walked by one's side at first and soon got tired. But as they grew stronger, they walked away and away, always getting more incomprehensible, till finally—it hasn't happened to Terry yet—till finally they met a man. Wait till you're a father, Lord Taborley; from the moment you give all that whiteness into another's keeping, you never cease to be jealous of him. He can never appreciate what a gift you have made him. He never saw her when she was little and helpless. She's your youth—she's everything vigorous that you were. The first time he affords you with a reason for hating him, you'll hate him like—— The way you said: so that you could brain him without compunction. Adair—— I could cheerfully kill him."

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Tabs felt rather than heard the pent-up passion in his voice; it alarmed him with its sincerity. "But mayn't you be exaggerating?" he suggested. "Are you sure that Adair—— What I mean to say is, he may be only philandering. Heaps of men do that—go through all the motions of making fools of themselves and actually do nothing. He may be only expressing the discontent of the moment, the revolt from suspense, the flatness of quiet after terrible excitements. One didn't need to be a fighting-man to share those excitements. You say that Phyllis made a nest of her home. Perhaps he didn't like nests. It may be that that's done it. Adair can't have altered so

radically over night; he wasn't forceful enough to erupt so disastrously. He was decent——"

"I know nothing definite." The passion had died down. It was again an old and weary man who spoke. "I only know that she believes he's abandoning her and that it makes her wretched. She wants him back; if there's any way of getting him back, she must have him. I never denied anything to my girls. If money will persuade him, it's for you to find out how much. If this Lockwood woman has a price, let her state it. I'll spare nothing. Though everything else has lost its value, money still has the power to purchase. I can't buy back faithfulness and loyalty; but I should be able to buy the appearance of it. If I were you I would tackle this Lockwood woman first."

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He tossed the stub of his cigar towards the fire. It fell short in the grate. He picked it up and rammed it deep into the burning coals. He looked a poor, old, pitiful child, uttering embittered heresies. "All women are mercenary; all of them except my wife and daughters. Ah, yes, and Lady Dawn."

Tabbs wondered what Lady Dawn had done to gain exemption from this sweeping accusation. "I'll see this Maisie Lockwood to-morrow," he said, "if you can tell me where she lives."

Sir Tobias had risen and was seating himself at his desk. "I'll copy you out her address. I have it somewhere buried among these papers."

He had hidden it so thoroughly that it took a few minutes to find. As he rustled sundry sheets and stooped over them round-shouldered, Tabbs had time to reflect. Terry! Where was she? She was so little and unprotected and white. Would a day ever come when a man would play her false? At this moment he had it in his power to prevent that day from ever arriving.

"Ah, here it is!" It was his host talking. Then the painful scratching of the pen commenced.

"Sir Tobias, I want to speak to you about Terry." The scratching of the pen stopped, but the shoulders remained bowed. "This is an unfortunate night for me to choose to talk to you about her, but—— To tell the truth, I feel that if I don't speak to-night I may lose my chance."

"What do you want to say about her?" The shoulders had unhunched themselves, but the head had not turned.

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"Only this, that I've loved her for a very long while and that if you don't think I'm too old, I should like your permission to ask her to marry me."

Tabbs thought to himself with a glow of satisfaction, "At last I've done it. And done it in just the way and at just the time that I'd always planned."

He felt the pride of a man who had worked on schedule and been punctual to the second.

Sir Tobias turned. His face was composed. It was some seconds before he spoke. "Of course this is no surprise to me. You *are* old for her. You'll be fifty-five when she's scarcely forty." He paused and Tabbs' heart sank. "You're older than her; but then you're wiser. She needs a husband who'll be wise." He sat leisurely as though he were resting from a long journey; then he stretched out his hand. Tabbs went over and took it. "My dear fellow, there's only one thing I ask: make her always happy."

The clock in the hall struck midnight. He lifted himself to his feet. "I had no idea how the time had flown. By the way, that's the address—the Maisie woman's."

Tabbs took it carelessly. It had become a thing of little consequence. He folded it away in his pocket. "And when shall I see Terry?" Of a sudden he felt that he must see her; see her and make sure of her without loss of time.

"To-morrow, I suppose. Say about eleven."

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Tabbs thought back. He had expected to receive a call from General Braithwaite about eleven, or at least to hear from him as soon as he had opened his morning's letters. Then he smiled to himself; when once he was engaged to Terry, what General Braithwaite did or did not do would be no longer of any importance.

"Yes, about eleven, if it'll be agreeable to Terry."

"There's not much doubt about its being agreeable to her."

They passed out into the hall. While Tabbs found his hat and coat, they spoke only in monosyllables. The servants had gone to bed. The house was intensely silent.

They had got as far as the front-door and Sir Tobias already had his hand upon the latch, when a taxi purred up to the pavement and came to a halt immediately outside. "Some one stopping at the wrong house," he hazarded and threw the door wide. "See you again to-morrow."

"Yes, to-morrow."

"At eleven," Sir Tobias reminded.

"On the dot of eleven," Tabbs confirmed.

He passed into the cool night air, wistful with the fragrance of unseen flowers. His eyes were

dazed for the moment by the sudden change of light. He made out the blurred silhouette of the taxi and faltered, thinking he might have a chance to hire it; then he saw that its shadowy occupants were climbing back into its deeper darkness. It seemed that Sir Tobias had been right; it had stopped at the wrong house.

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As he reached the corner where he turned, he glanced back. The taxi had not moved. Its occupants were again getting out—an officer and a girl. The girl was ringing the bell of the house that he had left, while, the officer was settling with the driver. As he joined her, the door opened, letting fall a shaft of light. There was a brief parley—evidently hurried explanations. Even at that distance he could recognize the indignant tones of Sir Tobias' angry voice. Then he heard the "Shish, Daddy!" from Terry. They entered. The door closed behind them. The taxi moved off in the opposite direction. Again there was silence—nothing but the fragrance of unseen flowers and the wistfulness of the cool, spring night.

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CHAPTER THE THIRD

ALL SORTS OF KINGDOMS

I

Tabb had dressed himself with more than ordinary care. He was rather amused at his self-consciousness in having done so, and a little disdainful of it. Yet he knew that in the winning of a woman the strategy of clothes has its value; he had no intention of losing a trick by negligence. It was nine o'clock when he sat down to breakfast; within two hours he would be seeing Terry.

It was a gay morning, lacquered with sunshine; bustling breezes made young leaves of trees in the little Square murmurous. Ever since he had wakened he had been listening to the gossiping chirp of congregated sparrows and the rolling boom of tumultuous traffic. At intervals across the upland of roofs there had drifted to him the far-blown chime of bells and the slower music of clocks striking. It was like an orchestra scraping its chairs and tuning up before crashing into the overture of the happier world.

Lying beside his plate as he came down he saw a single letter. It was addressed to him in an unfamiliar feminine hand. He picked it up and examined it carefully with the air of a connoisseur. So long as a letter remains unopened, especially when it is to a bachelor from an unknown woman, it retains an atmosphere of adventure. Up to a point he resented the intrusion. This morning his thoughts should have been so utterly Terry's. And yet he was piqued by it.

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He slit the envelope. The letter-head was embossed with a crest quite unknown to any but the most modern heraldry. He read:—

Dear Lord Taborley:

I have been given to understand that you are exceedingly anxious to make my acquaintance. If this is so, I shall be at home when you call to-morrow afternoon. Asking your lenience for this liberty, I remain,

Yours very truly,

Maisie P. Lockwood.

"To-morrow afternoon! Written yesterday! That means the afternoon of to-day.—And why the P—Maisie P. Lockwood? Is that for Pollock, her first husband?—Unusual! A rather naïve person!" Then his face went blank. "She must be a thought-reader! How the dickens did she guess that I wanted to make her acquaintance? I scarcely knew it myself at the time that she wrote this letter."

Crushing the scented sheet in his hand, he tossed it into the empty grate. "My dear lady, if you can read minds so accurately at a distance, be assured of this: to-day I shall be too busy with Terry to have any time to spare on you."

The door from the narrow hall partly opened. "May I come in?"

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At sound of her voice, he sprang to his feet, upsetting his chair. She made bold to look in at him. "Why, Tabb, you *are* a late breakfaster. Daddy told me you were planning to see me at eleven; to save you the trouble, I hurried round."

Like a flurry of March sunshine, Terry entered.

II

He scarcely knew how to greet her. How does one greet a girl whose permission he has yet to gain, whereas her father has already consented? Moreover, there was his last memory of her, at midnight dodging into the taxi to avoid him.

She spared him the trouble of deciding by holding out her hand. "I know that you saw me. That's

what I've come to talk about."

Her smile as she said it was both embarrassed and frank. She looked like an honest youngster who had come voluntarily to confess and, if need be, to be spanked. Tabs noticed that her lower lip was tremulous and that she was whipping up her courage. His mind went back to days when she had really been a child and he a man—when he had bound up cut fingers for her, had taken her on fishing expeditions, had taught her to cast her first fly and, as a reward, before the nursery lights went out, had been allowed to see her snuggled safe in bed. Little Terry, she had been his tiny sister in those days whom he had loved with no thought of gain—just a small companion for whom he bought exciting presents wherever he voyaged across the world—a doll's house in China, a quilt in Mexico, a scarlet riding-saddle in Persia. It hurt him to see her afraid of him now—afraid of him because he was about to offer her the greatest of all presents. Was she afraid because he was too old for her?

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"You don't need to talk about it unless you like," he said kindly. "Whatever you do or have done is right."

"That's not true." She wrung her hands. "Oh, Tabs, you make it so hard for me when you're generous. I haven't done right. I'm in a tangle. I don't know whether what I'll do in the future will be any better."

They were still standing just as they had confronted each other when she had entered. Tabs glanced round the room at the used breakfast-table, Maisie's crumpled petition lying in the grate, the flood of sunlight and the tops of the heads of passers-by stealing across the pane above the stiff row of tulips. His eyes went back to the flower-face of this young girl as she stood before him, fashionably attired and battling to conceal the storm of her distress. The setting struck him as inadequate and unprivate. The hats which stole by above the row of tulips seemed to belong to spies. At any moment Ann might tap and request that she be allowed to clear the table. He believed that in the next half-hour his dream of the last five years was to be shattered; otherwise, if it had not been to spare him, why should Terry have paid him so unconventional a visit, at such an unconventional hour, when by every law of usage she should have been waiting for him to call on her?

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"How about upstairs?" he suggested. "In my study we shall be sure to be undisturbed."

"No, Tabs, dear," and the little added word touched him strangely, "I've got to say at once what has to be said. It's like waiting at the dentist's—it's the waiting that's so wearing." Her face lit up with the ghost of a smile. "When you've faced the real pain, it's over in a second."

She seated herself. Reluctantly he followed her example. But when she was seated, she found herself at a loss for words. She drew off her gloves, and sat there folding and refolding them. He waited for her to commence; the silence was unbroken, save for the laughter of children playing in the Square and the occasional tapping of footsteps on the pavement. He leant across the table and took her hand. "Terry, after all these years you're not afraid of me? You don't need to be. Remember what you've just said: it's the waiting that's so wearing; the real pain's over in a second. Get the real pain over; then we'll plan for the best."

She looked up gratefully with eyes that were almost clear of trouble. "You're gentle—so different from other men. I could almost love you; I do love you. But not quite in the way— You understand. I trust you more than any one in the world."

"Then why—?"

"Ah, why?" she echoed. "That's what I wish you could tell me. Why should I be able to offer more to—to some one else whom I trust less? So much less?"

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"But is that love, Terry? Isn't it infatuation? Could you keep on offering? Loving means marrying and marrying means being together without respite."

"I know," she nodded wisely. "I know all that. I know it so well that I don't want to marry him or anybody—at least, not yet."

"Then why—?"

She took his other hand in hers, clinging to it as if she were drowning. "That's the second time you've asked me why. I'll tell you. Because if I don't say 'Yes,' I shall lose him. Even though I may not want him forever, I can't bear to lose him for now. You must know the feeling—you who are in love. And that's why," her voice choked with the tears that she kept back from her eyes, "that's why I promised him last night."

"Last night!" Tabs spoke slowly, trying to bring the finality home to himself.

"Last night," she repeated; "the night that should have been yours. The night I had promised to you for years." Then, in a flame of self-derision, "Why don't you let go my hands and hate me, now that you know how treacherous I am?"

"You're not treacherous." He smoothed the slim fingers as though he were coaxing a child. "You mustn't be unjust to yourself. When we're in love we're all apt to be unjust; I was yesterday, to this man. Injustice, whether to oneself or to some one else, works most of our mischief; one never knows where it ends. We can't control our hearts, Terry; you've tried. You've tried to make your heart love me and it's refused. Don't be miserable because of it; you couldn't help that. And this

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man—he's a fine fellow. I always knew he was a fine fellow, until seeing him with you yesterday made me jealous and blinded my eyes. He's a finer fellow than ever now. You couldn't love him if he weren't."

She wasn't giving him the enthusiastic attention that his praise deserved. Somewhere at the back of her mind there lay a doubt with which she wrestled while he strove to comfort her. He believed that he had guessed her doubt. "As for not trusting him the way you trust me," he explained, "that's natural. We know the whole of each other's lives; our families are the same kind of families and we share the same kind of friends. Whereas——"

"Whereas," she broke in, "I know nothing about his past, where he lived, who his people were or anything. I know nothing that he enjoyed or laughed at before I saw him lying quietly in our hospital-ward in France. I've questioned him as much as I dared; but always he grows vague. There's something that he's hiding from me. I only gathered that he had known you from the way he pricked up and listened whenever your name was mentioned. That was why, without warning either of you, I—— You see, I had to find out. And then, when he met you face to face he—he lied."

"Hush, Terry."

"But he did. He lied."

She had withdrawn her hands from his and sat back eyeing him with a clear look of challenge. Tabs was at a loss to explain her change of attitude. Yesterday she had been all for defending this man. What did she gain by accusing him now that she was engaged to him? In any case she had employed too ugly a word. And here was a strange state of affairs, that it should be left to him to defend his successful rival.

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"A man is not compelled to know another man unless he likes," he said cautiously. "They may have met some time in the past under unfortunate circumstances—circumstances which are embarrassing to remember. The man to whom that memory is a disadvantage has a right to protect himself by sweeping it clean from his mind."

"But not to lie about it to the girl he says he loves," she declared. "There can be only one motive for such a denial: that it covers up something which is dishonorable."

"But there never was anything dishonorable. That I swear."

"Then he believes that I would think it dishonorable," she insisted; "which means that he doesn't trust me. That's the reason I can't trust him in return. If we don't trust each other now, how can we hope that things would be better if we married?"

Her logic was unanswerable, but she was arguing on the wrong side. At what was she driving? He gave it up. Was she wanting him to tell her where and when he and her future husband had met? The eagerness of her silence seemed to demand as much. But there are rules to every game. No pressure that she could bring to bear could make him tell her that. She recognized those rules by refraining from putting her request into words.

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It was he who broke the silence. His tones were puzzled. "You come to me on the morning that I had hoped to be engaged to you myself and you confide all these secrets about this other man. You insist that neither of you trusts the other and that you could find no happiness in marriage. Then why, in heaven's name, Terry, did you pledge yourself to him last night?"

"The fear of losing him——" Her face quivered pitifully. She was on the verge of weeping. "He overheard what Daddy said about forbidding him the house. It seemed our last time together. I couldn't bear that it should be the last. It was to keep him near me for just a little longer that I ——"

Tabs rose and limped to the window. He dared not let himself go, the way his instincts urged. They might carry him too far. She looked so much like the little girl in short skirts he had known, as she sat there bravely trying not to cry. He wanted to take her on his knees, as in the old days. Now that she loved another man, he was not allowed to show her comfort in that way any longer. That she should run to him for help and yet love some one else, wounded his pride. What was the matter with him that he had failed to stir her passion? Why could he appeal only to her helplessness?

Inside the communal garden, with its surrounding railings and locked gates, nurses in uniforms were pushing prams. Toddlers were tossing a ball across the lawn and tottering after it with excited shouts. Beneath a tree in the clear sunshine a young mother sat sewing. Other men's women! Other men's babies! He would have to set out in search of his kingdom afresh; all his old quests had been mistaken. But he was older now and lame; he lacked the energy for a new journey. It seemed to him that he would be alone and unwanted always.

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A telegraph-girl was mounting the steps. He heard the bell ring without interest. Gazing out, with his back towards Terry, he put to her what he intended should be his final question. "You promised him last night—then why did you hurry round to me this morning?"

Her dress rustled and her breathing quickened. "Because——" she commenced and failed. He did not turn his head. She tried again in a lower voice, "Because I want you to get my promise back."

He swung round and crossed to where she was still sitting. With his hands resting lightly on her

shoulders, he stared down at her golden head. "But, Terry dear, why? Look at me. You must tell me."

She did not look at him. "I'm frightened. Nobody knows as yet; so before they know— Oh, Tabs, you're so clever; you can do anything." And then she repeated whimperingly, like a child over a broken toy, "I want you to get my promise back."

"Listen to me, Terry dearest," he spoke coaxingly, "don't be a baby. What is it that you're asking me to do? Is it to see him for you and to break the news that you've altered your mind over night. You know he'll want reasons. What shall I tell—?"

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She lifted her head, stretching back her throat so that all her face looked up at him. "If you'll still have me—" His hands on her shoulders tightened. "Say that you still want me, Tabs." For answer his head slowly nodded, but his eyes never left her eyes. "Tell him that I'm engaged to you, instead."

In the tumult of surprised desire he bent over her, but he got no further, for a tap fell on the panel of the door and the handle turned. He drew himself upright quickly and stepped back aloofly. "What is it?"

"A telegram, your Lordship." Ann entered. "I told the girl to wait in case there was an answer."

He tore it open, glanced through it and handed it to Terry. To Ann he said, "There won't be any answer."

Terry read, "*Shall be delighted to have you lunch with me to-day Savoy Hotel one o'clock. Braithwaite.*" She examined the address and looked up startled, "But it's to you. It's—it's as though he knew we were together. What made him send it?"

When Tabs answered there was no echo of her excitement in his voice. "I wrote him yesterday asking him to call here. Evidently he preferred a more public place."

She glanced at him shrewdly. "Why did you write him? You must have done that between leaving me and coming to our house to dine. I know it's no good my asking you." Her last words were more of a question than an assertion. "I can see that it's no good my asking you." "No, Terry, it's no good. Braithwaite's past is his own secret. But I can pledge you my word that it bears no stain."

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"Then why shouldn't he—?" She changed her question. "Shall you meet him to-day at lunch?"

"Yes."

"Shall you tell him what we've—?"

"Not all of it, Terry."

"Why not all of it? Which part are you going to leave out?"

He came again to where she sat and stood gazing down on her. "Terry, why do you want me to tell him? Why can't you tell him yourself? It would be kinder."

"Because— Oh, Tabs, you do want me, don't you? Because I daren't trust myself to see him."

"And so you want me to tell him we're engaged because you daren't trust yourself to tell him! Isn't that it?"

She nodded.

"And you daren't trust yourself to tell him because the moment you saw him you would fall again under his spell?"

This time she didn't nod, but her eyes gave assent.

"And what does that mean, little Terry? Whether you call it love or fascination, it means that even though you do not see him, your heart is his at present. It means that against your will he's infinitely more to you than I am. It means that you only ask me to become engaged to you in order that you may be strong to break his spell. It doesn't mean that I will be anything more to you to-morrow than I was last night, when you gave him your pledge."

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She tried to speak, but he halted her words. "I'm older than you are. Have you thought of that? I'm not the man I was; I'm lame. You can like me as a friend and believe me indispensable; but, if I were your husband, fifteen years from now when you're only the age I am to-day— Have you considered that? My dear, I love you so well, that I'll never let you tie yourself to me, till you're as certain that you can't risk meeting me without loving me as you're certain at this moment that you daren't risk meeting this other man. When you can do that—"

The tenderness in his eyes hurt her. "Directly I can do that, I'll tell you, Tabs. And—and I believe I could almost tell you now."

"If you can now," he said, "there's a test. Will you take my place at lunch and tell Braithwaite?"

She shrank, and tried to smile, and shook her head.

"Then it'll be I who'll have to do it." He tried to assume a cheerful manner. "But I can't give him

your reason about being engaged to me. If it were true, which it isn't, it wouldn't be generous. If I carry any message, the only honorable thing for me to do is to inform him of everything."

"Of everything?" she questioned.

"Yes, of everything. I must tell him where the trouble lies and give him his chance to be frank with you. Only when that is done, shall I be free to do my utmost to win you for myself." [Pg 107]

She took his hands and drew herself up to him. "Do what you like, Tabs. As long as I know that I've not lost you," her voice became small and almost happy, "I'm content."

She was tiptoeing against him. The next thing he knew he was kissing her warm red mouth.

III

She was gone. He had watched her from the steps until she had reached the end of the Square where the swirl of passing traffic had engulfed her. At the last moment she had looked back and smiled. For some minutes after she had vanished, he had stood there recalling the way in which her brave little figure had tripped out of sight among the blustering March sunshine and shadows. A child, he thought, impulsive and lacking in perspective, with a child's alacrity for drying its tears and believing in a future happiness. How would she regard this morning years hence in the after-glow of experience? Would she find nothing in its calamities but foolishness? And what relation would he himself bear to her when she had arrived at that stoical calm?

He reëntered the house. In the room where they had been together the fragrance of her presence still lingered. The chair was pushed back, just as she had risen from it to lift her warm, red lips to his. How smooth they were! Again like a child's! Everything about her was young and undeveloped. She had kissed simply and gratefully, with none of the blundering, sweet surrender with which a woman clings to her lover. If she had ever kissed Braithwaite, she had not kissed him like that. [Pg 108]

And then Tabs was overcome with a reluctant remorse, which was tinged with a shameful sense of triumph. She had offered him her lips in gratitude; they had kindled in him the flames of passion. For the moment he had devoured her with kisses—her eyes, lips, cheeks and hair.

If he were to keep himself in hand, he must fill his days with interests—*new* interests. He must move among people and normalize himself. He must fight against the melancholy of his obsession. His eyes chanced to rest on the crumpled sheet of scented note-paper tossed into the empty grate. Stooping, he picked it up and smoothed it out. This problem of Maisie would at least divert him—besides, he had promised to do what he could for Adair. He noted the Chelsea address and reread the contents with its sly humility and hint of coquetry: "I have been given to understand that you are exceedingly anxious to make my acquaintance. If this is so, I shall be at home when you call to-morrow afternoon."

She had been quite certain that he would call when she wrote those words. They had all the assurance of one who was fully persuaded of her own powers of charm and beauty.

"Again, Maisie P.," he apostrophized her, "I'm bound to acknowledge that you know more about me than I know about myself. I didn't know that I wanted to make your acquaintance at the time when you were writing this letter. I was quite sure that I wasn't going to call upon you when I read it. In both cases you were the better informed, for I shall be with you as soon as I've fulfilled my Savoy engagement." [Pg 109]

An hour later, as he was on his way out, he found Ann waiting for him at the foot of the stairs.

"I don't want to bother your Lordship."

"You're not bothering me. What is it?"

"I've been thinking that if I wrote the particulars down myself——"

"The particulars! What particulars?"

"About Braithwaite, sir. There were things you wouldn't know or might leave out. So I thought that if I stated my case myself, it might make things more sensible-like to your Lordship's friend at the War Office."

"It might. Are those the particulars you have in your hand?"

"Yes, sir. But they're kind of private. I shouldn't like them to be read by just anybody. That's why —— Perhaps, if your Lordship was seeing your friend——"

"As it happens," Tabs spoke with a careless air, "I shall be lunching with him to-day. I can deliver your letter direct."

"Your Lordship is very kind."

"Not in the least, Ann. And remember, whatever happens, that Braithwaite was brave and he'd expect you to be brave. If you're not—— D'you know what you'll do? Whether he's alive or dead, you'll let him down." [Pg 110]

Her head lifted proudly, despite the tears in her eyes. "No fear of that, sir. I'll never let my man

down."

"That's the way to talk. And don't worry too much. You know the saying about night always being blackest at the hour before the dawn? If we'd only all believe that and cheer up——"

He let himself out. As he walked down the Square he tried to stroll jauntily; probably Ann was watching.

"I could do worse than live up to that advice myself," he thought. Then, "And so I will, by the Lord Harry."

IV

As he passed through the doors into the Savoy, he consulted his watch; he was five minutes late. He halted in the middle of the foyer, gazing round. There was the usual collection of officers on leave or out of hospital, British, Overseas, American, all of them out for a good time and debonair. There were the usual rows of expectant girls, wondering whether their men had forgotten the appointment or whether the fault was theirs in mistaking the place of rendezvous. Here and there through the crowd worried and assertive literary individuals wandered, searching for invariably unpunctual publishers. As though Time pressed behind them with his scythe, hatchet-faced journalists from Fleet Street were making a bee-line for the restaurant. In contrast to this perfervid haste, self-possessed young queens of the footlights lolled with their admirers, importantly believing they were recognized. All the medley of London as it used to be, is and will be again, was there; but nowhere could Tabs descry a General's uniform.

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He went to the desk to enquire whether there was any message for him. At mention of the General his enquiry was received with marked respect. Yes, General Braithwaite lived there. No message had been left, but he might be in his room. While they were telephoning and he was waiting, Tabs remembered and smiled at remembering. Under quite other circumstances, on a former occasion, he and Braithwaite had stayed there together. The clerk interrupted his reflections. "The General's not in his room—— Ah, here he comes, your Lordship."

Tabs turned quickly and looked in vain at first. He did not become aware of his host till he was standing almost at his elbow. Then he held out his hand, "How are you, General? You must pardon me for not having picked you out at once. Like all of us, you look different in mufti."

"More like the old Braithwaite your Lordship used to know?" The General smiled. "Well, I have to thank that experience for this at least—that I know where to find the proper tailors. How about lunch? Are you ready?"

Against a window looking out on the Embankment, one of the best tables had been reserved—a further proof of the new esteem in which Braithwaite was held. The head-waiter hurried up immediately to advise what he should eat and passed on his orders to subordinates with as much solemnity as if they had been the details for an offensive. "Yes, my General." "No, my General." When everything had been chosen and there was nothing to do but wait for the first dish to be served, Braithwaite leaned across to Tabs, "Your Lordship is amused. I don't blame you."

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Tabs drew out his case and offered him a cigarette. "I'll make a bargain with you, sir. Let's cut out the unfriendly formalities. I'll call you Braithwaite if you'll call me Taborley."

The General blew a puff of smoke into the air and watched it disappear before he answered. In civilian clothes he bore a more distinct resemblance to the man he had been; and yet the resemblance only served to emphasize the change that had taken place in him. The old Braithwaite had been a slight-built, gentle creature, loyal to the point of self-effacement, soft-spoken and dependent on the appreciation of a master for his happiness. The new Braithwaite both in body and character had hardened. His gray eyes had concentrated into command. His clean-shaven cheeks and small military mustache gave him an expression which was tolerantly ironic. The moment you saw him, you knew beyond question that he was ruthlessly aware of what he wanted out of life. He was a sword which had lain hidden in its scabbard and was now withdrawn, glistening, intimidating and fiercely pointed.

Tabs compared his forceful appearance with his own, where in a mirror their reflections sat facing each other. There was little to choose between them in outward gentility, despite the immense disparity of their chances. There was no fault to find; everything about Braithwaite bespoke confidence and refinement—his neatly brushed chestnut hair, his well-cut gray tweeds, his black, woven tie with the horse-shoe scarf-pin of diamonds, his fine white teeth, his trim mustache. He looked a man of iron will and unswerving decision, destined from birth to take control of crises and to shoulder responsibilities. As a last humanizing touch, there was a hint of cavalier devilment about him, of the gambler who was also a sportsman.

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The puff of smoke had faded. The General's eyes came back with a twinkle to his guest. "You're right. Between us this 'Your Lordship and General' business would grow tiresome. I never thought the day would come when I'd call you Taborley, however. As for myself, plain Braithwaite's a little reminiscent—— Still, we'll consider that part of our compact settled. And now, what?"

"Do we need to hurry matters?" Tabs questioned. "This isn't a military court of enquiry. It wasn't my idea to meet you as though we were maintaining an armed neutrality. We——"

"But aren't we?" Braithwaite interposed with an air of amused good-humor. Then he lowered his voice, "When you parted from me I was your valet. You didn't hear from me for the best part of four years and believed me dead. You came back to find that I was your superior officer and had tangled things up for you pretty badly. You've threatened me with your knowledge of a previous love-affair and you have it in your power to tangle up my future in return. Under the circumstances what else is possible but an armed neutrality?"

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"Let me state the case from another and, I think, a juster angle." Tabs paused to knock the ash from his cigarette. "Before the war you were my valet whom I had always treated as my friend. I believe at that time, if it had come to the show down, you were the man who was closest to my affections and whom I trusted most in all the world. I'm trying to speak soberly, Braithwaite, without any color of exaggeration. We'd been in many tight corners together—perhaps the tightest was when they tried to execute us in Mexico. Anyway, we'd always played the game by each other. In 1914 we both joined in the ranks; in 1918 you finished up as a General, while I was a first lieutenant. There's only one way to account for that: up to 1914 you'd never had your chance; when your chance came, you proved yourself the better man. In a way, though it's difficult for me to confess it, I can understand and sympathize with Terry's preference. Women admire bravery and merit. Ann and I admired them in you; we knew they were there before the war made them public."

He took a breath while he watched what effect the mention of Ann's name had had. The General's expression from being interested and generous had grown suddenly obstinate and set. Tabs hurried on. "So I can understand Terry's preference. And yet, as you've owned, despite your advantages, I hold the winning card. I can joker all your aces by telling—well, the things to which you have referred." He leant forward across the table. "I don't want to have to tell. To do that I should have to make myself still more inferior to you than you have proved me to be in the hardest of all tests. There's only one occasion that would compel—"

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"And that?" the General enquired coldly.

Before Tabs could answer, a Major in the Guards who was passing had halted. "Hullo, sir!" he exclaimed, addressing Braithwaite. "I was intending to hunt you up. I've heard a rumor about your transferring to the Regulars. Why don't you have a shot at my outfit?"

Braithwaite introduced Lord Taborley perfunctorily, then returned to his friend's question. "A shot at your outfit! It's too expensive. I've got to make money. Besides, to become a Regular I'd have to sink my rank and live on my pay at that. I can't afford it. To tell the truth, I'm already out of the Army. I handed over the keys of my desk at the War Office this morning. That phase is ended."

"You did! Well, if you've got something better—" The Guardsman nodded assent to a signaled question from a companion at another table. "Don't lose touch with your old set, sir," he added cheerfully as he moved away. "Send us the map-location of your next dug-out."

The lunch arrived. Dishes were obsequiously offered for inspection and approval. While the meal was being served, there was no opportunity for private conversation. Tabs was pondering one fact which he had overheard. "So, he, too, was demobbed yesterday! That's why he took his last chance to become engaged. The glamour of a uniform— And to-day he's back where he started. Poor chap!"

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The over-zealous waiter had at last moved out of range. Braithwaite lifted up his dagger gaze. "And what is that occasion—the one occasion which would compel you to publish my past? Perhaps I can save you the trouble of putting it into words. You mean if I dared to become engaged to Terry Beddow? I am engaged to her. I dared last night; so I must leave you to do your worst."

He smiled with quiet triumph; gradually his smile faded into puzzlement. "You don't seem surprised."

"I'm not," said Tabs. "Why should I be? I myself supposed, that I was engaged to her last night."

It was Braithwaite who showed amazement. "You! Last night!"

"Yes, I, last night."

Braithwaite set down his knife and fork. The bleak look came into his eyes that had given him the nickname at the Front of "Steely Jack." He was silent for a full five seconds; then he said, "Lord Taborley, you're a man of your word, but I find it difficult to believe that."

Tabs' voice was both quiet and kindly when he replied, "You'll find it difficult to believe a good many things before I've ended. Evidently Terry never told you that for over four years she and I had had an understanding that, when peace came, if I survived, we would be married. Last night, while you were proposing to her, I was asking her father's consent. While I was gaining his consent, you were being accepted."

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The blank look of astonishment which had overspread the General's face, quickly gave way to one of generous compassion. "On my word of honor, Lord Taborley, I never knew that. I thought—please forgive me—that you were interfering merely out of snobbishness. I ought to have known better. All my dealings with you should have— I begin to understand."

Tabs' old sense of friendship for the man—his man—was coming back. "You begin," he said, "but you don't fully understand. You and I have to come down to earth. Not unnaturally up till now you've chosen to treat me as an enemy. Perhaps I was when I sent you those two letters yesterday. But I'm not now. I, too, am learning. There was a coster who let me off arrest. Did I tell you about him? I forget. The reason he gave taught me a lot, 'You and me was pals out there.' And you and I were pals out there, Braithwaite—not master and man or junior and senior officer. It would be a burning shame if, now that the war's ended, we should fall to squabbling among ourselves."

"And yet the fact remains," said Braithwaite, "that I, who used to be your servant, have cut you out of Terry. How are we going to remain pals in a case like that?"

Tabs flinched at the bluntness of the words, "cut you out of Terry." For a moment he felt inclined to say right out, "You're mistaken. She's sent me to get her promise back." Instead he said, "How are we going to remain pals! That's what I'm here to talk about. I've made up my mind how I'm going to act. It's about you that I'm concerned. I'm jealous for you, Braithwaite. I'm proud of the fact that, whatever you are to-day, you were once my man—my man in the old clan sense. I want to see you carry yourself as bravely in your new fight as you did in the one that's ended. I think of the two this peace fight will be the more difficult test, especially for men like yourself. I lost caste during the war, while for you it proved a social opportunity. Now that we're back at peace, the process is likely to be reversed. The qualities which gave you high rank in a world at war won't fetch the same market value. You'll have to fight afresh—only this time it'll be against the temptation to sink below your own high standards through bitterness. In a General's uniform you could go anywhere. It was your passport. No one made enquiries. Once you're demobilized, the world asks for other credentials—credentials as to your profession, bank-account, friends, birth. What I'm trying to say is this: there's nothing dishonorable in your past save your own assumption that it was dishonorable. And I want to assure you that it isn't my purpose to drag you down. I couldn't. There's only one man who can do that—yourself. But *you* can drag yourself below anything that you were if you go on refusing to play fair."

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Braithwaite's face went white beneath its tan. He fell to stroking his mustache. "You take a lot upon yourself. It's the first time that I've ever been accused of not playing fair."

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"But *I* accuse you of it." Tabs spoke with an equal quietness. To any one watching they would have appeared to be two handsome men of the soldier type engaged in desultory conversation. "I have to accuse you of it. I want you to glance through this before you answer me."

He drew from his pocket and passed across the letter which Ann had given him that morning—the letter which, to quote her words, "Might make things seem more sensible-like to your Lordship's friend at the War Office." It was unaddressed, but as Braithwaite's eye fell on the sprawling handwriting of the contents, the deep flush which crept across his face betrayed the fact that it was recognized. He commenced to read the sheet with a studied carelessness; as he proceeded, the carelessness gave way to a troubled frown. For some time after he had finished, he sat motionless. When he looked up, his mood was contemptuous. "So this is your price?"

"No price was mentioned."

"But it was implied. You tell me that, at the time that I was being accepted, you yourself were hoping to be engaged to Miss Beddow; then you hand me this letter. What do you suppose I infer? What would any man infer? That your promise to keep my existence a secret from Ann is conditional on the breaking of my engagement with Miss Beddow."

"Handing you Ann's letter wouldn't do that. Your engagement with Miss Beddow is already broken."

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Braithwaite jerked his chair back and stared. Then the audacity of such an assertion touched his sense of humor. He fell to laughing. "That at least is an invention."

Tabs showed no resentment. There was something disturbingly convincing about his self-possession. "Didn't I tell you," he asked patiently, "that you'd find it difficult to believe a good many things before I had ended? I had an appointment to see Miss Beddow at her father's house this morning at eleven. Before I'd finished breakfast she was visiting me instead. She had called to make two requests: that I would see you to-day and get her promise back, and that I'd become engaged to her myself."

Braithwaite lurched forward, folding his arms on the table. His voice was thick with passion when he spoke. "What you tell me sounds mad; but you'd gain nothing by telling it if it were not true."

"Nothing," Tabs confirmed.

"No, nothing. If it weren't true, I could go to the telephone and disprove your falsehood inside of ten minutes."

"You could."

"Then it is true—which means that you've ousted me. And that's why you can afford to be so calm and Christ-like. I've been wondering how you'd contrived this Galilean display of charity."

"You've not heard me out." Tabs still spoke with friendliness. "While we were together your telegram arrived and I agreed to be the bearer of her message. But as for her second request,

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that I should become engaged to her, I refused that point-blank."

"You what?" The anger cleared from Braithwaite's face, leaving the chalky mask of a tragic harlequin. When he spoke again it was humbly. "You can't blame me for not believing you. You jump about. You say several things which seem to point to a definite conclusion and then at the last moment you change it. I don't know whether you do it to amuse yourself at my expense or whether it's merely the way your mind works. At any rate, it's cruel—this cat and mouse game. I wish you'd be direct."

"That's what I wish to be. You could help me if you'd ask questions."

Braithwaite sighed, wearied beyond endurance. He was becoming less like the General and more like the old dependent Braithwaite every second. "You wanted to marry her last night, only to find she'd promised herself to me already. Then she comes to you this morning, offering herself, and you refuse her. That doesn't make sense. Why did you refuse her?"

"Because if I'd taken her at her word, I shouldn't have been playing fair."

At the recurrence of that phrase "playing fair," a momentary annoyance crept into Braithwaite's eyes. "I've always heard," he commenced, "that in love and war——"

"Everything's fair," Tabs ended his quotation. "Well, in this case, it isn't. It was because she realized, after she'd promised herself to you, that in love everything isn't fair, that she asked me to get her promise back."

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"You mean as regards yourself? She'd begun to feel that she wasn't treating you handsomely?"

"I don't mean as regards myself. You were the cause of her change of mind."

"I!" Braithwaite's bewilderment made him hostile. "How could I have caused her to change her mind? I parted with her after midnight; it must have been shortly after nine that she was seeing you. I held no communication with her in any shape or form during the eight or nine hours that elapsed."

"Nevertheless, you were the cause. She realized in the meanwhile that in love everything isn't fair. It isn't fair to ignore a young girl's happiness in order to win her hand. You had done that; though she has no proofs, instinctively she feels it."

Braithwaite shook his head and thrust himself back with the gesture of a man whose patience is completely at an end. "I haven't the vaguest idea what you're hinting at."

"Then I'll be brutally explicit. You've at no time told her who you were or where you came from before you made a name for yourself. You've evaded all her questions. You told a palpable falsehood in her presence when you insisted that you had never known me. You're perfectly aware that, if you approached her father, all the facts about your past, which you're suppressing, would most certainly come out. Your courting has been clandestine, behind the back of her family. It seems perfectly obvious that you're trying to lure her into a runaway match. She has grounds for believing that you do not trust her and, because of that, although you fascinate her, she finds it impossible to trust you in return. She trusts you so little that she did not dare to risk facing you and sent me in her stead. She's so sure that a marriage with you would be unfortunate that, in order to save herself from it, she's willing to become engaged to me, whom she loves only as a friend. You'll wonder why I tell you all this. It's because I want her to be happy. If you really are the man for her, she must have you. But you'll never have the remotest chance of winning her unless you make a clean breast——"

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"If I did my chances would be at an end."

"If you believe that," Tabs sought for the most lenient words, "you know what you're doing. You'd despise to cheat at cards, but you don't mind cheating the woman whom you profess to love best.—And then there's Ann."

"I'd rather not discuss Ann." The abrupt pain in Braithwaite's tone betrayed the grumbling ache of an old wound. "I think even you will grant that there are some things in a man's heart which are privately sacred. Ann lies entirely outside the bounds of all justifiable interference on your part."

It took an effort for Tabs to bring himself to break down the barrier of reticence which this depth of feeling had imposed. "I'm sorry, General, but I can't agree with you." He waited for the expected protest. When it did not come, he carried on reluctantly, "I have a high regard for Ann. She's one of my household and that makes me responsible for her to an extent. I can't allow her to be tortured any longer with suspense—she's had more than three years of this horrid nightmare, hovering between hope and dread. Every day of the three years has been unnecessary. Whether you break or keep your promise to her is your concern. Whether she takes action against you when she knows the truth, is hers. But she has the right to know. To see that she knows comes within the bounds of any decent man's justifiable interference. One of us must tell her; the news would come with less grace from myself. But for you to wriggle out of your dilemma with silence, while she goes on breaking her heart, is cowardly—just as cowardly as if you'd deserted in the face of the enemy. I've no doubt you've sentenced more than one poor wretch to be shot at sunrise for doing that."

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Tabs pulled out his watch. He had said everything. So far as he was concerned the conversation

was at an end. It was nearly three o'clock. Time had traveled quickly. He was surprised at the lateness of the hour. Now that his intentness was relaxed, he let his gaze wander. The room was nearly empty. Most of the gay little ladies who had chattered across the tables to their recently recovered lovers or husbands, had tripped away to continue their spree of celebration at a matinée or in an orgy of shopping. Those who were left were putting on their wraps or sipping the last of their coffee under the reproachful eyes of waiters. Across the window in a brown-gray streak flowed the wind-flecked highway of the Thames.

Braithwaite beckoned for his bill. After the humiliation of what had been said it irked Tabs to have to see him pay it. The trend of the conversation had helped to strip him of the arrogance of his military honors. The mercenary subserviency of the man who handed him his account, seemed to arouse him to the landslide that had taken place in his self-esteem. He made a conscious effort to pull himself together. While he waited for his change, he broke the silence.

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"I believe you meant well by coming here. It would be foolish for me to pretend that I'm altogether grateful—grateful for your way of expressing most of the things that we've discussed together. At the same time, Lord Taborley, I owe you an apology if at any point I've misjudged your intentions. As regards Ann, you err in justice when you hold me accountable for all the causes of her tragedy. Both she and I, and Miss Beddow for the matter of that, are the victims of circumstances. It's scarcely my fault that I've outgrown Ann; I'm no more to blame for that than Terry is for having fallen in love with a man who was your servant. *I didn't make the war. I didn't promote myself from a valet to a General. I didn't even consciously allure Terry. She fascinates me as much as I fascinate her: I fought against her fascination at first.—But to get back to Ann, I let her slip out of my life because I wanted to spare her. I thought it would be easier for her to believe me dead than to be told that she was—was discarded. I couldn't be expected to foresee that she would display this awkward loyalty of hoping. I didn't know what had happened to her. She's a good-looking girl; I'd pictured her as married to a man of her own class, until you flung this bombshell at me. I'm not callous. Don't misapprehend me. I can still think of her with tenderness. But as for ever treating her again as my equal— It would be as impossible for me to resume the old relations with her as it would be for your Lordship to commence them.*" He waited for some word of criticism or encouragement. When Tabs only nodded non-committally, he proceeded more slowly. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm fully aware, now that the war is ended, that as a has-been General who rose from the ranks, I have no marketable value. I have no specialized training to offer to a commercial world which calls for experts. The only knowledge that I have to sell is the old knowledge that you used to purchase. My house of cards has collapsed. To be unwisely frank, my financial resources are limited to little more than my war-gratuity."

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"And yet you're anxious to marry Terry," Tabs suggested; "to marry her without letting her know about any of these handicaps of which she would have to share the penalty."

Braithwaite's head went up with a soldierly jerk. The bleak look came into his eyes. He was "Steely Jack" at that moment. "I have the confidence to believe," he said proudly, "that I shall go as far in peace as I did in war. Never to own that you're beaten, never to squeal when you're hurt, never to retreat from a position when once it has been captured must count back here for as much as it did out there. In France I had the reputation for never losing an inch of trench. I don't intend to lose an inch of trench now. My back is to the wall. For the present I can't afford to do anything gratuitously charitable; by the smallest waste of energy I may defeat myself. To hold any correspondence with Ann at this moment might mean the slamming in my own face of every door of opportunity. I'll do my stretcher-bearing when I've won; not a second before."

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Against his will, while he listened, the unscrupulous valor of the man stirred Tabs to admiration. Only the after-event could prove whether this verbal display of fireworks was only bombast. "And so that's your ultimatum?" he asked with disquieting sanity.

"Yes, if that's what you call it."

The waiter had returned with the receipted bill. Braithwaite was picking up the change. Not looking at Tabs he said, "A few minutes ago you were consulting your watch. I believe you have an engagement."

"I have. But if we can arrive at any more definite conclusion by talking longer, I'll skip it. It's of no importance."

Braithwaite glanced up. "Not to you, perhaps; but it may be to her."

With that he commenced to lead the way out, choosing a winding path through the maze of tables. Not until they were traversing the great gold and crimson lounge, with its ornate furnishings, did Tabs catch up with him to ask his question. "How did you know about my engagement and whether it was important or not?"

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Braithwaite answered carelessly, "It's with Maisie, isn't it? I heard Terry suggest to her that she should make it. She's a nice little woman. I shouldn't like to be the cause of her disappointment. She was looking forward——" The rest was lost as a flunkey requested the registered number of whatever Tabs had left in the cloak-room.

While they waited for the hat and cane to be produced, Tabs made a last attempt to persuade the General to commit himself to some promised course of action. "No one would be more pleased to see you succeed than myself. I'm not trying to hamper you. Neither is Terry; but she insists that

unless things are to terminate between you, she must know the truth. Frankness with Terry necessitates frankness with Ann. You'll never succeed, however great your courage, unless you start with your honor solvent. Ann's beneath you, you say—that's why you've outgrown her. It's not my business to dispute the fact. I didn't want to introduce the class view of things; but, by the same showing, you're beneath Terry. She's young to-day: through a lifetime she might outgrow *you*. She's as much your social superior as you claim to be Ann's. You've discarded Ann on the ground of inequality of rank. In your case Terry's family have a perfect right to raise the same objection."

"Not at all." The answer came like the crack of a whip. Braithwaite drew himself up with the pride of one who had moved men like pawns across the checker-board of life and death. "The two cases afford no parallel. Ann and Terry have remained in the social stations to which they were born, while I—I stand outside all such ready-made, rule of thumb classifications. By sheer impetus of personality I have lifted myself out of the rut, so that not even you, with all your omniscience, dare prophesy how far I am going or where I shall end."

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It was plain that further talk would be useless. "I'm afraid I must be going," Tabs said. "I wish you very good luck. I hope we part friends. And of course you understand that I now consider myself entirely free to do my utmost to win Terry for myself."

He extended his hand. Braithwaite made no motion to take it. He held himself erect as if prepared for an affront. His tones were icy when he spoke. "Before I shake hands with you, Lord Taborley, I have to know what you mean by your utmost. With so many playing-cards out against me, I don't stand the ghost of a show unless— Perhaps I have no right to expect it; I never asked quarter from any man. I was going to say, unless you intend to be gallant—"

Tabs pocketed his hand and turned to limp into the sunlit thunder of the Strand. "The merciful receive mercy, General. Perhaps we shall shake hands some other day. How gallant I am depends entirely upon yourself."

V

He emerged into the swollen thoroughfare, where the traffic roared and jostled like a torrent through a mountain gorge towards the broader freedom of Trafalgar Square. He turned westward, walking swiftly for the first hundred yards, rather fearing that he might be followed. Then he slowed down; swift walking made his limp too painfully obvious.

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He was dissatisfied with both himself and Braithwaite. He felt as though he had gone to meet some one in a wood and had heard only the muttering of a voice and the rustle of retreating footsteps. "If I had only seen his face," he thought.

In recalling Braithwaite, he found himself picturing two persons, of both of whom he had had separate and distinct glimpses: the one the loyal man, who in years gone by had served him faithfully and shared so many of his adventures; the other the arrogant, red-tabbed superior, who had stolen his happiness without warning. It was impossible to resolve the two into one. The first he still regarded with affection. The second— He had never allowed himself to hate any one. Hatred he held to be back of breeding—a weak man's subterfuge for acknowledging self-distrust. Because he had come so near to hating, he accused himself of censoriousness. "If I had only seen his face—the real man beneath the pretense—I might have understood and helped him," he muttered.



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

And now he was going to a fresh encounter where even more sympathy would be required. It would be easy to condemn Maisie P. Lockwood. On a superficial judgment she merited nothing else. Three husbands in four and a half years, plus a risky flirtation with a married man were not the credentials of an honorable character. If he followed the advice of Sir Tobias Beddow, he would seek to assess her price at once. But he had never been accustomed to regard women in

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that light—as a sex whose virtue could be inflated or depressed by the increase or shrinkage of a balance at the bank. Actually he knew very little about women; riding as a knight-errant, with the wonder in his eyes of the mystery that might surprise him round the luck of any corner, he had never given himself much time to learn. His ideas about women were Tennysonian. He liked to believe that they were free from temptations, more true in their emotions, more generous in their affections, more unerring and unstained than men. He extended to them all the reverent tenderness with which he regarded his mother's memory. In this he saw nothing quixotic; to him the most hoydenish girl was a potential mother, whose body possessed a sacredness quite apart from herself as a slim, adventurous ark which would bear the future of the race across the deluge of the ages. He knew, as a matter of fact, that all women were invariably neither saints nor angels; but he clung to his chivalrous superstition as a man prays, though he receives no answers to his prayers. To the recorded cynicism of experimenters in temptation he flung back the challenge of a sadder cynic, "We're all in the gutter; but some of us are looking at the stars."

So in this matter of Maisie, he argued, she couldn't be as shallow as her history would indicate. She was Terry's friend; that, in itself, was a proof of goodness. Terry had been so anxious for him to meet and comprehend her that she had gone behind his back to prompt the appointment. Well, he would make a better job of this second interview than he had of the one that was just ended. He must approach it, at any rate, without prejudice.

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While thinking these thoughts he reached Charing Cross. Already he was weary with so small an exertion. He halted, debating whether he should struggle further. Then he became aware of wounded Tommies, chiefly Overseas troops, Canadians and Australians, who from their first landing in England had chosen this quarter of a mile as their happy hunting-ground. They stood propped up against the pavement; they sat among the pigeons on the parapets of Trafalgar Square. They were laughing and chaffing, those one-legged, one-armed, derelict crusaders in their atrocious hospital uniforms. They were thousands of miles from their one and only woman; but their drawn faces grinned cheerfully and their jaws were squared in the old, invincible, obstinate determination never to admit they were down-hearted. The sight of them filled him with strength. Though he saw them only fugitively through gaps in the tide of traffic, he felt their companionship. He would always feel it—the fine, shared courage of men out of sight, who had adventured for an ideal as his companions.

He crossed the top of Whitehall, passed beneath the Admiralty Arch and entered the garnished, graveled, tree-bordered spaciousness of the Mall. His old sense returned—the confidence which the Mall always gave to him—of Empire and world-wideness. As he strolled along, he noticed a board which informed the public that, by following a certain path, one would arrive at the Passport Office. Hidden in the greenness, set down in the bed of an ornamental lake which had been drained when the terror of air raids had threatened, he made out a low-built, sprawling shed. It was like a glimpse of romance. The path which led to its doorway was the first few hundred yards along the road that ran to Rio, Fiji and Tibet. One had but to enter and the journey was commenced. The sight reminded him of something which he had forgotten; that, though every other delight failed, he still possessed the wideness of the world. He could sail away. There were islands of the sea—Stevenson's Samoa, Conrad's Malay Archipelago. If people proved disappointing, there were always the painted solitudes which human disillusion had not withered and could not defile. It was a loophole worth remembering.

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Outside Buckingham Palace he made an unpremeditated surrender. A taxi was prowling along by the curb as slowly as regulations allowed. He raised his stick automatically as he caught the driver's eye. When the cab had halted, again he procrastinated with the handle of the door in his hand.

"Where to?" the driver enquired for the second time.

"To Brompton Square," he ordered uncertainly.

The cab was already moving when he changed his mind. Standing up and leaning out of the window, "No. To Chelsea," he shouted above the throbbing of the engine. Then drawing out Maisie's crumpled letter, he read from it the address.

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CHAPTER THE FOURTH

THE COMPLICATIONS OF MAISIE

I

Tab's was not very familiar with Chelsea. He had seen it from the river a score of times, red-walled, umbrageous and old-fashioned. But of the district itself he knew next to nothing, save that up to the war it had been the favorite roosting-place of short-haired women and long-haired men. He wondered whether Maisie's hair was short. He decided in the negative. To have attracted three husbands in four and a half years she must be outwardly conventional. An unconventional woman might persuade one man to marry her, but not three in such rapid succession. She probably belonged to the apparently harmless, sympathetic, sisterly, domestic type. And yet she must be something more than conventional; millions of merely conventional

women lacked the prowess to anchor only one man in all the years of their life, whereas, judging by the Adair incident, Maisie had not yet completed her list of husbands. There was an undefined danger in coming into contact with such a woman, which lent this expedition to Chelsea an atmosphere of adventure.

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Did she know for what purpose he was visiting her? If she did, she was a bold woman—a strategist. Her position was strengthened by his coming to her in the guise of an invited guest. Then he remembered that he had made a bargain with himself to meet her with a mind unclouded by prejudice.

He had been traveling mean thoroughfares, when suddenly the cab swung into an old-world street of dignified respectability and turned again abruptly into a tiny quadrangle of color-washed, stucco-fronted, timbered houses. In the center was a lawn, surrounded with white posts between which black painted chains hung in loops; the apparent intention was to create the illusion of a village-green. Tabs entered instantly into the spirit of the game—the littleness and childishness of the attempt at quaintness. He liked the bijou privacy of the Court, its greenness and tidiness, and the absurdity of the narrow windows which glinted at him like spectacles. But there was something that he missed.

The driver had climbed down and was opening the door. "Mulberry Tree Court, mister. I forget which number you told me; but there ain't so much of it that you're likely to lose yourself."

"But where's the mulberry tree?" Tabs asked. There was in his voice the discontent of a disappointed child.

"There never was no mulberry tree," the man replied in all seriousness.

"Well, if there isn't a mulberry tree," Tabs laughed, "I suppose we must make shift to do without it."

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The man frowned and justified himself grumblingly. "It ain't my bloomin' fault. I've done nothin' with yer bloomin' tree."

"I suppose not," said Tabs as if the matter were still in doubt.

Feeling in his pocket he paid what was owing and watched the cab move off. Even at this last moment he was half-minded to retreat. What business was it of his to interfere in another man's love-affair? He looked stealthily round the Court to see if eyes were watching. All the windows were empty; nothing stirred. The fact that he was not watched reassured him. He glanced at the number on the nearest door, discovered in which direction the numbers ran and decided that his must be the house conspicuous for its marigold-tinted curtains, standing retiringly in the farthest corner.

Once again he hesitated. Should he or should he not? The old nursery-rhyme came wandering into his head with its innocent lilt of jolliness:

"Here we go round the mulberry-bush,
The mulberry-bush, the mulberry-bush;
Here we go round the mulberry-bush,
So early in the morning."

"And so we do," he murmured. "Let's take a chance."

II

The door—an apple-green door—was opened by a maid as trim as Ann. Was Mrs. Lockwood in? She would enquire. "And your name, please, sir?—Lord Taborley! Certainly."

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She left him waiting in the hall, while she went to make her fictional enquiries. He was as sure that they were fictional as if he had glanced into the room upstairs where Maisie was making a last anxious inspection before her mirror. So the pretense was to be that he had called casually and had scarcely been expected.

He tried to learn something of Maisie from the appearance of her hall. It was speckless. Everything in it shone with intense cleanliness and polish. He had noticed the same gleam about the windows, brasses and very doorstep before he had entered. He had noticed it again about the maid who had admitted him. It sent Maisie up very much in his estimation. It almost explained to him how she had managed to get three husbands. Men never know why they fall in love with a woman; more often than not they mistake tidiness for beauty. "If you can't be beautiful, be clean," Maisie's hall seemed to say; "if you can be both, you're invincible." Maisie was invincible, as her conquests proved. This first glimpse of her belongings showed that she loved cleanliness. By a jump in his logic Tabs began to suspect that she must be beautiful.

He had pursued his observations thus far, when he heard a door discreetly closed overhead and the starchy rustling of the maid returning.

"If your Lordship will step into the drawing-room, Madam will be down in a moment."

He found himself in a long artistic room, feminine to a degree, exquisitely restful and yet broad-minded with signs of selection and travel. It was furnished according to no particular period. There was an Italian chest of drawers inlaid with ivory, a Dutch marquetry secrétaire, some Louis

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XVth chairs, a mirror of old Venetian glass, bronzes, snuff-boxes, specimens of china, odd bits of beaten silver, knick-knacks of all sorts, lying scattered about with apparent carelessness. A fire was burning in the grate. Tea was set out on a table beside a companionable couch. Through French windows the smallest of gardens shone bravely, a-blow with bulb flowers planted in crevices of a rockery, at the foot of which lay an oval pond and a silent fountain. As though to emphasize the game of littleness, a toy-boat floated on the pond's surface.

"Not the woman I had imagined," was his unspoken thought; "not the wily adventuress! But if she's not, then what—"

In an attempt to satisfy his curiosity, he commenced to inspect the room in detail. The first thing he discovered was that all the silver frames, which stood about, contained photographs of the same man. It struck him as an odd exhibition of faithfulness on the part of a woman who had had so many husbands. He counted the photographs; there were no less than five of them, recording the same face from varying angles.

"Which of them, is he," he asked himself, "Pollock, Gervis, or Lockwood? But he mayn't be any of them. Perhaps he's a possible fourth—the latest. If so, here's hoping, for he shuts out Adair."

He turned towards the couch, intending to sit down. As he turned, his gaze encountered an oil-painting hanging above the mantelpiece.

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"By George! How did I manage to miss that?"

He stared at it with intense interest—almost with a sense of shock. Somewhere—he could not determine where—he had seen that face before.

The picture was a half-length portrait of a woman. There was something extraordinarily queenly and at the same time patient in her attitude. Her hands, which were out of sight, seemed to be folded. She was seated, leaning forward; her head was turned towards the right, so that her face appeared in profile. She was in extremely low evening-dress of an aquamarine shade, flowered with gold. Her shoulders were sickle-shaped and gleamed like the half-crescent of a young moon. From her throat, which was full and white, hung a splendid string of tan-colored pearls. But it was the slope of her jaw, the way her ears set back, and the rounded strength of her head that gave to her that peculiarly alert beauty. Her dark hair was drawn from off her forehead, making clear in her features an expression of calm challenge. She was a woman who had lived and not always happily. Her calmness was the quiet of almost painful self-control. And her age— With her atmosphere of experience, it was certainly over thirty. She was not the woman to put back the hands of time for any man.

"It can't be of Maisie," he thought, and yet he hoped. "But it can't be of her," he insisted. "This woman is remote and uncapturable. She's done with passion. She's tasted life to the full and the taste was bitter. She has nothing left but her unquenchable pride, with which she tortures herself: her pride not to submit, not to cry out, to stand always at bay. That's all she has, unless ——" And then, speaking aloud in his effort to remember, "I know her. I'm positive. And yet—"

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The door behind him opened. "This is nice of you, Lord Taborley.—Ah, you were looking at Di! Most men do that when they visit me. I ought to be jealous. But a word of warning; looking is as far as any of them get."

Tab found himself shaking hands with a woman who shared the features of the woman in the portrait, but who differed from her in that she was fair, lacked her alluring remoteness and had much more of youth to her credit. Whereas the woman in the portrait looked uncapturable, Maisie's charm lay in her accessibility—the genial promise she held out of being willing and even eager to surrender. Her every tone and gesture proclaimed her anxiety to find this world a pleasant place—her determination to make it pleasant and to be gay under every circumstance.

She was as little, flawless and gleaming as her house. More than half her good looks were due to the immaculate care which she bestowed on her body—the whiteness of her teeth, the fineness of her well-kept hands, the brilliant clearness of her complexion, the wavy smoothness of her abundant flaxen hair which had been brushed and brushed until it shone and glinted like raw gold in sunshine. She would have looked almost too perfect to be genuine, had it not been for her vivid health. She was so dainty in her fragility that one longed and yet scarcely dared to touch her.

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The moment she had spoken Tab had recognized that nothing that she had done or might do could obscure her atmosphere of breeding. He had met men like that, whose sense of race, even when they were at the lowest depths, had kept them superior to their environment. A pale woman of spun silk and gossamer, with cornflower eyes and lips like parted poppy-petals! This woman could be kind to the point of folly—so kind that her folly would appear almost virtue. She was a woman who, though she might love too often, would love so much that to her much would always be forgiven.

"I must apologize," Tab spoke gently, "for having been found staring at your picture."

He did not know it, but men always spoke gently to Maisie. It was her air of trust and helplessness that did it, her tender trick of creating in each man the belief that she relied peculiarly on him for protection—all of which was totally at variance with the masterly efficiency with which she ran both herself and her house.

"I was staring at your picture," Tabs continued, "because I thought I recognized——"

"I daresay you did," Maisie interrupted. "Though you may not have met her, her face is forever in the papers. Among the family she's known as the Princess Czarina Bolsheviki——"

"She looks it. But is she a princess?"

Maisie laughed. "Not yet, but it won't be her fault if she isn't. It'll have to be a prince next time. If she marries again, she'll stoop to nothing less. Look at the way she carries her head; she almost feels the weight of her coronet already. But she says she's had enough of marriage. We've all said that. Poor dear Di, she misses a lot of fun by her exclusiveness. If I only had half her wealth——" [Pg 142]

She evidently wanted Tabs to ask her what she would do with it. Her eyes grew round with spendthrift promises of jolliness, if ever such wealth should come within reach of her tiny, managing hands. She looked as mischievously covetous as a magpie while she waited for him to put the obvious question.

But Tabs wasn't interested in the obvious. He stuck to his enquiry. "What you've told me doesn't help me to recall her," he said. "Who is she? It's most annoying to recognize a face and not to be able to place it against any background."

Maisie pretended to pout. "You're like all the rest of them; you come to see me and do nothing but talk of her. I'd have hidden her in the attic long ago, only she's by Sargent. She's too beautiful for hiding, and then no one can afford to hide her Sargent under a bushel in these hard times."

"And still you've not told me," Tabs reproached her.

III

"Wouldn't we be more comfortable sitting down?" Maisie slid between the couch and the tea-table, making herself comfortable against a pile of cushions. When Tabs looked round for a seat, he discovered the strategy of the arrangement of the furniture. The nearest available chair to Maisie was at least four yards away; to have selected it would have been to have isolated himself. He would have had to have hailed her ridiculously across the room's breadth. It was plainly intended that he should challenge fate and share the couch, just as Pollock, Gervis, Lockwood, Adair and so many others had done before him. [Pg 143]

All this friendliness would make it a little difficult for him presently when he broached the subject of Adair. He had an uneasy feeling that Sir Tobias wouldn't approve of this way of conducting his mission. It was one thing to fly the white flag of truce while you parleyed with the enemy; it was quite another to share the same couch with her in a cozy room, where there were only the two of you and the jumping flames of the fire in the grate made the silver on the small round table glow red. When they weren't talking there was no sound. None of the clamor of London reached them. They might have been in a cave, far removed from everything that disturbed. And, indeed, the little piled-up rockery outside the windows, with the spring flowers blowing and the baby lake, with the toy-boat drifting on its quiet surface, rather created the illusion that this was a cave.

A restful lethargy of kindness was creeping over him. He didn't want to be at enmity with anybody, least of all with this dainty sprite of a woman with the cornflower eyes and the flaxen hair. He no longer wondered that three men in succession, weary of the mud of fighting, had come to her for rest. He could even comprehend Adair's treachery, if it had gone so far as treachery. Adair had found his wife fretful—she had always been crying and hanging round his neck. Here he had found companionship, secret laughter and forgetfulness. The world owed any woman a large debt of liberty who could give men that. Maisie was the kind of woman who could bury twenty husbands and go out next morning to meet the twenty-first. What was far more amazing, she could do it without frivolity or loss of self-respect. She lived a day at a time. She made you feel, the moment you met her, that that was the only tolerable way of living. The excuse for her philosophy was its success. She was an expert in happiness—so expert that she could communicate her secret without waste of words. Probably for most men words were not necessary; for them their happiness was herself. [Pg 144]

From her end of the couch Maisie smiled at Tabs dreamily. "You're persistent when you want anything. I suppose you always get your desires?"

"The little things, yes," he replied. "But the big things—they evade me."

"You mean Terry."

She said it without change of tone or expression, with the same happy smile curling up the corners of her uncruel mouth. It was disconcerting to have his private humiliations referred to so frankly, as though they were fitting subjects for casual conversation. But, after all, he reminded himself, his business there was to discuss her equally private affairs. He was hardly in a position to resent anything she might say. It was a duel, and she had drawn first blood. He was quick to see that her purpose in introducing Terry was to gain an advantage while she postponed the inevitable discussion of Adair. [Pg 145]

She didn't give him a chance to reply. "I know all about you and Terry," she continued, "and about Braithwaite, too, for the matter of that. Perhaps why Terry evades you is because she isn't one of your really big things. You may have mistaken her for a big thing. If she is one of your

truly big things, you'll get her. You're one of the few men who get all that they desire."

It was possible that she was trying to flatter him; nevertheless, against his will, the certainty of her way of talking impressed him. "What makes you think that I get everything that I desire?"

She laughed and snuggled closer into the cushions. "I can't put it into words. I just know by looking at you. You have the air."

"Then what makes you say that Terry may not be one of my big things?"

She glanced up at him amused. "I almost made you angry when I said that.—Do you really want to know? I said it because I don't think that she is one of your big things and, what's more, you don't think that she is either. Now I *have* made you angry— But you don't—not the sane you, who was and is and will be to-morrow—the you who'll outlive this disappointment."

He was at one and the same time intrigued and offended by the turn the conversation had taken. His memory groped back to the first conception he had had of this woman—the woman who tricked married men, who used scented note-paper, who interpreted thoughts before they were uttered and forestalled actions before they had been planned—the woman whom he had been instructed to buy off with a price. What was he doing discussing his love-affair with such as her?

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His voice was chilling when he spoke. "It's very good of you to take such an interest in me. I ought to be gratified that you should think you know so much about me, and after so short an acquaintance—so very much more than I know about myself."

"But I don't think; I do know far more at this moment than you know about yourself." Her tones were calm and lazy, unembarrassed and pleasant. The red glow of the fire glinting on the silver tea-service seemed the reflection of her cheerfulness.

"If you're so certain that you know, you might tell me," he said stiffly.

"I know— Do you mind if I smoke?" She leant forward while he held a match to her cigarette. "I know that you're an intensely lonely man. All men have to be lonely till they're thirty if they're going to get anywhere. They have no time to spare. You've had no time to spare for women—that's why you don't understand them. Women were for you a treat in store, until the war broke. Then suddenly you discovered that you had missed the most precious thing in life. You hadn't the time to be wise in your choice, so you turned to some one young and accessible. Her youth seemed to symbolize all that you coveted at the moment; it symbolized going on forever. You weren't really in love with her as an individual; you were in love with the thought of love and youth. You won't believe it, but almost any young girl who was beautiful and willing would have served your purpose. During the terrible years you've clothed her with your own idealism. You've told yourself that it was for her that you were fighting. You've created in your heart a person she never was and hasn't it in her to become. You've thought of her as a second you, with *your* sense of honor, *your* passion for unselfishness, *your* patience and experience gained through suffering. The ideal you've set up for her is contradictory and impossible. Youth isn't considerate, experienced, unselfish, patient. For those qualities you have to go to the middle years. I know what I'm talking about, for I've had three soldier husbands." She said it without self-reproach or self-glory—as though it were the sort of thing that might happen to any woman. "You've been finding out the kind of girl she really is since your return—the kind of girl who prefers General Braithwaite to yourself and can't discriminate between the temporary and the permanent. You're disappointed in her. You've discovered already that she isn't the woman you thought you were loving. You're now only pretending that you still care for her because life would be too empty without your dream and because the right woman, for whom you've already renewed your search, hasn't yet turned up. Somewhere inside you at this moment your sane self is endorsing every word that I'm saying as true."

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"That's not so." His contradiction was spoken fiercely.

"But it is so," the sweet voice persisted. "You yourself have tacitly owned it."

"How?"

There was the sharpness of alarm in his way of asking. Her assurance had startled him out of his brief anger.

She laughed softly. "I think we might have tea; it'll restore our serenity. There's nothing like employing your hands when you want to keep from losing your temper. A woman learns that, even when she's only been married once. When she's been married three times," the cornflower eyes became suddenly innocent, "she knows everything.—Will you touch the bell? It'll save me getting up.—How, you ask. How do I know that you've already renewed your searching? To a man who's as head over heels in love as you profess to be all women, except the one woman, however beautiful, ought to be hanks of hair and bags of bones. I read your thoughts when I caught you gazing at my sister's portrait. You were saying to yourself, 'What if she's the woman!' And you're even sufficiently detached in your affections to acknowledge attraction in a horrid little pestering, too-much-married person like myself."

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IV

It was lucky that the maid selected that moment for answering the bell. Things were getting

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uncomfortably personal. Tabs had the idea that Maisie had been talking against time till she should hear the footsteps of her reinforcements. As the maid entered, she turned towards her with the brightness of relief.

"That's splendid of you, Porter. You guessed what we wanted.—Porter always guesses what I want, Lord Taborley; she's my second self. And Porter can tell your fortune from the cards—can't you, Porter? Only she never reads the cards on a Sunday; she says it brings bad luck. If you come here often, you must try her.—You might take that dish from her.—Thanks awfully. There's room for it here on this corner of the tray."

Tabs smiled inwardly while he did his awkward best to make himself useful. He might know very little about women, but he knew intuitively quite a lot about this particular woman. He knew that Porter had guessed nothing, because nothing had been left to chance. He knew it as surely as he had known what Maisie had been doing in front of her mirror while he had been kept waiting. He knew that long before his arrival every detail of his reception had been prepared and planned, and that Porter had been instructed. The whole morning had been spent in dusting, sweeping, polishing and making ready the various dishes of dainty cakes and neatly-cut sandwiches which were being spread before him. He was certain that the kindly patronage of Maisie's way of addressing Porter was another part of the conspiracy.

Curiously enough it was Porter who made him like and trust her more than he had done as yet. Porter's eyes, when they rested on her mistress, embraced her with a slavish worship; when they rested on him, they warned and dared him. He had the feeling that the man who made Maisie cry was likely to feel a knife in his back. Maisie must be good to be able to call forth such fanatical loyalty from a humble woman. He began to be infected by this atmosphere of idolatry. And yet —

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What was Maisie's object in belittling his love for Terry? What did she hope to gain by it? He hardly dared allow himself to suspect; thinking in her presence was like speaking aloud. She heard unspoken words as plainly as those that were uttered. But the suspicion would not be suppressed. Had she formed the audacious plan of winning him for herself? And this despite her three previous marriages, despite her knowledge of why he had visited her, despite his knowledge of Adair!

Quick as a flash her eyes turned on him with a scarcely perceptible shake of her head. The door clicked discreetly as Porter left them. It was like clearing a ring for the second round. The dangerous intimacy, half tender, half inimical, returned.

"There's no harm in being pleasant," her voice was musical and pleading, "however unpleasant the circumstances which have thrown us together. Taking tea with me doesn't set up any social obligation. You won't have to know me again or anything like that. Now that we understand each other— How do you like your tea? Is it two lumps?"

With the tongs poised ready to pounce, she waited for him to tell her. But he didn't tell her; he smiled inscrutably. He wasn't sure at what he was smiling. Perhaps it was that he was happy— happy in a worldly-wise fashion that he had never been with Terry. He could say anything to this woman and it wouldn't shock her—there was comfort in that.

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But she had scared up a doubt in his mind that he might have mistaken his kingdom. Perhaps the recovery of youth wasn't everything. There were things very precious in themselves, which were well lost under certain circumstances. Maisie's youth, for instance. She was far more enchanting now than she could ever have been as a girl. In losing her youth she had gained in sympathy; it was that that made her understand him so well. In a wife you wanted more than youth—the knowledge of a companion. It began to dawn on him that there might be truth in what she had said. Perhaps once again she had known him better than he knew himself. He had been with her less than an hour. He didn't completely trust her, and yet here was this astounding fact: by reason of her experience there were things he could say to her that he would never dream of saying to the girl whom he believed he loved best. And Adair, he, too—

"You hadn't expected that things would be like this," she was saying, "just you and I, sitting like old friends and drinking tea together. You'd nerved yourself up for a vulgar row. I know— Well, since you won't tell me how many lumps, I'll give you two."

As he bent forward to receive the cup, their hands touched. The contact was electric. A rush of excited vitality seemed to pour into his body from hers. The touch was only for a second, but it left him startled and stark of pretenses. When he sought her eyes, they were calm as ever. "You're a most bewildering woman—the most bewildering I ever met," he confessed.

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"Except my sister," she corrected.

He glanced up at the portrait and back to her, comparing the features. "Yes, I see it now. She is your sister. I ought to have guessed. But I haven't met her; so I don't except her."

Maisie busied herself with passing the dishes. She had a way of making everything appear conventional by the unruffled quiet with which she accepted it. At the back of her mind she seemed to be smiling at the domestic scene she had achieved with this man, who should have been her enemy.

"No, you haven't met her," she assented. "But until you've met her, you won't rest; and after you've met her, you won't rest either.—And so you think I'm bewildering! You thought something

else, which you didn't have the courage to put into words. Bewildering and dangerous—the most dangerous woman you'd ever met—that was what you meant."

He smiled with a shade of embarrassment. "I might have called you the most disconcerting woman; you're all of that. No man of sense, who valued his peace of mind, would tell any woman she was dangerous."

"I don't see why. Why shouldn't he? Do tell me. I shan't be offended." She leant forward, absorbing him with her childish eyes, her lips parted with expectancy.

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"Because——" Tabs checked himself while he studied the tantalizing innocence of her expression. He felt certain that he was going to say something irresistibly unwise. To gain time he looked away and commenced aimlessly stirring his cup. "Well, if you must have it, because to tell a woman that would be to tempt her to be dangerous."

"But I love to be tempted," she said eagerly; "temptation is the yeast of life." And then in a whisper, speaking less to him than to herself, "A woman knows that she's old when temptation ends."

Like ripples from a stone flung into water the poignancy of what she had implied rather than uttered, spread away with a commotion which grew ever fainter. They sat without change of posture at either end of the couch, she bending towards him, he gazing down into his cup as though by staring into it he could retain his grip on the conventions. There was no sound, save the rustling of live coals in the grate. Outside the window the toy boat floated, a symbol of men's and women's ineffectual childishness, always dreaming of adventures on which they never set sail. Tabs pondered the hidden profundity of her words. At last he believed that through her he understood himself. It wasn't youth that he or anybody coveted; it was the more supreme boon of not growing old. He had just arrived at this new self-knowledge when she spoke.

"To be tempted means that one's wanted—wanted dreadfully, so that it hurts. That's living—to be wanted. Not to be wanted is worse than death. When you're dead, you're forgotten and you forget. To be forgotten and to remember is the end of all things. Not to be wanted when you're alive is to beat your flesh against the walls of a tomb. Lord Taborley, I know what you came for." He had set down his cup. She covered his bronzed hands with her own passionate white ones, overwhelming him with a rush of words. "You came to accuse me, to bribe me, to buy me. You didn't want to hear me; I was already condemned. Do you think I don't know what's said about my marriages? I know too well. But it isn't vanity that makes me want to be loved. It's so right to be loved. It isn't wickedness. It's the terror of not being loved—the same terror that makes you cling to Terry though she doesn't want you in return—— We all want to believe that we're wanted. It's human. Without that life's a blank. One can't face up—— And I——"

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She tore her hands from him and buried her face, sobbing in the cushions.

V

He had done it. By some unaccountable blunder he had made her cry. What was it he had said? Only a minute ago she had been so radiant and smiling. His first thought was of Porter; she must not know. This crying must be stopped before she heard it. Any moment she might enter. Even now she might be listening at the door, preparing to enter.

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Another conjecture rushed into his mind—this sobbing might be part of a prearranged plan. Tears are the jiu-jitsu of woman's art of self-defense. To the world at large the man is always a villain who has caused them. "But I didn't cause them," he protested to himself. And then, "Dash it all! There's nothing gained by sitting here. I've got to do something."

He roused himself and limped round the table to the end of the couch against which her face was hidden. He could see nothing but the pale gold of her hair, the ivory whiteness of her neck and the pitiful heaving of her fascinating shoulders. She looked extraordinarily like a doll—a broken doll which had been allowed to fall through some one's carelessness.

"Confound it! What a brute I am!" he muttered. "What the dickens does one do with a woman in hysterics?"

He laid his hand very timidly on her silky hair. He had had no idea that it was so silky. "Cheer up!" he said softly. And then again, "I do wish you'd cheer up."

She took not the slightest notice, save that a small white hand scuttled out like a mouse from beneath the cushions and commenced a hurried search. He watched it and formed a hasty guess. It couldn't find the thing for which it had been sent, so he dropped his own large handkerchief in its path, saw it take possession of it and dive again beneath the cushions. It made no difference to the sobbing.

What ought he to do? He couldn't endure the sound—it wrenched him. He bent over her, trying to turn her obstinately hidden face in his direction.

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"Maisie!" The word had slipped out. It didn't matter. It mattered so little that he repeated the indiscretion. "Maisie, you mustn't break your heart like that. No one thinks ill of you and you are wanted. You're wanted most awfully. Heaps of people want you."

The shoulders ceased to heave for a fraction of a second, but her face still refused to turn. "Who-

oo—who wants me?" Her voice reached him choked with tears and muffled.

Tabb frowned. The question was a poser. Who did want her? He was blessed if he knew. There must be people who wanted her—Adair, for instance. But the mention of Adair would provide her with a reason for a new outburst. There was only one thing to say under the circumstances, so he said it. "I do."

She lay so still that she might have been dead. It was frightening, this sudden silence after such a storm of emotion. It was so frightening that he had to say something more to prove to himself that she could hear. "You're beautiful. You're so gay when you're not crying. I don't think any man could prevent himself from wanting you." And then desperately, in a last effort, "You're most tremendously charming."

Her face never stirred from the cushions, but he was aware that surreptitiously his borrowed handkerchief was being employed industriously.

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He had just time to compose his features before a tear-wet eye blinked up at him. It was an eye eloquent with gratitude and babyishly blue. "You're a dear," a small voice whispered.

VI

He had been called many things from time to time, but never before "a dear." To be called "a dear" by a beautiful woman was an entirely new sensation for him. It made him distinctly uncomfortable—almost ashamed. A gift of this sort, even though it hasn't been desired, puts the recipient under an obligation. When once a woman has dubbed a man "a dear," she expects him to live up to the part she has assigned him. Tabb hoped that she hadn't been as sincere as she had sounded.

Taking himself off to the nearest French window, he stood staring out morosely—staring out at the silly little rockery, with the silly little pond at the foot of it, containing the silly little boat that never sailed anywhere. He was cross with himself and even more cross with her. Why couldn't she have behaved sensibly, instead of bursting like a rain-cloud without warning? She made mysteries out of everything, out of himself, Terry and even her sister's portrait. She never gave him a complete answer to any question. She surrounded herself with the atmosphere of a detective novel. He was half-minded to rush into the hall and make good his escape before she involved him further. Sir Tobias could come and conduct his own unpleasantness. How on earth was he going to tackle her concerning Adair now that she had called him "a dear"?

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But beneath his irritation and always struggling to surmount it was a quite different emotion—an emotion of tenderness. He kept seeing her as she had lain there sobbing, so fragile and dispossessed and broken. It was the whiteness of her neck that he remembered, the narrowness of her shoulders and the silkiness of her pale gold hair.

He had been standing at the window for perhaps five minutes when her voice reached him from a great distance. "Thanks muchly for the hanky. I'm better now."

"I'm glad," he said with his back towards her, once again on his guard.

As he turned slowly, she greeted him with a smile of welcome and nodded towards her sister's portrait. "She wouldn't have cried, you know."

"Wouldn't she?"

He had to say something; that seemed as good as anything. He made no attempt to approach her, but stood at bay against the window just where he had turned. He had arrived at one fixed determination; whatever happened, he would not again be entrapped into sharing the couch with her.

In answer to his unenthusiastic enquiry, Maisie shook her head vigorously like a little girl. "No, Di wouldn't. She never cries. Even when we were children we couldn't make her."

It flashed on Tabb that this conversation about the unknown woman was intended as a kind of peace-offering. Not to be ungracious, he roused himself to a show of interest. "Couldn't make her! Surely you weren't so cruel as to try?"

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"Here's your hanky," she said, tossing the moist, scrunched ball across to him. "Cruel! We didn't mean to be cruel. I suppose we were. She used to ask us to try. There was a game we played; we called it Christian Martyrs. She was always the martyr; she liked it. All she ever did when we hurt her was to say, 'Do it harder; I can bear more than that.' She was as proud then as she is to-day of all that she could bear. I think that's what made her husband furious. She seemed always to be saying to him, 'Do it harder,' and he certainly did. But neither he nor any one else has ever succeeded in making her cry."

Tabb glanced at the aloof beauty of the painted face—it was like the face of a Roman Empress, so proudly secure in its serenity. "Make her cry! Why should any one want to make her cry? To do that would be a kind of blasphemy."

"That's why," Maisie clasped her hands eagerly. "You've said it for me exactly. I've never known how to put it. It's the holiness of God that tempts men to revile Him. He evades them, outlasts them and yet compels their affection. They have no power over Him and can't destroy Him,

though they can destroy everything else in the world. What a man loves and has no power over, he longs to destroy; either that, or to drag it down to his own level, so that he can get his arms round it and comfort its weakness and hug it to his breast. It was that way with Di and her husband. He couldn't drag her down. He couldn't find her weakness. She was always up there. So he reviled her."

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A silence fell between them. They stared at each other across the room's breadth, finding each in the other something at the same time intimate and incomprehensible; each feeling that they stood on the verge of a discovery. It was Tabs who spoke.

"Was! Then he's dead?"

She barely nodded. "Killed at the Somme, poor fellow. He must have hated her to the end. In everything else he was large and splendid."

"And his name?"

Again Tabs was striving to remember where he had seen the unknown woman's face. He *had* seen it—of that he was certain. He had the sense that the circumstances under which he had seen it had been tragic. If he could only make Maisie reveal the name, he might recall.

VII

"His name was Lord Dawn." Seeing the instant puckering of his brows, she asked quickly, "You knew him?"

"Knew him!" Tabs pondered the question. "I'm not sure. But Lady Dawn—I've heard a good deal about her. She had a nursing unit in France, didn't she? Of course she had; you and Terry were with her. It was in her hospital that Terry met Braithwaite. She passed me yesterday, driving with the Queen in the Park; not that I noticed her. It was Terry who did that." He came slowly over from the window to the fireplace and stood gazing level with the picture above the mantelpiece. He spoke wonderingly, "The most beautiful woman in England, they say! So this is Lady Dawn!"

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When he had finished his inspection, his interest and absorption were so great that he did what he had vowed he would never do again—he sat down for a second time on the couch beside her.

"There's something wrong," he said quietly. "Either you're misinformed or I'm mistaken. Let's get things straight."

She made no attempt to conceal her amusement. She attributed his seriousness to sudden infatuation—an infatuation which made him seem ridiculously inconstant after his recent professions concerning Terry.

"Something wrong!" she echoed mockingly. "If you think that I've exaggerated anything that I've told you about—" She glanced up at the portrait. "I don't think I'm likely to be misinformed. After all, I'm her—"

"I didn't mean that," he interrupted impatiently. "I was referring to Lord Dawn. If he's the same man, I think both you and she have misjudged him."

Maisie laughed. "Lord Dawn was sufficiently definite. I'm not misjudging him. He left no room for misjudgment."

"But you said that he had died hating her."

"He did, as far as we know. He gave no sign to the contrary."

"But does she, Lady Dawn, think that?"

"Think that he hated her?"

"No, that he died hating her?"

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Maisie picked up a cigarette from the table and looked to Tabs for a match. She was getting bored. "Why, certainly. One doesn't want to be cynical, but all the deaths on the casualty-lists weren't total losses. Some of them were releases. They weren't all—well, to put it mildly, occasions for wearing the deepest mourning. There were English wives to whom German shells were merciful—more merciful than English law. If they took lives, there were cases in which they restored freedom."

As Tabs struck a match and held it to her cigarette, his hand trembled. He had to steady his passion before he asked his question. "And you think that she, Lady Dawn, was one of these?"

Maisie blew out a lazy puff of smoke. "Everybody thinks so." Then she added pointedly, "Everybody who knows her and has a right to an opinion."

Tabs refused to be put off. There was a polite forbearance in his tone when he spoke. "The first thing to do is to make sure that my Dawn was the same as yours. Mine was known to us by no title; he was a Captain in the same battalion as myself. He was killed in front of Pozières.—Ah, I see by the way you start, that so was yours! But here's where the difference comes in; mine loved his wife, if she was his wife, more dearly than any man I have known. His devotion was the talk of the regiment."

She flipped the ash off her cigarette. "Then that puts him out of the running, doesn't it?"

It was the studied carelessness of her gesture that released the trigger of his indignation and made it leap out beyond control. There was in his mind the vision of those blood-baths of the Somme, where men had drowned in the putrescence and been flattened by shells like flies against a wall. They hadn't all been good before they had reached their ordeal. They had come, as most men come, from every kind of prison-house of lust and human error. But they'd been good when they had died. They'd been reborn into valor and tenderness. And now, to hear their imperfections discussed in this pleasant room, so entirely feminine, where everything was safe and warm! Their imperfections were so small as compared with their sacrifice. Modern-day Christs, that's what they were! Christs by the thousands, who had found no Josephs of Arimathea to hide their defilement in garden-sepulchres. There they lay at this moment in the wilderness of corruption where they had fallen, while living people between puffs of cigarettes, undertook to explain why they should not be regretted.

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"Puts him out of the running! It doesn't."

He leapt to his feet and commenced to drag himself up and down the room, limping backwards and forwards, while she pressed lazily against the cushions at a loss to account for his excitement.

"It doesn't," he repeated, pausing opposite to her. "He's still in the running. The Dawn whom I knew was a very silent man. He was a man with a sorrow. It made him careless. He was in the war to die. We all knew it. The men adored him because of it. He was the finest officer in the finest of battalions."

He became aware that he was frightening her and sank his voice. The lowered tone only made what he said the more dreadfully impressive.

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"There was something funny about him." He all but whispered it. "Something funny that we couldn't understand. We couldn't understand why he should want so much to die. The reason why we couldn't understand was a woman's photograph."

She looked up at him timidly. "Yes!"

"Wherever he went he carried it. When he went into an attack, he carried it next his heart. In billets he slept with it beneath his pillow. He pinned it against the walls of dug-outs. That was where I saw it. I remember now. It was smeared with the mud of a hundred trenches—Boche trenches as well as ours. It looked down on curious sights, did that woman's printed face in the photo." He laughed harshly. "Sights that those of us who were there will spend the rest of our lives in an effort to forget. And here you and I sit and talk— Well, as I was saying, we couldn't fathom why he should be so keen on death when there was that woman in the world for whom he cared—for whom he cared right up to the last. It was at the Somme, in the attack on Pozières, that he went west. He was in command of a company that got cut off. When we found him, he had that bit of cardboard so tightly clasped that we couldn't take it from him."

He paused, suddenly exhausted. His indignation had burnt itself out. "I'm tired," he apologized. "I'm afraid I let myself get out of hand. I scared you for a moment. I'm sorry. Do you mind if I sit down?"

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She pushed the table back to make it easier for him to take a place beside her. "It's all right," she consoled him. "I know that you're only just out of hospital. Terry told me. You're not really recovered yet. Besides, it was my fault; I spoke lightly. I wasn't thinking what I said. But I don't feel lightly about these things. I couldn't." Then she said something which struck him oddly. "You know my man's out there."

What did she mean by *her man*? If she had said *her men*, he could have comprehended. She had lost three husbands in the war. But why did she particularize and say, "My man"? It seemed cruel to the rest. And which of the three was it that she regarded as so peculiarly hers.

He jerked his thoughts back. "There was something you told me about Lord Dawn; you said it explained him. How did it go? I think you said that he hated his wife as men hate God, because they love Him so much and yet He won't come down. Well, out there it wasn't like that. Dawn climbed up to her; yes, and perhaps beyond her. Out there he didn't need to pretend to hate her; he could afford to love her without loss of self-respect. I suppose he thought it was too late to tell her after all that had gone before."

"Either that," Maisie assented, "or else— It would be like him. Or else because he was too much of a sportsman. As it was, if he were killed, she wouldn't need to be sorry. But if he wrote her that he loved her and had always loved her, and then got killed— Don't you see, that's where her remorse would start?"

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Tabs nodded. "And yet she was his last thought. She ought to know it. It's monstrous that she should go on believing—" He broke off. And then, "She must be told. It's merest justice— whatever it costs."

VIII

The light had been failing while they had talked. A tap fell on the door. Coming at that moment

when their nerves were jangled, it sounded ominous. Their heads turned sharply. Maisie's voice was unsteady when she asked, "What is it? What do you want?"

"It's Porter, Madam. Dinner is served."

"Oh, come in, Porter. Have you laid a place for Lord Taborley?"

As the maid entered, Tabs rose. "I had no idea— Why, I've been here for hours. I really must apologize, Mrs. Lockwood, and be going."

However much his reception had been prearranged, dinner had formed no part of the program. The slightly puzzled expression on Maisie's watch-dog's face betrayed that fact to him at a glance.

Maisie laid an arresting hand on his arm. To the maid she said cheerfully, "It's all right, Porter; Lord Taborley is staying."

As Porter was making her exit, he commenced again to protest. Maisie silenced his objections by leaning against him warningly. "You've talked of everything except me," she whispered; "it was about me you came to talk. You *must* before we part."

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Following her across the hall to the dining-room, he reflected on her ability for getting him into deeper and yet deeper water. He had the feeling that he was being led somewhere against his will—somewhere that might be for his good or for his harm, but which would inevitably cut him off from many of his old affections. He had the discomfiting sense that he was doing something disloyal to Terry. Heaven knew what promises might not be exacted from him before the evening ended. When would it end? He would have to stay for at least an hour after coffee—that would bring him to nine o'clock. Sir Tobias Beddow would have been expecting him long before that to deliver his account of the result of his mission. Furthermore, Sir Tobias would be demanding an explanation as to how it was that, having asked for Terry's hand the night before, he was still unengaged to her. If he postponed the interview till to-morrow, it would create the appearance of lukewarmness. He couldn't very well excuse himself by saying that he'd spent the afternoon and evening with Maisie. And he couldn't get Maisie to let him off on the plea that Sir Tobias, her harshest critic, was waiting for him. Besides, he had accomplished nothing as yet; Adair Easterday had not been mentioned.

If ever he made good his escape, he prayed that he might never again encounter a woman possessed of charm. His paramount desire was to seize his hat and make a furtive exit. There was nothing to prevent him but the politeness due from a man to a woman—and she traded on it. As he passed into the dining-room he was secretly on his guard. "I wonder what she'll do next to inveigle me?" was his thought.

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"It'll be only a little dinner," she explained as they seated themselves. "You weren't expected. But Porter always has something hidden away for an emergency. Don't you, Porter?"

He was getting accustomed to these asides addressed to Porter. He began to perceive that Porter had other uses besides gliding round the table in a cap and apron. She was a conversational stop-gap when situations grew awkward, as they frequently must between an ensnared bachelor and an unchaperoned widow.

And she was eligible; he had to own it as they sat down to their first meal together. Tea hadn't counted as a meal; you can serve tea to anybody. But dinner for two, in an oak-paneled room, when the spring dusk is falling is different. The table was lit by four naked candles. Looped back from the windows hung the marigold-tinted curtains, revealing in triangular patches the courtyard, with its mock village-green and its quaintly timbered houses. It looked very real in the half-light. An electric street-lamp stood out sharply against the fading sky, placid and contemplative as an unclouded moon. Several houses away a woman was singing. Sometimes her voice sank so that he lost the air; but once, when it rose, he caught the words, "Crushing out life, than waving me farewell." He knew what she was singing then and followed the air in his imagination. The atmosphere of the room was vibrant with romance; all that was lacking was his impulse to be romantic.

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Maisie was chattering gayly and forestalling his wants. He reserved a small portion of his mind for her conversation—sufficient to enable him to reply "Yes" or "No" when the occasion seemed to demand it. It was clear to him that it made her happy to have a man so entirely at her mercy. She meant immensely well by him. Behind her mist of words she seemed to be saying, "Isn't it nice to be just we two together?"

But he was thinking of the other three soldiemen who had played the game of being "just we two together" before him. The singing voice, drifting through the courtyard, put into words the question of his thought, "Where are you now? Where are you now?" Yes, where were they?

He felt pity and distaste for Maisie in equal proportions. Those men had each in turn caressed her, dipped their hands in the largesse of her pale gold hair, seen their souls' reflection in the cornflower innocence of her eyes, drunk forgetfulness from the poppy-petals of her mouth and gone away to die, believing she was wholly theirs. How little of her was theirs now! She was almost virginal—as though she had never been touched by their passion. And yet there seemed to be one of them whose memory had outstayed the rest, for she had said, "You know, my man's out there." Was she merely a light, predatory woman or— Or very loving and lonely?

She was speaking more seriously now. "We mustn't tell her. It's natural to be sorry for him now that he's dead." He picked up the thread and guessed that she was referring to Lord Dawn. [Pg 170]

"We must tell her," he said.

"But we mustn't," she urged. "For years he tried to make her wretched. There were rumors of other women. She's found peace at last. It wouldn't help him to let her know that he had died loving her out there. He's beyond any help of ours. They all are." He surmised who the *they* were: the three soldiers who had sat there before him. In pleading for silence for others, she was pleading for silence for herself. Again she was defending herself against his thoughts. "All of the dead had their chance. Lord Dawn had; there were so many years in which he might have told her. To tell her now would be to rob——"

She broke off as the maid reëntered with the coffee. Her tone changed instantly to one of convention. "Not here, Porter. We'll have it in the drawing-room."

As he followed her out across the hall, he glanced at his watch. It was past eight o'clock. He could lose no more time. He must plunge boldly into the subject of his mission and bring his visit promptly to an end. He dreaded the temptation of that feminine room, with its coziness and security and quiet. It made him too much alone with her; she was not a woman that it was wise to be alone with too long.

The moment the maid had left them and the door had closed, he became confirmed in the sanity of this decision. Everything in the room appealed to him to procrastinate. The curtains before the French windows were closely drawn. The hearth had been swept in their absence; the fire glowed more companionably than ever. About the table, where the coffee waited, a solitary lamp shed a golden blur. It was heavily shaded with yellow silk, so that most of its light escaped their faces and fell downwards. [Pg 171]

She had seated herself on the couch. When she had filled both cups, she glanced up at him smilingly, patting the vacant place beside her as a sign that he should occupy it. He was standing before the fire, looking immensely tall in the semi-darkness. He could see her plainly where she sat beneath the lamp; but of him she could see nothing but his outline, for his eyes were lost in shadow. When he seemed not to have noticed her sign, "Come," she said coaxingly. "You don't spare yourself at all. You make yourself tired by so much standing."

"Mrs. Lockwood——" She started as he called her that. Twice already she had been Maisie to him. "Mrs. Lockwood, as you reminded me before dinner, it was about you that I came here to talk. Let's get it over. I haven't any idea how far things have gone. I should like to believe that nine-tenths of what's said is nothing more than gossip. But why can't you let him alone? He may mean nothing or a tremendous lot to you—but why can't you?" [Pg 172]

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

THE AIR OF CONQUEST

I

She sat very silently, the way he had seen men sit when they were wounded. She had been expecting the blow and trying to postpone it; now that it had fallen her only feeling was one of peace because the expecting was ended. Her face remained turned towards him, as it had been while he had been talking. As though a mask had dropped, the real, very tired, very young, very lonely Maisie watched him. The wistfulness of her beauty surprised and touched him. Several times her lips moved in an attempt to say something. Then, at last, "What right have you to ask?"

"I should like to claim the right of friendship."

"Of friendship!" She frowned slightly, peering from beneath the lamp in an effort to make out his features. Then her eyes cleared and she smiled. "If you don't mean it, please don't say it. You see, it would hurt afterwards. And—and I should like to have you for my friend."



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

He came over from the fireplace and seated himself beside her. "We've been almost enemies—just a little afraid of each other. Isn't that so? It's ever so much more comfortable now; we'll be able to talk more easily. Tell me honestly, what do you see in Adair?" [Pg 173]

"See in him!"

She commenced sipping her coffee. She looked extraordinarily like Terry used to do years ago, when she was a little lass and had been naughty, and had come reluctantly to ask pardon. He thought that if he went on talking he might make it easier for her.

"You'll wonder why I, who never knew you until to-day, should have taken upon myself to broach this subject."

"I don't wonder," she headed him off. "I know. Terry's my friend. Her father was determined to send somebody, so she worked things in order that you might be sent. She thought that you would be the kindest person."

"She thought that!" Tabs was a little taken back by her assertion; it seemed to pledge him to kindness before he had learnt whether kindness was required or deserved. It made him in a sense her partisan, when he ought to have been impartial.

"I think I can be trusted to be kind," he said; "but you must remember that I've got to be kind all round. I must be kind to Adair's wife and to his children. If this goes much further it will spell tragedy for them."

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed without mirth. "Adair's wife should have remembered to be kind to herself. If a woman can't keep her husband, she never deserved to have won him. And Adair—he's the easiest man to keep in the world; far too easy to be exciting. If she doesn't lose him to me, she'll lose him to some one else, unless——" And then she surprised him, "But she won't lose him to me, for I don't want him." [Pg 174]

Tabs sighed with relief and lit himself a cigarette. "Then that's settled. If you don't want him, the trouble's ended, and I think Sir Tobias and all of us owe you an apology."

Again she laughed. This time some of her old mischief had come back. "You go too fast, Lord Taborley. I shouldn't advise any of you to apologize to me yet. It's true that I don't want him for keeps, but——"

Tabs guessed the way the ground lay and went back to the question with which he had started. "What on earth do you see in him? That's what I can't make out."

She kept him waiting for his answer. While he waited, like sunshine struggling through cloud, amused happiness fought its way into her expression. When she turned, she met his gaze with complete candor. She was again a woman of the world. "What do I see in him? Not much—only a makeshift, a second best. Only a man who needs me for the moment because he's lost his direction. You remember our conversation of this afternoon about having to feel that you were needed. He gives me that feeling, so I'm grateful. That's why I have to have him."

"Are you so lonely as to stoop—well, to steal to get it?" [Pg 175]

He was sorry he had asked it. She bit her lip in an effort to keep back the tears and to force herself to go on brightly smiling. "Yes, as lonely as all that," she nodded; "so lonely that it's almost a joke."

"No joke." He was at a loss what to say. "But you have friends. You go everywhere. You——"

"Friends!" she interrupted, laughing with the high-pitched note of breaking nerves. "What are

friends? People to whom you say, 'How d'you do?' here and 'How d'you do?' there, every one of whom can do without you. I want some one who can't do without me for a second— No joke, you said. But it is almost a joke to be young, and eager, and good-looking, and to know how to dress, and to be so willing to love, and to live in the world just once, and to hear the world go by you laughing, and to desire so much," she paused for breath, "and to want to give so much that no one is willing to accept. If one didn't laugh over it, it would be more than one could stand. If one didn't treat it as a joke—"

He caught her hands. "Steady, Mrs. Lockwood. Stop laughing at once. There's nothing to laugh about. You're nearly over the edge."

She stared at him with wide eyes, filled with panic, while little ripples of laughter kept escaping from her, which she did her best to suppress.

"Now, listen to me," he continued quietly: "You're not exceptional. You've been expressing something that there's not a man or woman that hasn't felt. I feel it when I realize that I may lose Terry; so does Braithwaite. Lord Dawn felt it when he couldn't drag his wife down to him and couldn't climb up to her. And his wife must have felt it too, when she sat always by herself. Phyllis feels it when she sees that, for the moment, you have more attraction for her husband than she has. And Adair feels it as well, when he risks his good name for a little desperate comfort and is willing to clothe you, for whom he professes to care, with all the appearance of dishonor. You're no exception; it's the feeling that you are exceptional that makes you unscrupulous in your self-pity. Get that into your head, that you're not exceptional. Half the world's with you in the same box; but it smiles and doesn't own it. Have you got that?"

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She nodded and tried to withdraw her hands; but he held them fast.

"And now as regards this desire to be wanted; that's perfectly right and natural. There's nobody who doesn't share it. And I understand what you say about mere friendship. It's unsatisfying and impermanent. It's like a meal snatched at a restaurant; none of the dishes or napkins or tables or chairs belong to you. They've been used by other people before you and they'll be used by other people the moment your bill is settled. What you want and what every one wants, is something more than friendship—a human relation with one person who is so much yours that your intimacies are a secret from all the world."

"Some one with whom I can be little," she whispered, "and foolish and off my guard."

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He smiled. "That's it exactly. But you won't get that sort of relationship with a man who belongs already to another woman."

"One gets the pretense."

He shook his head. "Not even the pretense. There was a phrase you used about Adair; you said he'd lost his direction. That's true; he has for the moment. Presently he'll refind it and the road leads back to Phyllis. You said something else: you called him a second best. That's all he is, however you take him, whether as a husband, a father or a lover. He lacks earnestness; he has always lacked it. I've been his friend for years; his flabbiness sticks out all over him. But you're not a second best, Mrs. Lockwood. You're a top-notch—too fine for anything but the best. You really are. You ought to set a higher value on yourself."

She had regained her composure. He showed a willingness to release her hands, but she let them rest where they were like tired birds, while she regarded him with wistful kindness.

"Too fine for anything but the best! It's a long while since I heard any one say that. Reggie used to say it in almost those very words. But then Reggie," she caught her breath at the remembered ecstasy, "Reggie used to think that the sun rose and set for me. He was different from all other men. You advise me to reserve myself for the best. How can I do that, Lord Taborley, when the best is in the past?"

She was very beautiful in the simplicity of her pathos—one of the most beautiful women he had ever met. She had become a little child for the moment and her littleness was baffling. He felt extraordinarily near to her and alone with her. There was no longer any danger in their aloneness. He realized why it was that she was able to give away so much of herself; there was no value in the gift, for her heart was beyond the capture of any man. She was the shuttered house of a vanished happiness, inhabited by a restless ghost. The gold light from the lamp fell in a pool about her. It revealed startlingly the whiteness of her arms and throat, the blueness of her eyes and the primrose gleam of her polished head. She seemed insubstantial as a dream, environed by shadows. And what did she mean by saying that all her best lay in the past? Surely she had misjudged! With her power of charm she could build her world to any pattern.

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"The best in the past! None of us know enough about the future to say that. The best lies ahead—always. To believe that brings our best within our grasp."

"For me it can't." She spoke hopelessly. "No believing can do that when your best is dead."

The finality of her despair silenced him. He could feel it like fingers tightening on his throat. He realized in a flash that this was how he, too, would be tempted to speak were he to lose Terry—that, having lost the best, any careless makeshift would suffice to comfort him. While he considered, her hands snuggled closer in his clasp, establishing a new sympathy.

"I think," he said at last, "even though my best were dead, I should try to go on acting as if it lay still ahead. If I did that, round some new turning I might find it waiting for me as a kind of recompense." [Pg 179]

She leant forward, peering eagerly into his eyes. "Yes. You would do that. I'm sure of it. I knew you had something to give me the moment we met. That was why I wouldn't let you escape me. I've learnt the secret at last—the secret of your air of conquest. It isn't that you get your desires. It's not that. It's your belief that you will get them that makes you strong."

Somewhere at the back of his head he remembered the pleading of Delilah with Samson, "Tell me, I pray thee, wherein thy great strength lieth."

He laughed. "Perhaps you have guessed. I'm what you might call a round-the-corner person. I have a philosophy all my own; it's a round-the-corner philosophy. I believe that we find everything that we've lost or longed for, if we'll only press on. Everything that we've ever loved or wanted waits for us further up the road, round some hidden turning. It's always further up the road and just out of sight. The whole trick of living is to keep your tail up and march forward with the appearance of success, no matter how badly other people say you've been defeated. More often than not, we're nearer our hidden corners than any of us guess; it's the pluck to struggle the last hundred yards that swings us round the turning and wins our kingdoms for us."

She withdrew her hands and lay back against the cushions. "No amount of courage——" She broke off and tried afresh. "Being brave wouldn't put him again into my arms. You're wondering whom I'm talking about—Reggie Pollock, my only husband. The other two didn't count, any more than Adair counts. I don't say it unkindly. I do want you to believe that. They were passers-by—that was all. They hung their hats in the hall and, somehow, they stopped. They were nice boys, both of them. It seemed a kind of war-work to let them marry me. You see, they needed me; so when they said they loved me, I didn't have the heart to turn them out. I suppose I was too amiable. But they didn't count—not at all." [Pg 180]

"The war's over," Tabs reminded her with quiet humor. "How long is this amiability going to last?"

She smiled dreamily. "Adair again! You don't leave him alone for long. If you think that I ever let him make love to me, you're mistaken. It's only that he's unhappy and I can do something for him."

Tabs wasn't at all sure that it was only that. This fatal amiability might have raised quite different expectations in Adair. Like her two latest husbands, he might take a notion to hang his hat in her hall. If he did, would she abate her amiability sufficiently to tell him to hang it somewhere else?

She was drifting; what she needed was either a tow-rope or a rudder. He sent his gaze questing through the shadows.

"Those five photographs, all of the same man—they're of Pollock?"

"Yes."

"He was one of the first of all the aces, wasn't he? It was he who brought down the Zeppelin over Brussels and went missing a few days later. You see, I remember his record. He was outstandingly brave at a time when the world was full of brave men. And you tell me he loved you?" [Pg 181]

An expression of triumph flitted across her face. "Not loved." Her voice was full-throated. "He adored me, and to me he was a god whom I worshiped. I'd have gone through hell for him. I'd ——"

"No, you wouldn't."

The flatness of the contradiction pulled her up short. "No you wouldn't," he repeated quietly. "You wouldn't even go through this for him. You wouldn't play the game by him when he was dead. He always kept his end up, whatever the odds against him; but you—you couldn't. This was your chance to show that you were worthy of him. While he was alive, you played a winning game; it was easy to be true to him. But he—he was stauncher; he was most to be trusted when the game seemed all but lost. You ought to have kept his spirit alive for us; but you've understood so little of his spirit that you've been willing to put any stranger in his place—to quote your own words, any stranger who chose to hang his hat in your hall. Pollock was a soldier; he didn't need to be sure of victory to show courage. It was in tight corners that he was at his best. You're in a tight corner now, and you're his wife—the wife whom he didn't love, but adored."

The brutal impact of the truth had struck her dumb at first. Her lips had fallen apart. While she had listened, her face had gone white. Now that he paused, she slipped back into the cushions, covering her eyes with her hands. "For God's sake stop torturing me! Though you think I'm as contemptible as that, don't say it. If you must speak, tell me what you think I ought to do." [Pg 182]

"Do! Until you find a living man who's his match, carry on as though he were not dead."

She uncovered her eyes and sat upright, staring at him. "As though he were not dead. But Reggie is dead. You know as well as I do that he's dead."

Tabs nodded. "I'm not denying it. But for all that, try to live as though he weren't—as though

somewhere up the road, a day, a week, a month, a year hence he would meet you round the corner."

Her interest faded forlornly. "What good would that do? It would only be making believe with myself."

He spoke gently. "Yes, but games of make-believe come true. You couldn't meet *him*, but you might meet some one his equal—a man who's, perhaps, already waiting for you, while you squander yourself on makeshifts and second bests."

The little silence which had ended his speech dragged on from seconds into minutes. In the quiet room nothing stirred. She attempted to free herself from his gaze by refusing to look at him. Against her will her eyes crept up to his, clashed, evaded, fell back and again crept up to them.

At last, speaking humbly, she said, "I was ashamed. You made me ashamed. Whatever I'd done, if he came back, he wouldn't be ashamed of me. It wouldn't matter how cowardly I'd been or however many husbands I'd had; he'd be so glad to have me in his arms that he wouldn't find time to be ashamed of me. So I'm not going to be ashamed any longer; I'm going to start to live as if he were coming back. It'll be hard at first. Adair—he was nothing. And yet—I shall miss him, no doubt. You said something this afternoon that you didn't mean."

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"Didn't I? What was it?"

"It was when I was crying because nobody wanted me. Do you remember what you said? You said, 'I do,' not meaning a word of it. Could you manage to want me just a little, Lord Taborley? Not for long, you know; only till I've got past the loneliest places—till I've begun almost to persuade myself that he may come back. To think that you wanted me would help."

Before he could answer, she had sprung to her feet, all but over-turning the lamp. "What's that?"

A sharp rat-a-tat-tat had reverberated through the house. While she spoke, it was repeated. Her over-strung nerves gave way. As Tabs rose, she clung to him beseechingly. "Don't let him in. I'm not ready for him. Don't let him in. Go outside and send him away. Tell him anything. But don't let him enter."

Tabs had no clear idea to whom she was referring. It might have been to Adair. It might have been to Pollock. It seemed more likely that it was to her dead husband. This talk about living as though he might come back had probably distraught an imagination already over-taxed.

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"He sha'n't enter," he assured her. "There's no need to lose your nerve."

As he passed into the hall, he heard the starchy approach of Porter. He waited and halted her with, "Mrs. Lockwood asked me to answer it."

When he had watched her retreat and vanish, he advanced towards the door. Who was it out there in the darkness whose knock had power to strike such terror? It was a terror the excitement of which he at least remotely shared. The thought crossed his mind, "Is it possible that her longing could have dragged him back?" He felt as though in the stucco-fronted gloom of Mulberry Court, Fate itself stood waiting for him on the other side of the panel. With conscious bravado he stretched out his hand and drew back the latch.

II

"Is it Mr. Easterday?"

It was a woman's voice that asked the question—a deep voice, thrilling with emotion, that made him wonder what it would sound like with all the stops pulled out. He had opened the door only a little way, expecting that he would have to refuse admittance. At the sound of a woman's voice, his sense of the conventions sprang to life. It must be a good deal past ten and here he was answering Maisie's door as though he were her butler. The kind of conclusions that could be drawn were made plain by the caller's question, "Is it Mr. Easterday?" To be mistaken for Easterday annoyed him. It was tantamount to an accusation. It implied that, even though he were not Easterday, the proprietary way in which he attended to other people's doors at after ten o'clock put Him well within Easterday's class. Tabs was particularly annoyed to hear himself accused by a voice so gracious and pleasant. His surprise had evidently impressed her as furtiveness, for she said, "So it is Mr. Easterday?"

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He was at a loss what to do with her—how to turn her away. For Maisie's sake she must not be allowed to enter, for then she would discover that they had been alone. He opened the door a few inches wider and parried to gain time. "If it's Mr. Easterday that you're wanting, you've made a fortunate mistake. This is Mrs. Lockwood's house. But I happen to know an Easterday—an Adair Easterday; he's a personal friend. Perhaps he's the man you're looking for. If so, I can give you his address."

This sally was greeted with a quiet, rather mocking laugh. He was using his eyes, trying to form an estimate of the visitor. She had arrived in a car, which he judged to be private, for in the light reflected from the windshield he could make out the livery of her chauffeur. She was swathed in a sumptuous wrap which looked as though it were of sable. She held it gathered closely about her, so that it fell in soft folds, revealing and at the same time concealing her figure. He was anxious to read her face, but the lower part was snuggled into the fur of the deep collar and the

upper part was shadowed by a broad-brimmed tulle hat, from which two bird of paradise plumes spread back like wings on the helmet of a viking. For the rest, she had white kid gloves, which reached up to her elbows. Outside the glove of the left hand she wore a bracelet; every time she stirred the stones struck fire in the semi-darkness. Her hands were very small. Peeping out from below her gown, the buckles on her high-heeled shoes twinkled. She was mysterious, taunting, and strangely commanding. As she hovered there across the threshold, a faint perfume drifted up to him like the intoxicating romance of June rose-gardens under moonlight.

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She, too, seemed to have suffered a surprise at hearing the tones in which he had spoken. "His address! Oh, no, it wasn't Mr. Easterday I was wanting. I only supposed— If Mrs. Lockwood's at home, I should like to see her."

Her voice was like a chime of contralto bells. It made him think of Bernhardt. It imparted to the commonplaces she uttered a quite disproportionate intensity of drama and tragic depth. The way in which she had said, "Oh, no," reverberated in his memory as though the sound still lingered on the air.

"I don't know at all," he commenced. Then he smiled at his confusion. "You see I'm not used to answering doors, and Mrs. Lockwood's not quite herself. She was very tired just now. But if you'll give me your name, I'll—"

If he'd been left to himself, he might have succeeded in creating the impression that he was Maisie's physician. As it was, his conscience was spared the deception by the advent of the inevitable Porter. She sailed up behind him with an appearance so immaculate that it would have shed propriety on the most compromising circumstances. He instantly stood aside to make room for her. "Porter, here's a lady enquiring for—"

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But the lady took matters into her own hands. "Mrs. Lockwood in, Porter?"

"Why, certainly, your Ladyship."

"Then why was I shut out? Who is this gentleman who—"

The rest was lost as their voices sank. The next words he caught were her Ladyship's, running up the scale of laughter. "Then I'm not *de trop*! That's a blessing!"

He fell back, trying to obliterate himself, as with every sign of deference Porter admitted her; but in crossing the hall, she had to pass him. Scarcely pausing, she swept him with a pair of stone-gray eyes, made mischievous for the moment with merriment. "You're no good as a butler," she whispered. "You carry discretion too far."

To his chagrin he recognized her—the one woman whom he would most have chosen to have met in an attitude that was dignified. She entered the drawing-room and was lost to sight. But she had left the door ajar and he heard Maisie's delighted exclamation, "Why, Di, what brings you here so late? This is darling of you!" His position was elaborately false. It grew more false every minute he delayed. He foresaw himself apologizing and being explained. He had no appetite for explanations. Since he had adventured into Mulberry Tree Court, he had twice been tempted to bolt for safety. Now that he was tempted for a third time, he acted blindly on the impulse. Having played the rôle of butler with too much discretion, he seized his hat and, without a thought of ceremony, adopted a butler's mode of escaping.

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III

In the shrouded emptiness of the London night he felt himself free again. He came into possession of himself and found that he could think with his old definite clearness. In the last few hours events had rushed him off his feet; he had no sooner realized their significance than he had discovered himself in the throes of a new crisis. Now, for the moment, he stood aloof and could consider his actions in their true perspective.

As he turned out of Mulberry Tree Court, he had thought he had heard a voice calling after him. "Lord Taborley! Lord Taborley!" He had looked back across the imitation village-green, where the white posts showed dimly like smudges of chalk. The door of Maisie's house had been opened wide, making a lozenge of gold against the blackness. He had fancied that he had seen her standing there framed, leaning out, and then— Yes, surely he had heard the running of slippered feet along the pavement. He had not waited. He scarcely knew from what he was escaping—perhaps from his fate, from which there is ultimately no escape. He seized his respite, however, for the dread of recapture was strong upon him.

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And now all hint of pursuit had died out. Tall houses stood muted against the sky; dim trees cast a leafy obscurity; stars glinted remotely like diamonds set in gun-metal. He found a healing chastity in his sudden aloneness; it roused in him an almost angry desire to recover his lost monasticism.

He was amused to discover himself speculating as to whether women were worth the trouble they occasioned. They coerced men with sentimental arguments to which there were no replies. They wore away men's fortitude with the continual flowing of their tears. They molded men's strength into weakness with the magic caressing of their sex. They promised and disappointed, flattered and allured, captured and despised. Their curiosity was insatiable to possess themselves of secrets, which were no longer valued the moment they were divulged. Their little teasing

hands, so destructive and lovable, had commenced the débâcle of every human greatness. Throughout the ages, their coaxing, pleading voices could be heard wheedling men's hearts to the same purpose. "Tell me, I pray thee, wherein thy great strength lieth, and wherein thou mightest be bound to afflict thee." The strength of men had eternally roused their resentment, whether they were the Delilahs of long ago or the Maisies of a modern generation. The goal of all their passion, even when it was unselfish, was to bind.

He had nearly been bound, but he had escaped. At the thought that he had escaped, he felt a flood of exultant joy sweep through him. He smiled, believing he had discovered a humorous and more human motive for the exhausting piety of the anchorites. It wasn't their religious self-abnegation that had made them flee to scorched river-beds and desert hiding-places; it was their triumphant satisfaction at having tantalized and eluded feminine pursuit. They fled in order that they might possess, not deny themselves. As they became more emaciated and scarred and as their needs grew less, they listened. What they heard was ample compensation for all that they had foresworn at the hands of life. Far blown from distant haunts of habitation came a sound which in their ears was sweetest music: day and night the painful dragging of chains and the groan of men toiling in servitude to women.

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"The Philistines be upon thee, Samson!" When the last sleepy caress had been given, all men who lacked the caution of the anchorite, were sooner or later destined to hear that cry.

How much nobler men had been in a womanless world! Some of them had had to become womanless before they could be noble. Pollock plunging to his death from the clouds, like an eagle struck by a thunderbolt! Lord Dawn with the smile of calm remembrance on his lips, purged of all his fruitless sex-contentions, lying white and quiet beneath the crack and spatter of exploding shells! Braithwaite, the ex-valet, who had proved himself an aristocrat in courage! And he himself, thinking only of duty, with every jealous ambition laid aside!

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And now— The mate of the eagle was a trifler with peacocks and vultures. The man whose face had been molded by his last thought into an expression of serene faithfulness, was recalled only as one who had lived envenomed by disloyalty. Braithwaite, the aristocrat in courage, was now distinguished for his cowardice; he himself was at one and the same time Braithwaite's rival and grudging critic. *The Philistines be upon thee, Samson! And he awoke out of his sleep and said, I will go out as at other times and shake myself—*Asleep! He felt that he, too, had been asleep. All the men who had been giants in the past five years were either dead or sleeping. And this sudden transformation was the work of women, because men had come back to walk and rest with them in the soft, desired places. The little feminine hands had stripped them of their charity, had taken away their valor and had concealed liars-in-wait in the chamber of their affections.

So his thoughts ran on, amplifying, magnifying, exaggerating the theme of the debilitating effects of women. But from all his accusations he exempted Terry. She was the Joan of Arc of his imagination, who rode on unvanquished across life's battlefields, inspiring to heroism with her shining purity. And he made one other exception—Lady Dawn. It was the Lady Dawn of the portrait he exempted, not the Lady Dawn who had mocked him in passing with her steady stone-gray eyes. In a strange way he discriminated between the portrait and the living woman. The portrait was almost his friend; the living woman was a stranger. The woman in the portrait was after his own heart; she had never been known to cry. "Do it harder; I can bear more than that." He thrilled to the pride of her defiance.

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Then he pulled himself up with a start. Again he was thinking about her. Yes, and though he might discriminate between the portrait and the living woman, it was the living woman's eyes that gleamed in the blackness of his mind. There was truth in what Maisie had said, that were he as much in love with Terry as he professed all other women, however beautiful, except the one woman, should be hanks of hair and bags of bones. He consoled himself by arguing that that was precisely what he had been trying to prove them by his sweeping applications of the conduct of Delilah.

Whichever way he viewed his situation, things were in a pretty fair muddle—a muddle which annoyed him because it was so unmerited. He was pledged to Terry, while she held herself unpledged. He was committed to help Maisie—a distinctly unwise little lady for any bachelor to help. As a third party to his problem, Lady Dawn intruded herself—though why she should, he wasn't certain. He would have to see her, however much Maisie dissuaded; it was right that she should know about her husband. Yet was that the entire reason why he was so keen to see her? He assured himself very earnestly that it was, and dismissed her from his mind.

For the rest of the journey home he conscientiously narrowed his imaginings to thoughts of Terry.

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IV

It was with thoughts of her that he fitted his key in the latch. The Square was full of newly married couples, some of them little more than boys and girls—youngsters who had waited impatiently and had run together the moment war was ended. Others had been married just long enough to be proudly parading their first baby. Every morning white prams were wheeled out into the garden, there to be watched over by softly spoken nurses. Every night, as dusk came down, expectant mothers paced gently through the shadows, leaning on the arms of ex-officer husbands. It wasn't only in the trees that nests were being built. The Square's name might well

have been changed to Honeymoon Square.

And now, as Tabs pushed the door open, preparing to enter, he knew that all up and down the Square, behind the pall of darkness, other doors were being pushed back. Young couples were coming home from dinners and theaters. He could hear the murmur of their laughter, subdued and secret, hinting at intimacies of affection. The men had misplaced their latch-key perhaps; the girls were advising that they search another pocket. Or the lock refused to turn and the girls were whispering how it could be persuaded. Some of them were arriving in taxis; others, less lucky or more economic, were tripping by on foot along the pavement. He noticed how closely they clung together and he thought of Terry. It would be jolly to be young, to build a nest and, by and by, to see your own white pram wheeled out to take its place in the blowy greenness of the garden. He withdrew his key and entered, closing the door behind him.

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The house was very still. It was nearly midnight. The maids had gone to bed, leaving lights in the hall and on the landings. As he hung up his hat, the stillness was broken by the sudden ringing of the telephone. It rang in a peevish, scolding manner, as though this were not the first time and it had lost its temper with waiting. He climbed the flight of stairs to his library and, without waiting to switch on the lights, sat down at his table, taking up the receiver.

"Yes."

"Is this Lord Taborley?" a voice inquired.

"Lord Taborley speaking."

"This is Sir Tobias Beddow." There was a pause, followed by a little asthmatic cough. Then, "How are you, my dear fellow? I've been trying to reach you all evening. I was expecting to see you round here this morning at eleven.—No, I don't mean perhaps what you infer. Besides, it wouldn't have been any good if you had called; Terry wandered out, without leaving word where she was going. She didn't get back till nearly lunch-time. Most unaccountable conduct under the circumstances; but since your conduct was equally unaccountable, perhaps it was just as well. But that wasn't what I called you up about."

Tabs smiled in the darkness. Sir Tobias was as simple and crafty as a child; he couldn't keep anything back. Then his mind jumped to the obvious conclusion. Terry hadn't told her parents about her morning interview; her parents naturally supposed that it was his fault that he was not engaged to her as yet. Making an effort to be diplomatic, he said, "Perhaps I can explain my apparent negligence to you later. It must seem unpardonable. I've been busy every minute over things that absolutely couldn't be avoided."

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"Of course. Of course." The words were spoken soothingly, but without conviction. "We men understand. It's Lady Beddow who— Such events are women's great occasions. She's a stickler for form. As you say, you can explain later— But that wasn't what I called you up about."

Tabs stifled a yawn. He had suddenly discovered he was sleepy.

"What was that you said?" Sir Tobias enquired suspiciously.

"I didn't say anything," Tabs replied politely. "But I think I know what you called me up about. It was about Maisie—I mean Mrs. Lockwood."

"What about her?" The question was asked carelessly; he knew at once that he had missed his guess. It was strange, even though he had guessed wrongly, that Sir Tobias should not display more interest.

"What about her? Only that I've spent the last six hours with her. You asked me to see her as soon as possible, you remember. I had only just got home from being with her, when the telephone rang. She's not the woman we thought her."

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"Eh? What's that?"

He repeated what he had said. He was perfectly certain that Sir Tobias had heard the first time. "She's not the woman we thought her." And he added, "There's been some mistake. She hasn't and never did have any designs on Adair. After we'd talked things over, she agreed of her own accord never to see him again."

"She did!" There was a long pause, expressive of skepticism, dissatisfaction, or anything that he cared to conjecture. Then, "When we meet, you can tell me. But that wasn't what I called you up about."

Tabs waited for him to tell him why he had called him up. He waited so long that it seemed to be a competition to see who would compel the other to break the silence first. At last he gave in. "If that wasn't why, why did you?"

He almost heard Sir Tobias blink his eyes—those faded eyes that looked so blind and saw so much. "I called you up about this General Braithwaite. He's been here to see me on the biggest fool's errand, with the most unusual story which, if it's true, partly concerns yourself. It's too late to enter into details this evening. But I thought I'd let you know— Good night."

"One minute, Sir Tobias—"

Before he could get any further Sir Tobias had hung up. For a few seconds he sat there in the

darkness listening; then he hung up also and took himself off to bed.

What object had Braithwaite had in going to see Sir Tobias? Was it his first step in trying to play fair? Was his "fool's errand" a formal request for Terry's hand in marriage and his "unusual story" a manly recital of the facts? And had this great advance in frankness included the telling of Ann? As he tossed sleeplessly from side to side, other problems leapt up to confront him. Had he done wisely in promising Maisie that, in a measure, he would compensate her for the loss of Adair? What would Sir Tobias think of such an intimacy when he got to hear of it? What would even Adair think of it? There was only one person who would not doubt his integrity; that was Terry. And then Lady Dawn—had he actually any moral right to interfere in her affairs? "Do it harder; I can bear more than that." He could hear her saying it in that deep, emotional voice of hers. He could feel her honest stone-gray eyes, probing his soul for motives in the darkness.

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Day was breaking and birds were stirring in the mist of greenness that topped his windows, before his eye-lids closed and he slipped off into forgetfulness.

V

"To-morrow's another new day," he thought as he awoke. One could meet any and every indebtedness to life if he only had a sufficient fund of to-morrows in his bank.

He looked at his watch and leapt out of bed. Nine o'clock! He had slept late. He didn't hurry over his dressing. He could afford to be late for once. The mood of conquest was upon him. Maisie had said that. No, it wasn't *the mood* but *the air* of conquest that she'd said he had. Whichever it was, he would prove her a true prophetess. He might not gain all his desires, but he'd at least wear the air of one who was going to gain them. To-morrow was another new day, and to-morrow had arrived.

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On coming down to breakfast he scrutinized Ann's features closely to learn whether she had heard anything from Braithwaite. They told him nothing. Presently, however, while she served him, she began to open out.

"Did your Lordship speak to the gentleman at the War Office?"

Tab had been glancing through the morning paper. He looked up. "Yes, I did, Ann. I placed your letter in his hands, and saw him read it."

"Did he say anything or promise anything to your Lordship?"

Tab pursed his lips judicially, trying to avoid a lie. "You know what these War Office officials are. They never make promises to any one. But I believe this one's a good-hearted chap. When he realizes how much this thing means to you, I think he'll do his best."

"Then he didn't show your Lordship my letter?"

Tab had dipped into his newspaper again. He detested the well-meant deceit he was compelled to practice. This time, when he answered, he didn't raise his eyes. "No, he didn't."

But she didn't efface herself, as he had expected. She stood there, to one side of his chair. He felt that she was looking down at him. Just above the edge of his paper he could see her hands clasped together, pressing against each other in agitation. He abandoned his refuge and dropped the paper to the carpet.

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"Something more that you want to ask me? What is it?"

"Your Lordship said that when the gentleman realized how much all this meant to me, he'd do his best."

"That's what I said and I'm sure of it."

"What I wanted to ask was, does your Lordship think he has realized?"

It was the way she said it that roused his curiosity. Could she have guessed? Had she read the address on that letter which he had given her to post to General Braithwaite, and put two and two together?

He met her eyes—good, gray eyes, with something of Lady Dawn's grave honesty in their expression. "I think he has realized."

"Thank you, sir; and I'm sorry I had to trouble you."

She withdrew, leaving him with the disturbing sense that she had intended more than she had said. He gathered up the paper from the floor in the hope that a perusal of it might enable him to recover his lost equanimity. In so doing he caught sight of the last page, which contained the photographic items. Braithwaite's face stared up at him. Above it was printed the caption, "*Youngest Ranker Brigadier Demobbed Yesterday.*"

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If she had seen that, she knew. If she had seen it, what would be her next move—appeal or revenge? What had been the significance of her final question, "Does your Lordship think he has realized?" Did she know now; had she even known when she had written her letter that it would be received by Braithwaite himself?

If she didn't know and had not seen the paper, he was determined that she should not see it. Before leaving the room, he stuffed it into the empty grate and applied a match. He would play fair by Braithwaite. He was so eager to play fair that he did not turn to go upstairs till every vestige of print had been licked to ashes.

VI

His library occupied the whole of the second story; even at that it was not very large. It had two long French windows, opening onto a veranda which looked out over the Square. The veranda was constructed of wrought iron, painted green, and ran straight across the front of the house. Ann used it for giving her plants an airing; they usually formed a truant garden beyond the panes. There was a smaller window at the back, from which a view could be obtained of the Oratory.

The room was furnished in English red lacquer, which had been transferred from the collection at Taborley House, when Taborley House had been lent to the Americans for a military hospital. The walls were hung with landscapes by Zuccarelli and with Chinese portrait-groups of the Eighteenth Century.

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He had scarcely entered before the telephone renewed its irritating clamor, like a fretful child which yelled whenever it heard his footstep. He responded to its fretfulness in very much the same mood, seizing hold of the receiver as though he would shake it into silence.

"Yes. Hullo! Hullo! Yes, this is Lord Taborley. What's that? You didn't catch what I— It's Lord Taborley speaking, I said."

"Well, I must say you don't sound very nice." It was a woman's amused voice. "Even at this distance, you make me almost afraid. I do hope you haven't been like that all night."

Tabs made his tones more smiling. "I'm sorry if I don't sound sufficiently pleasant. But who are you?"

"Well, who do you think?" There was a snatch of laughter. "I'm Maisie; I mean Mrs. Lockwood. You needn't tell me that you're not frowning, because I can feel it. What's the matter?"

He pulled a wry face at himself in the opposite mirror and shrugged his shoulders. Down the 'phone he said with excessive amiability, "Nothing. I'm top-hole. How are you feeling?"

Her answer came back like a flash, "Vulgar and not very safe." It was followed by a gurgle of merriment.

"I'm not sure that I understand your symptoms."

The gurgle was repeated. "You wouldn't. Lord Taborley never feels vulgar and he's always safe. But this is one of my vulgar days, when I'm not to be trusted. I always have one when Di has been to visit me; it's the relapse after contact with too high standards of respectability. I'm liable to do anything. I married Gervis and Lockwood after being with her. I shall break out to-day if you don't come at once and stop me. Unless—unless you don't want to stop me and would prefer the experiment of being vulgar together."

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"The prospect sounds alluring." He was trying to let her down lightly. "But I'm afraid I have too many engagements on hand."

"Oh!" It was the *oh* of disappointment. When she spoke again her gay irresponsibility had vanished and a coaxing quality had come into her voice. "I know you've only just got home from being with me—I mean comparatively speaking. I don't want to make myself a burden to you, but — It's such a jolly day. Have you been up long enough to look out of the window? I thought we could go off somewhere—to the Zoo, perhaps, and drink lemonade all among the monkeys and the nuts. I woke up planning it. We'd limit our spending money to five shillings like kiddies, and do all our riding on busses. Doesn't that sound jolly?"

"Immensely," he agreed; "but I'm afraid no amount of jolliness could tempt—"

She broke in on him. "It's the kind of thing I used to do with Adair."

The meaning of this last remark was plain; she was reminding him that if the pair of shoes vacated by Adair were to remain vacated, he must pay the promised price on occasions by wearing them himself. He determined to get behind her diplomatic hints with frankness.

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"I don't want you to think, Mrs. Lockwood, that because I have to refuse your first request I'm going back on our contract. There'll be plenty of other opportunities."

He caught her sigh of relief across the line. When she spoke again it was with a new brightness and reasonableness. "I'm glad you said that. So you really are going to help me? I was a wee bit afraid that you'd gone back on your bargain by the way you ran away."

It was his first experience of the advantage a woman gains when she attacks a man from the other end of a telephone. He had trouble in making his voice sound patient. He replied with conscious hypocrisy, "I'm sorry I created the impression of running away."

"You did." Her answer came back promptly. "You created the same impression on us both. I had

to do a lot of explaining to Di."

"And I was trying to save you embarrassment," he excused himself.

"Eh! What's that?"

To his immense surprise a third voice—a man's—jumped in on the conversation. "Are you there? Is this Lord Taborley?"

Tabs was just getting ready to confess that he was there and that he was Lord Taborley, when Maisie took matters out of his hands by informing the intruder that the line was occupied and that he was interrupting a conversation.

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"I'm sorry," the intruder apologized, "but my time's valuable. I've been kept waiting for the best part of quarter of an hour. Are you the telephone-girl that I'm talking to?"

"Indeed I'm not," said Maisie with considerable haughtiness. "Please get off the line." And then to Tabs, "Are you still there, Lord Taborley? This is Mrs. Lockwood. Can't you postpone some of those engagements so that we can meet to-day?"

At that moment the girl at the switch-board took a hand. There was a confused gabbling and buzzing of voices, out of which the suave tones of the intruder emerged triumphant, saying, "This is Sir Tobias Beddow. Can I speak with Lord Taborley?"

Perhaps Maisie had heard. At all events, the moment Sir Tobias declared himself the line cleared.

But it wasn't what Maisie had overheard that disturbed Tabs; it was the uncertainty as to how much of her conversation had been listened to by Sir Tobias. After all, prospective fathers-in-law are only human and as likely as any other class to jump to damaging conclusions. Tabs hung up the receiver, making it necessary for him to be summoned afresh before he acknowledged his presence at the 'phone. Then, "Good morning, Sir Tobias."

"Good morning, my dear fellow." Sir Tobias was as courtly and friendly as ever. "I called you up to know whether you could run round to see me between now and the forenoon. Yes, the matter I mentioned to you last night. About eleven, you say? Very well, then, I shall expect you."

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VII

No sooner had the butler with the velvet-plush manners admitted him than he found himself face to face with Terry. She must have known that he was expected and have been lying in wait for him. Before he could say a word, she pressed a finger to her lips, signaling caution. To the butler she said in a low tone, "It's all right, James; you don't need to wait. I'll announce Lord Taborley." The discreet James showed a fitting appreciation of romance by folding his plump hands across the pit of his stomach, making the ghost of a bow and tiptoeing noiselessly into the nether regions with the stealth of a conspirator.

Terry's face was a picture of innocence. After Maisie she struck him as very young—much too young to love or to know the meaning of love. The sight of her freshness was forbidding. It made him seem jaded. It filled him with a reverence that was not far short of worship. He felt it impossible to think of her as performing the ordinary acts of a mortal world. He had the feeling that she moved on higher levels—that she was a creature too shy and perfect to be made the instrument of passion. She should be guarded in her purity like a vestal virgin, so that her straight young body might be forever valiant and her eyes might never learn the cowardice of tears.

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In the brave March sunlight which shafted down on her, her head looked more like a Botticelli angel's than ever. The raw gold of her bobbed hair shone solid as metal, making a sharp edge where it ended against the ivory pallor of her throat. She was dressed in a white tailor-made serge. Her violet eyes danced with eager secrets.

"What are you doing to-day?" she whispered.

"Nothing!" he whispered, "if you want me."

"Then invite me out to lunch. I've such heaps to tell you. Don't let Daddy take you to his club—I know he's going to ask you. And, oh, before I forget, I've told them nothing about yesterday, so don't give me away by accident." Then in a sly aside, just as she was turning the door-knob to admit him to her father's library, "You've been getting on famously with Maisie, haven't you?"

Before he could reply, they were across the threshold. There was a sound as of a rheumatically hen stirring in its nest. The neck of Sir Tobias craned painfully round the corner of a high-backed chair.

"Here's Lord Taborley to see you, Daddy. Don't keep him forever. He's just invited me to go out with him to lunch."

Having shot her bolt, with the masterly strategy of her sex, she vanished, pulling the door behind her.

What would Shakespeare have said under the circumstances, and what would a suitor have said to Shakespeare when he knew that he was suspected of having gone back on his request for the

daughter's hand in marriage? Tabs almost felt that he was in the actual presence of the bard of Stratford, Sir Tobias looked so ineffectually pompous and overweighted with gravity. Both Sir Tobias and Shakespeare, in the opinion of Tabs, were vastly overrated persons; but the only thing Shakespearian about Sir Tobias this morning was the magnificent calmness of his forehead; his podgy body, supported by its stiff little pen-wiper legs was more reminiscent of Punch, as portrayed on the cover of the famous weekly which bears his name.

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"Immensely considerate of you to come," puffed Sir Tobias, levering himself out of his chair in order that he might shake hands.

"Not kind at all," Tabs contradicted cheerfully. "I kill two birds with one stone; I have my conversation with you and in half an hour I carry off Terry."

That'll make him hurry up with whatever he has to say, he thought; it sets a time limit.

The old gentleman seemed put out to find himself deprived of his prerogative to be elaborate and prosy. He made a gesture, indicating that Tabs should copy his example and choose a chair. But Tabs ignored it. He had learnt that a man on his feet has the advantage, especially if he stands six foot two in his socks.

"You'll be wanting my news," he suggested. "I told you pretty well everything across the telephone. I think it's a case of everybody having got the wind up—Phyllis particularly. Mrs. Lockwood's a very restful woman. I should call her a man's woman. She's bright and entertaining and pretty, and she owns a charming little house. She had no responsibilities, so she's free to entertain from morning till night. Adair has without doubt visited her more often than was wise. It was remarkably foolish of him to have made a woman-friend whom he didn't share with Phyllis. But I suppose he didn't dare to introduce them after he'd seen that Phyllis was jealous. However that may be, this dread that they may run away together is moonshine. Mrs. Lockwood sets too high a value on herself. Besides, there's only one man whom she loves or ever has loved for that matter. He happens to be dead!"

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"One moment, my dear fellow," Sir Tobias interrupted, "I always understood that the lady had had three husbands. Was this man one of them or did she have no affection for any of the men she married?"

Tabs felt himself cornered—and he had been getting on so well. He realized that if once he allowed Sir Tobias to start questioning him he would get tangled up. "She's complex," he explained; "she's complex in her simplicity. She's one of the most simply complicated and complicatedly simple women that I ever met. To understand her you have to talk with her. I talked with her for six hours. The upshot was that she promised to shut her door against Adair."

The innocent old eyes blinked. "I'm not modern, like you, Lord Taborley. I have my suspicions of these simply complicated and complicatedly simple women. Set me down as old-fashioned. Having been only once married, I can't enter into the refinements of feeling of such matrimonially inclined boa-constrictors as Mrs. Lockwood. I sha'n't give myself the chance of meeting her. I'm an old man; it would be too upsetting. If I talked with her, I shouldn't understand. So I must take your word for it that, however much appearances may have been against her, her motives were beyond question." He slipped forward in his chair with a disconcerting suddenness; for a moment his filmy eyes became penetrating. "She seems to have made a deep impression on you, my dear fellow. If your optimism proves correct and through your efforts Adair is free from her clutches, we all owe you a debt of gratitude. But—and I'm sure you won't take amiss what I'm saying—I would advise you, now that you've effected Adair's rescue, not to see too much of her yourself. In fact, if I were you, I wouldn't see her any more if I could help."

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It was clear that the benignant, sly old gentleman had overheard a substantial part of Maisie's telephone conversation. It was equally clear that his interference was wisely and kindly intended. He had a perfect right to be scrupulous about the conduct of a man whom he regarded as his future son-in-law; but he had no right to take advantage of the worst managed telephone-system in the world to eavesdrop on a private conversation. At the same time Tabs could hardly accuse him of eavesdropping, so he fell back on his dignity for defense.

"I've always been very well able to take care of myself," he said quietly. "If I hadn't been, I shouldn't have undertaken your mission and have gone to interview the kind of woman you described. I found, however, that she didn't live up to your description of her; in fairness to her I have to let you know that. I don't think you appreciate, Sir Tobias, what a delicate situation you created for both of us. She's a woman of breeding; which goes without saying since she's Lady Dawn's sister—a fact which you withheld from me. You sent me to her house as a kind of moral policeman with a warrant for her arrest. She was well aware of that and she was also aware that the charge you laid against her was almost libelously mistaken. All I can say is that she has behaved very handsomely. Since you and Phyllis have misunderstood her friendship for Adair, she's willing to break off relations. The most courteous and only decent thing that we can do is to cease discussing her. It's an incident which does none of us much credit."

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As he had warmed to her defense, Tabs had been very conscious that he was being more than generous—perhaps even more generous than truthful. It hadn't been his intention at the start to depict her as a wronged and spotless angel; but the skepticism of the attentive old image, bleached with disillusion and faded with years, had goaded him to excess.

Sir Tobias had listened, scratching his pointed beard thoughtfully, with entire amiability. He was utterly unimpressed and visibly unashamed. "You're a man of the world, my dear Taborley, and you have the advantage of having seen her. From what you say I gather that she's not bad looking. To the not bad looking much is forgiven. Nevertheless, I stand by my opinion that she's not a safe woman to see too often. However, you're master of your own actions and that's neither here nor there."

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He commenced to fumble through his pockets. When he had found his cigarette-case, he proffered it to Tabs, who refused it.

"I wish you'd sit down, my dear fellow."

Tabs glanced at his watch. There was only a quarter of an hour left of the time he had allotted. As a concession to Sir Tobias he seated himself. "It was about General Braithwaite that you called me up last night?"

"Yes. But there's no hurry. We can discuss that over lunch."

Tabs considered that the time had come to be firm. "I'm sorry, Sir Tobias. Terry's lunching with me. We start in something less than fifteen minutes."

Sir Tobias screwed himself round and surveyed his future son-in-law with a mild amazement. For forty years he had been accustomed to having his own way unchallenged. "Terry can wait." He spoke as though the matter was now settled. "What I have to tell you is important."

"And so is what I have to tell Terry." Tabs emphasized his statement by glancing again at his watch.

For a few seconds Sir Tobias was at a loss. To hear himself opposed was a novel experience. Then he thought he had discovered a consoling reason for this obstinacy and smiled loftily, as Shakespeare retired to Stratford might have smiled at hearing himself reminded by Ann Hathaway that he was not so great a man as London had imagined.

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"Very well, my dear fellow," he conceded; "young blood will have its way. I withdraw for this once, since your plans are already made."

His forgiveness was brushed aside. Time was pressing. Tabs forced him to the point without further ceremony or waste of words. "When you phoned yesterday evening it was nearly midnight, so the matter must have seemed urgent. You said that General Braithwaite had been to see you on a fool's errand, with a story that partly concerned myself. May I ask how it concerned me?"

"You're brusque, very brusque," Sir Tobias complained. "We could have talked this over much better at my club."

When Tabs showed no signs of relenting, he revealed his real feelings testily. "You know this fellow Braithwaite. You must have recognized him the moment you clapped eyes on him. Why didn't you tell me?"

Tabs looked up quickly, taken aback and slightly resentful at the peremptory tones in which he was addressed. "It wasn't my business. Apart from that, I was aware of nothing to his discredit." Once again as in the case of Maisie, he was allowing himself to be goaded out of justice into excessive generosity.

"Nothing to his discredit! That depends on your point of view." Sir Tobias sniffed audibly. He could be as rude as a spoilt child. "That depends on how deeply interested you're in—in my daughter."

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"I think I gave you proof of my interest, Sir Tobias, the other evening when I asked——"

"Pshaw! You know very well what I'm driving at, Taborley."

"Nevertheless, I should like to hear you put it into words."

Sir Tobias gave one of his remarkable exhibitions of youthfulness. Flinging aside his decrepitude, as though it had been no more than an affectation, he shot bolt upright, gripping the arms of his chair. "Last night, within a handful of hours of my forbidding him the house, he had the impertinence to call here to inform me that he was in love with Terry. Not content with that, he added insult to his impertinence by telling me that he had been your valet. How is it, Taborley, that on that evening when you dined here as his fellow-guest, you never once hinted by look or word that he wasn't the part he was playing? I can't consider that very honorable of you. As an old friend, quite apart from any new relationship, I had the right to expect that my interests were nearer to your heart. It upsets me to find I was mistaken. Have you so little pride in the girl you propose to marry that it doesn't offend you to see her gadding about with ex-servants? You saw them get up and leave the table that night. You heard the front-door bang and knew that they'd gone out together—my daughter with the fellow who used to put the studs into your shirts! And there you sat with me, sipping your coffee and chatting as though it were all perfectly right and normal. Upon my soul, Taborley, you're beyond my comprehending. If I, her father, can feel this indignation, what ought not you to feel? You're supposed to be her lover and you're not jealous. So far as I can see, you're not even disturbed."

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Tabs' face had gone suddenly white. He acknowledged to himself that, had he been Terry's

father, he would have said no less. When he spoke it was with quiet intensity.

"I am annoyed, Sir Tobias—a good deal more annoyed than I care to own to myself; but I try not to let my annoyance obscure my sense of justice. It isn't fair to consider Braithwaite in the light of a servant. He isn't a servant; he's won his spurs. He arrived at the position he occupies to-day through original and unaided merit. That the man who was my servant, happens to be my rival, is bitterly galling. But I'm not going to let it blind me to the fact that he has qualities of greatness. He proved those qualities, even more than on the battlefield, when he came to you and pluckily told you the truth about himself. God knows what he thought to gain by it; but I'm hats off to him."

Sir Tobias threw out his hands in a disowning gesture. "I don't want to quarrel with you—that's the last thing I desire. But I must confess that I fail to sympathize with your attitude of mind. Magnanimity is all very well, but it's easy to be magnanimous where your affections aren't too deeply concerned. A man in love has no right to be magnanimous—it isn't a healthy sign. Lady Beddow used those very words to me this morning. She feels as I do, that in your attitude to Terry you lack something. You've let two days elapse since you asked my permission to approach her— You're the same with this Maisie woman—inhumanly, unsatisfactorily magnanimous. You don't identify yourself with our antipathies—you almost side with the people who affront us. It's estranging and distressing. I like a man to be more emphatic in his loyalties and aversions. I like him to show more fire. In days that I can almost remember, Braithwaite's intrusion would have been an occasion for a duel. Terry's mother feels the same about you; it makes her unhappy. 'He lacks ardor'—that was how she expressed it. 'Perhaps, after all, he's too old for Terry,' she said. Personally I don't go as far as that."

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Now that he had made an end, Sir Tobias attempted to beam on Tabs with his accustomed suavity. He was skillful in saying offensive things with an air of consideration. When he had said, "Personally I don't go as far as that," he had leant out and patted Tabs' hand with a senile display of affection.

Too old for Terry! Tabs sat pondering the words. They voiced his own doubt—the doubt that had haunted him from the moment of his return. The antiquated version of Shakespeare sat watching him, plucking at his pointed beard and blinking his faded eyes shrewdly.

Suddenly with a cavalier smile of conquest, which was strangely unwarranted, Tabs swung himself to his feet. "Well, Sir Tobias, we've talked for more than our half hour. After all, it doesn't matter a continental what you, or I, or Lady Beddow feels. It's Terry's feelings that count. I shall know what she feels before the afternoon is ended."

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He was holding out his hand to the surprised old gentleman, when the door opened just sufficiently to admit Terry's head.

"Come on, your Lordship!" she laughed mockingly, "you've kept me waiting long enough."

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CHAPTER THE SIXTH

TRAMPLED ROSES

I

As Tabs emerged from his interview with Sir Tobias, he found Terry standing in the hall, doing up the last button of her gloves. James, of the velvet-plush manners, lost no time in proffering him his hat and cane, and in flinging the front-door wide. He did it with the air of a sentimentalist who was aiding and abetting an elopement. Tabs had the feeling as he limped along the pavement with Terry tripping at his side, that the eyes of the house which they had left followed them—followed them jealously, romantically, expectantly. There was only one way in which they could give satisfaction and that was by returning to it engaged.

"He lacks ardor. Perhaps, after all, he's too old!" Lady Beddow's criticism drummed in his mind. Not very pleasant hearing!

Silence was maintained till they had rounded a corner and the tall buff house was left behind. Then Terry raised a shy, laughing face. "Downcast, Tabs? You look as though you were bearing the sins of all the world."

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"Not of all the world!" he corrected gravely. "Only of three people."

"Then I'm one of them. Who are the other two?"

"You know already—Mrs. Lockwood and Braithwaite. I saved all your necks, but I broke my own."

She brushed against him affectionately. "Tabs, you're a trump."

Her praise displeased him. "I didn't tell you for that."

"Then why?"

"Because I thought you ought to know." He slackened his pace. "I thought you ought to know that your father isn't as keen on me as he was, Terry."

"That's all right," she said cheerily; "I am. But what have you been doing to Daddy?"

"Describing Mrs. Lockwood as a lady above reproach and accusing him of uncharity towards Braithwaite."

She tossed her head and laughed outright. "You *have* become converted!"

"Converted!" He pondered her assertion. "No. I'll acknowledge that I was inclined to be too harsh at first. I may have become more pitiful; but I've not become converted, if by that you mean that I condone what these two people have done. I still think that Mrs. Lockwood's conduct with Adair was inexcusable and that Braithwaite's holding back the truth from you was dishonorable. In talking with your father I gave Braithwaite all the credit for speaking out to him like a man, and I let him suppose that Mrs. Lockwood had given up Adair unconditionally. As you know, Braithwaite didn't come up to scratch till I'd handed him your ultimatum; and Mrs. Lockwood—
But you don't know about her yet. I haven't told you."

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"I know," Terry smiled roguishly. "Maisie's a great abuser of the telephone. She called me up this morning to ask whether she might share you with me for a few weeks. When I asked her why, she said to help her to forget Adair. Of course I consented."

Tabs looked down at his companion to see whether her last remark had been sarcastic; to his discomfort he found that it hadn't. "I'm not sure that I like to be lent round like that," he objected. "I was sorry for her last night and promised to help her; but this phoning you up to ask your permission puts an entirely erroneous complexion on the affair."

"Not erroneous if I understand," she assured him, glancing up with tender frankness.

He smiled at the way she cozened him. Was she willing to lend him to another woman because she was so sure of him, or because she didn't care whether she lost him?

"Your father suspects me of being lukewarm about you," he said; "and I can't blame him. He knows nothing about our meeting yesterday. He doesn't know that you care for Braithwaite. All he knows is that I asked his permission to approach you and then let two days elapse. When I did come to his house again it was to defend the two people who have caused him most annoyance. My reason for defending them was that I might make things easier for you. But my position is false, Terry. Every day your parents are expecting that we'll become engaged; every day that we don't—"

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They had come to the Marble Arch. "Shall we hop into a taxi?" he enquired.

She shook her head. "Let's walk a little farther—down to Hyde Park Corner. It's easier to say things."

When he had helped her through the traffic and they were sauntering through the Park, she took up the thread of their conversation. "I told you yesterday that I was willing to become engaged to you. I'm willing to-day."

"*Willing!*" he emphasized. "But you don't *want*. The man you love is Braithwaite. What difference has this confession of his made?"

She shrugged her shoulders and looked away, so that he should not see the quivering of her mouth. "It's made everything impossible. I admire him more than ever. I admire him for having told the truth and for having climbed so far up by his gallantry. But— I'm no fool, Tabs. I know that I couldn't marry him without bringing ridicule upon all of us. Noble notions about human equality don't work in practice. He's what he is—fine of his kind. He's finer than you or I, Tabs, only he's not our sort. He couldn't ever become our sort. If I were as big as he is, I might not mind. But I'm little and mean; I care so much for caste. And yet, in spite of that, I want to marry him. I oughtn't to tell you, of all people. But I can't tell him and I can't tell any one—any one but you, Tabs. I want him so much that I'm ashamed sometimes. I wouldn't have my people know it, so you must stick by me. Do at least as much for me as you promised to do for Maisie—stay with me till I can forget him." And then she added ruefully, "It isn't much fun for you after all you'd expected."

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He couldn't afford to let her become emotional. Riders and smart equipages were passing. Several times already they had been recognized. The introduction of Maisie's name supplied him with a loophole. "Mrs. Lockwood rather adds to our complication. If I'm not engaged to you and I see something of her, your father will never understand. If I were your father, I wouldn't. To be perfectly frank, he thinks already that I'm lenient to Maisie only because she's good-looking—"

Terry didn't permit him to get further. "Daddy's probably right. Be honest, Tabs. Would you have stood up for her, if you'd found her fat and forty? Of course you wouldn't. Maisie's a dear, but she's dangerous. She can't help being dangerous; it's half her attraction. By the way, we've been walking entirely in the wrong direction."

They had come out by Hyde Park Corner. "How do you make that out?" he asked. "I thought we would lunch at the Ritz."

She began to apologize. "Before I met you this morning, I'd arranged for us to lunch with her—I

mean with Maisie. You don't mind, do you? I was speaking with her over the phone and she said we must come because she didn't feel safe."

"She said that to you, too! She said the same thing to me. But you and I, do we want her?"

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Terry nodded, making her eyes wide. "We'll all make each other more safe. That's what friends are for. I told her we'd be at her house by one."

"If you told her that——" He was trying to discover whether he was relieved or disappointed. With an eagerness which it was hard to account for, he was wondering whether Lady Dawn would be there. He pulled out his watch. "Twelve-forty-five. We can just do it in a taxi. If you told her that, we'd better stick to your plans."

He hailed a driver who was passing and helped her into the cab.

II

As he and Terry chugged their way to Mulberry Tree Court he eyed her, sitting beside him. Would he ever get her? If he did, would she prove to be one of his really big things? All men must have thought that their wives would be the really big things in their lives before they married them. How many of them thought that six months after they were married? There was Adair, for instance. But his wife was going to be the big thing—on that he was determined.

And yet, it wasn't very big of Terry to be using him as a stalking-horse for her love for Braithwaite; he felt morally certain that that was what she was doing. She hadn't acknowledged to having seen him, but Tabs felt instinctively that she had seen him. He also felt that within the next twenty-four hours she would be seeing him again. It was impossible for him to accuse her of clandestine meetings of which he had no proof; at the same time he was distressed by the restraint that was put upon himself. As things were, anything might happen. When it did happen, it would happen suddenly and he would be in a measure to blame.

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And here again, in this luncheon with Maisie, he was being made a party to her policy of secrecy. There could be no doubt that Sir Tobias was in ignorance of her continual correspondence with Maisie.

He looked at her. How near she seemed to him and yet in reality what miles away! He could listen to her voice. He could touch her. But he could not foresee a single one of her future actions. She was remote and strange and dear. She had offered to become engaged to him, but she was no part of him. She filled him with discomfort and unrest. For the first time he dared to frame his charge against her. It was in almost the same words as the charge which she herself had brought against Braithwaite. He could love her so that it seemed that if he did not win her, he would never be able to love any other woman; but he could not trust her. He began to question whether she had ever been the woman he had tried to think her. Perhaps she was only a dummy and his imagination had clothed her with affection. He had attributed to her adorable qualities——

When all was said, how little he really knew about her! His need of her fought with his sense of discretion. It was not dignified that a man of his position and years should allow himself to become a shuttlecock in the hands of her capricious inexperience. Would he ever be able to bridge that gulf of years! Lady Beddow's unhappy criticism haunted him. "He lacks ardor." Perhaps she was right; experience should marry experience and inexperience inexperience.

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As they sped down the Brompton Road, they passed the end of Honeymoon Square. In the enclosed garden among spring flowers children were still playing. Scattered here and there, under the thin shade of blossoming trees, he caught glimpses of white prams with their attendant nurses. The little houses—his own among them—stood all a-row, shoulder to shoulder, looking intensely smiling and habitable. His imagination reconjured all the midnights they had witnessed—the home-comings under cover of darkness, the secret endearments of lovers, the muffled laughter. Then he remembered his own dream, which he had planned to share with her. It was intolerable that it should escape conversion into reality.

It seemed little short of marvelous that she should still sit beside him. She should have vanished with the Square. Had he given her a name, he would have called her his lady in heliotrope, for she was dressed in a heliotrope gown, trimmed round the hem and throat with gray opossum and topped with a little close-fitting turban of color and fur to match. She looked so dainty and subtly haughty, so austere in her virginal beauty, that it seemed to him he must have wronged her with his silent conjectures.

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"You're more than ordinarily pretty to-day," he said.

"Am I? What you mean, I suppose, is that you like my gown. It's a new one. I'm wearing it for the first time, especially for you."

She turned her laughing face towards him, violet eyes, flushed cheeks, golden hair, white teeth—everything aflash with instant gratitude. The discovery of how easily he could command her happiness touched him.

"Can I make you as merry as all that just by telling you you're beautiful?"

She compressed her lips and nodded. "It's not being told. That doesn't matter. It's being told by

you."

He felt for the moment that he had recovered her—that he had bridged the gulf of the years that divided. Before anything further could be said, they were halting in Mulberry Tree Court.

III

On entering the house with the marigold-tinted curtains he had glanced round casually for any signs of Lady Dawn. After Porter had shown him into the drawing-room Terry had left him to go in search of Maisie. He walked over to the tall French-windows and found himself once more gazing out on the garden-rockery with its oval lake, its silent fountain and its toy-boat that never sailed anywhere. He made an effort to continue gazing out, for his impulse was to turn and look at the portrait over the fireplace. He tantalized himself by trying to ignore it. But it was strange the fascination that it held for him. He had the feeling that behind his back the face had changed from the profile position in which it had been painted, so that the steady stone-gray eyes were challenging his attention. At last he resisted no longer; walking over to the fireplace, he stood gazing up at it.

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For a moment he tried to pretend to himself that his interest was purely an art-interest. It was Sargent's brush-work that he was admiring. Then he smiled, as much to the portrait as to himself. "Princess Czarina Bolsheviki," he murmured, "were you really looking at me when my back was turned? Did you flash your eyes away directly I obeyed your desire? It's the trick of every woman; but you're not like every woman, Princess Czarina Bolsheviki."

It seemed to him almost as though the woman on the canvas was about to relax her pose and quiver into life. The longer he looked, the less aloof she became and the more her serenity trembled. He felt that he knew so much about her—so very much more than he had ever been told. There were experiences of pride and terror which were common to them both—the pride and terror of appalling heart-hunger. He knew for certain, as though those painted lips had confessed it, that he was the one man in the world who had the power to make her cry. And yet he dissociated in his mind the woman of the portrait from the woman who had slipped past him out of the night with the taunting, sideways smile of feminine triumph. The living woman could wound and disappoint; the woman of the portrait was his friend entirely.

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He was startled out of the mood into which he had fallen by the sound of footsteps crossing the hall. He was not going to be discovered in that position by Maisie for a second time. He had barely recovered his place by the French window, when she and Terry entered laughing. It would have been easy to have mistaken them for sisters, with their golden heads and clear complexions. Directly he caught sight of them he guessed by the mischief in their eyes that their laughter had been at his expense. It was Terry who spoke. "Oh, Tabs, how could you? It was like a little frightened boy."

He glanced from one to the other of them for further enlightenment. "Do what? If you'll let me know, I'll tell you."

"Run away, like you did last night," Maisie explained. "I've just been describing it to Terry. There was I sitting on the couch when Di entered. The first thing she asked me was, 'Who's your new butler?' I wouldn't tell her. 'He'll be here in a minute,' I said; 'I'll introduce him to you.' We waited for about a minute and, when you didn't come, I went out into the hall. 'He's gone, Madam,' Porter told me in her most Mayfair manner. 'Gone!' I exclaimed. 'He can't have gone without saying good-by.' But I was afraid you had, so I went on to the steps and called after you. I don't know whether you heard me. When I came back into the drawing-room, Di was smiling. 'I've read about lordly butlers,' she said, 'but it's the first time I ever met one.' So there you are! You can imagine what a trouble I had to clear myself. I only downed her suspicions when I assured her that you were on the point of becoming engaged to Terry."

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Instantly Terry's eyes sought his; the laughter died out of them. He shared her annoyance that Lady Dawn should have received this piece of information—Lady Dawn of all persons. He wasn't engaged to Terry. He was a long way from being engaged to her—perhaps further at this moment than since his return.

The silence that followed made Maisie aware that she had been guilty of a mistake. He suspected that she had intended to be guilty of it from the start. Nevertheless, she played the part of innocence, making her cornflower eyes eloquent with apology. "Oh, I'm afraid I've put my foot in it. But you are almost engaged, aren't you?"

Tabs laughed good-humoredly. "It's all right, Mrs. Lockwood. You didn't mean to, but you've paid me back in more than my own coin."

Porter relieved the tension at that moment by announcing that lunch was served.

When they had taken their seats in the front-room, overlooking the make-believe village-green, Terry surprised them by saying carelessly, "Oh, Maisie, you remember General Braithwaite whom we nursed in our hospital?"

Maisie looked up sharply, trying to warn her that Porter was still present. "Of course I remember him," she said. "Since then we've both met him a hundred times. I think Lord Taborley would like some bread, Porter."

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But Terry wasn't to be deterred. She seemed to be taking a perverse delight in introducing the one subject on which it would have been most fitting for her to have remained silent. "Since Tabs came back we've found out all about the General. You'll never guess who he really is or was. It's difficult to say whether he is or was, now that he's demobilized."

Tabs recognized the blaze of recklessness in her eyes, like the glare of lighted windows after nightfall from which the curtains have been suddenly thrown back. He had seen that look in her eyes at the hunt when, in disobedience to shouted warnings, she had looked back across her shoulder challengingly before taking an audacious jump. There was in her expression the fear of the thing she was about to do and the panic of determination to get it done. He attempted to turn her aside from the danger by slipping in quietly, "I don't think I'd discuss the General at this moment."

"At this moment!" she flashed back with a scared smile. The sound of her own voice seemed to clap spurs to her excitement. "Why not at this moment, dear Tabs? Everything comes out sooner or later. If there's going to be any spreading of gossip, one takes the sting out of it by being the first to spread it. Besides, you oughtn't to mind. You ought to feel most frightfully bucked."

"Nevertheless, I don't think I'd say it."

Then he held his breath for, paying no heed to him, she had turned to Maisie. "You mustn't laugh, but it's too good to keep to oneself. Before he was a General, what do you think he did for a living? He used to clean Lord Taborley's boots. You don't believe it, but it's a fact. Daddy's terribly grim with me over it. Of course it was *infra dig* to go footing all over town with your best friend's valet. But how was I to know that he'd been that? Daddy says I ought to have sensed it, if I'd had any sort of a social instinct. But here's the funniest thing of all, the way we made the discovery. I'd invited him to dine at our house on the very night that Tabs was Daddy's guest. I'll never forget your faces, Tabs, when Daddy introduced the two of you." She commenced to pantomime the scene with forced gayety; then she pretended to become aware for the first time that they weren't joining in her laughter.

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"What's wrong? You look as solemn as a funeral. Don't you find it amusing?"

Porter was leaving the room. Maisie waited till the door had closed. Then, "You didn't intend it to be amusing. Why on earth did you say all this before her?"

Under the rebuke Terry's face flushed defiance. She was near to tears, but she contrived to go on smiling. "When I want all the world to know anything that's private, I mention it before servants. It always works."

"But—" Maisie was at a loss to find a motive for such indiscretion. She glanced helplessly at Tabs. "But," she objected, "surely you don't want all the world to know about this, Terry? You and the General have been such good pals, and— I have to say it, even though Lord Taborley is present: there were a great number of your friends who were rather afraid—"

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"Then they won't have to be afraid any longer," Terry cut in with icy sweetness. "When it's reported to the General that I've told this story, he won't have to be rather afraid either. It'll set all his doubts at rest."

Tabs had sat puzzled and horrified while she had been talking. Everything that he could remember about her was gentle; it wasn't like her to be cruel. Now at last he realized that it was for his sake that she was being cruel—far more cruel to herself than to any one else. She had so little faith in her strength to break with Braithwaite that she was building up a protective wall of contempt by the spread of this damaging story. If Braithwaite heard it, she might well hope to rouse his hatred and save herself further effort.

From across the table her eyes sought his in appeal; his answered hers with intuitive comprehension. But his mind was stunned with apprehension at the discovery that her passion for this man meant so much that his hate would be a lighter burden than his love.

Maisie turned to Tabs with veiled disdain. "I suppose it was you who told her this, Lord Taborley?"

He paid her scant attention and continued looking at Terry. "On the contrary." He spoke with unruffled urbanity. "It was General Braithwaite—Steely Jack as he was nicknamed in the Army. He never lost an inch of trench, so they say. Like your own first husband, Mrs. Lockwood, he's most to be feared when every one else would have given up hoping. Like myself, though he doesn't know it, he's a round-the-corner person. Curious, Terry, that you should have attracted two round-the-corner admirers! It makes one almost believe that you're a round-the-corner person yourself."

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He had said it without consciousness of magnanimity. There was nothing magnanimous about stating the truth according to his code of honor. He was seeing the bleak look that would come into Braithwaite's face should he hear of this happening. He was wondering whether Braithwaite possessed the insight into feminine strategy not to take offense, but to interpret it as surrender.

Terry was speaking again. "My dear Maisie, if ever you get to know Lord Taborley, you'll learn to have a better opinion of him. He plays with all his cards on the table. I think most men play like that. It's we women who cheat and carry spare aces and revoke when the game's going against us." Then came her amazing burst of frankness, "Like you did when, to suit your own purpose,

you pretended that we were on the point of becoming engaged. Like I did when I told that story just now about Steely Jack. And again like you've done all along in your dealings with Adair. Why, even now, when you're ready to give him up, you can't play the cards that are on the table; you have to try to borrow Lord Taborley from me. Don't get angry. I'm not accusing you especially. We women are all the same; there's not one of us who can stick to the rules of the game." Her glance shifted to Tabs. "You used to think that I was the exception. You see, I'm not. The wonder is that men can even pretend to respect us."

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Long after she had finished and the conversation had taken a new turn, she went on gazing at him, raising and lowering her eyes as she ate her lunch, begging him to understand.

"You're wrong, Terry." In her capacity as hostess, Maisie was making an attempt to get away from personalities. She was too convicted by what had been said to consider it wise to defend herself. "You're wrong. Men don't want to respect us. They love us for having faults that they wouldn't tolerate in themselves. They encourage us to cultivate them. It flatters their integrity to discover our dishonesties. They like to believe that we're cowards. They don't expect us to tell the truth. They almost resent our having a sense of honor. The woman who cheats at every turn and then cries in their arms when she's found out, is the kind of woman who always has a man to take care of her. Look at my sister, Lady Dawn. She's never been known to cry. She's missed everything in life through being almost repellently honorable."

In the discussion that followed Tabs took no part, though he was often appealed to for an opinion. As he listened to their modulated flow of voices, their refined and gentle intonations, their evasive, slyly uttered words, he began to have an understanding of what was taking place. It was something primitive—the oldest of all battles. Neither of them wanted him, but each was prompted to covet the pretense of his possession. Their hunting instincts were aroused. He had taken on a sudden value in their eyes because each had discovered that the other was in pursuit of him.

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His thoughts went back to Lady Dawn—to her pale aloofness. She wasn't like this—she was different from all other women. It was ridiculous that he should be so sure that she was different when his only proof was a portrait, quite certainly idealized. He began to argue with himself again as to whether he ought to seek her out and endanger her serenity by telling her about Lord Dawn. It would be useless to confide such intentions to Maisie. He would obtain no help from her. She could conceive of no sympathy between a man and woman into which sex did not enter. The thought of sex in connection with Lady Dawn seemed an impertinence.

The discussion went on. Luncheon was at an end. Coffee had been served. Cigarettes were being lighted. Again and again he was referred to. Did he think this and didn't he agree to that? Wasn't this true of the way in which men regarded women? Their differences of opinion seemed so trivial. Their views so immature and amateurish. He watched them with curious, brooding attention. They were so nobly tender in their outward forms. He appreciated the grace of their gestures, the fine-boned smallness of their bodies, the delicacy of their molding, the tendril thinness of their fingers, the sagacity of their tiny aristocratic heads, the seduction of their soft red mouths, the poetry of the fringe of golden lashes in which the pathos of their eyes hung enmeshed—their intrusive, penetrating frailty, which supplicated, denounced and astounded. They were so weak and yet so strong. A man could crush them with one arm. But they could slay a man's soul with their sweetness. They were equipped in every detail by their pale perfection to quicken and to disappoint. To disappoint! That was what they had been trying to persuade him for the past half-hour—that they were Nature's traps, cunningly contrived and baited. *The Philistines be upon thee, Samson!* Their self-traductions were undermining his faith in all sacredness.

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In the silence of his brain he fought—fought against disillusion, claiming exemption for at least one woman from these sweeping denunciations—the woman in the portrait.

A man had been passing and repassing the windows, cut into triangles by the looped back, marigold-tinted curtains. At first he had mistaken him for a different man each time he had passed. Then the lazy certainty had grown up within him that it was always the same man. A man who wanted something—wanted something that was in that house. It wasn't possible to make out his features. He wore a morning-coat and was top-hatted. The swing of his carriage was indefinitely familiar.

And now he had vanished—lost courage, lost patience, given up his quest, perhaps. Through the triangular gaps in the panes the village-green showed untraversed, sunlit, tranquil, garnished.

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Without knocking Porter entered, looking worried.

Maisie broke off from her conversation long enough to say, "A little later, Porter. We're not finished."

She was resuming, when Porter again interrupted. "It isn't that, Madam. It isn't—"

"Then what is it?"

With an elaborate air of caution Porter closed the door and set her back against it. "I've told him that it's no good. That you won't see him, Madam."

"Of course not. That's quite right." Maisie bestowed her approval with rapid tolerance. "I can't see any one at present." Then, as an after-thought, "By the way, who is it?"

It was then that Porter let fall her bomb. "It's no good my telling him. He won't go away." Her firmness crumbled. She bleated in a dramatic surrender to distress. The three who heard her caught the commotion of her alarm and waited breathless. Her explanation came at last. "It's Mr. Easterday." The moment she had said it, she turned and fled.

The door had scarcely closed, when Maisie rose from her chair and stood swaying. She sank back, closing her eyes and pressing her hands against her breast. The mask of placidity had been wrenched from her face, leaving it blanched with the conflict between yearning, temptation and loneliness.

"Adair!" she moaned. "My God, I daren't trust myself!"

Unclosing her eyes, she gazed burningly at Tabs.

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"I was honest in what I promised. I do want to live as though Reggie weren't dead. How did you put it? As though he were round the corner. As though he were truly coming back."

In the silence that followed she stifled a sob, realizing that it wasn't Tabs who was the obstacle. Turning hysterically to Terry, she laid hold of both her hands. "I can't do it—*can't*, *can't* by myself. I can only do it if you'll tell Lord Taborley to help me."

IV

At a nod from Terry he left the table. In the hall he found an odd sight waiting for him. He had to look twice to make certain that this was the Adair Easterday whom he had known, and not a strayed and befuddled wedding-guest.

The man before him was worried to distraction. He had the unhappy, panic-stricken eyes of an over-driven bullock that scents the slaughterhouse. And yet his dress was immaculate; he was tailored and laundered as though for an occasion of joy. Everything that he wore was discreetly festive, from the lavender gloves and shiny topper to the striped trousers and canvas spats. One would have said that he was a caricature of George Grossmith on his way to a garden-party.

But he was hot—terribly hot; far more hot than he had any excuse for being in brisk spring weather. There were beads of perspiration on his forehead; his face was congested with excitement. To lend the touch of humor, which always lurks behind other people's tragedies, he held his top-hat by the brim in his right hand, as though he were taking a collection, while from his left, like a feather-duster, trailed an enormous bunch of roses. He was a short man in the late thirties, red-headed and inclined to be podgy. He was not built to express poetic passions—how many of us are, if it comes to that?—or to sustain their onslaught with dignity. Emotion seemed to have bloated him with unshed tears. There was nothing noble in his distress—only a farcical appearance of wretchedness.

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As Tabs crossed the hall to the front-door, just inside of which Adair was standing, he felt an undeserved compassion for him—the kind of compassion one feels for a clumsy dog, which is always getting under people's feet. At the same time he couldn't help marveling that there should be two women at the same time in the world who were willing to compete for such a man's affections.

"I happened to be lunching here," Tabs commenced conventionally. But he altered his tactics promptly. In the presence of his friend's self-advertised misery nothing but the briefest truth seemed adequate.

"Old man, it's no good. She won't see you. She doesn't want you." Forgetting his sense of justice, he placed his hand affectionately on Adair's shoulder.

Adair stared in a full-blown way and nodded. "She never did want me."

He passed no comment on this unforeseen meeting in the little house with the marigold-tinted curtains. He manifested no resentment against this familiar angel who had been deputed to bar the gates of Eden to his approaches. He was incapable of surprise. He was obsessed by the solitary idea of his own forlornness. "I knew it. She never did want me." And then, in a rush of self-pity, "No one ever wanted me."

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"Except Phyllis," Tabs suggested.

Adair appeared not to have heard. He stood like a living statue, his top-hat extended, his bunch of roses dangling—the picture of idiotic futility. Genuine emotion, however mean its origin, always has its grand moments. Tabs forgot the silly beginnings of this upset and the endless troubles it had caused. All he saw was a typical ragamuffin of humanity in the grip of the policeman, Nemesis. Adair had been caught trying to do what thousands of other ragamuffins achieved daily with success. He had been arrested red-handed in the act of stealing forbidden happiness. It was his first offense. He was inexpert and had bungled. He had bungled because, while assuming the rôle of roguery, he had remained at heart an honest man. Now that he was caught, he took the exposure of his dishonesty too seriously.

Tabs had almost forgotten that he had been the last to speak, when Adair repeated his exact words, "Except Phyllis!" And then, "Poor kid! She, too, is unhappy."

Through the marshy obscurities of his humiliation his conscience was building a path. With his

two hands he crushed his topper back onto his head. The act had the vehemence of decision. In the doing of it he dropped the roses to the floor. There they lay forgotten—so forgotten that he placed his foot on them without noticing.

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"Home! Best be going home," he muttered.

Without further explanation, he drew back the latch and let himself out into the sunlit Court. Delaying long enough to pick up his hat and cane, Tabs followed.

Adair gave no sign of recognition as he caught up with him. Failing to hail a taxi, they boarded a bus. Tabs paid the fares. Adair sat like Napoleon after Waterloo, taking no notice of anything. It was the intensity of his thoughts that kept him silent—not moroseness.

They had reached Clapham Common and had come to his garden-gate, before he acknowledged Tabs' presence.

"I was a fool. I deserved it," he said sadly. "It's ended in exactly the way that any sane man would have expected."

Kicking the gate open, he passed up the path. From the Common Tabs watched him, till he was safely within the house and the door had shut.

As he turned away, he scarcely knew whether to laugh or feel vexed. The misfortunes of others can always be traced to folly; it is only our own misfortunes that are never deserved and never anything less than august. If Adair's love-affair had appeared ridiculous in his eyes, probably his own would afford materials for jest to some one else.

He couldn't forget the top-hat and the trampled roses. The ineffectualness of all passion loomed large. It might have its value as an educative process, but what a waste of energy! For the moment he drew no distinction between Adair's guilty hankering after something which was forbidden and his own honorable love for Terry. The end of all passion was futility.

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Then he laughed, for in imagination he saw the world as a crestfallen caricature of George Grossmith, top-hatted and bespatted, wending its unfestive way through the centuries to an eternal garden-party, from which Adam and his lineage were forever debarred.

V

His exit from Mulberry Tree Court had been so hurried that he had had no time to make arrangements with Terry.

He had no sooner knocked than the door was opened by Maisie. He was slightly embarrassed at being brought face to face with her thus suddenly after the last scene that they had shared. He entered in a tentative manner, only just crossing the threshold, as though he had not much time to spare.

"I called in," he apologized, "because I thought you'd like to know what happened—and to fetch Terry."

"Of course." She spoke with a cheerfulness that astonished him. "I was expecting you." With that she led the way across the hall to the drawing-room.

Carrying his hat, he followed. He clung to his hat purposely; it would serve as a reminder that he had not come to stay long. She was on the point of seating herself, when she spotted it. "Oh, how rude of me!" In the twinkling of an eye she had deprived him of it and vanished. "Captured once more!" he thought.

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During the few seconds that she was gone, he looked about him. Everything was as it had been yesterday. A companionable fire glowed in the grate. On a table beside the couch tea was spread. Even as yesterday, the nearest chair to the couch was at least six feet away, making it necessary for any one who did not wish to appear boorish to share the couch with her. There was something else that he had noticed on entering: while he had been away she had made a complete change of toilet. She was now dressed in a filmy gown of emerald green, with shoes, stockings and buckles to match. It was a gown so *chic* that, had he been a woman, he would have guessed at once that it was the latest from Paquin's. Inasmuch as he was a man, his sole comment was, "Plucky little thorough-bred! You don't catch her owning that she's down." The emerald shade brought out all the values of her coloring, the faint rose of her complexion, the daffodil gold of her flaxen hair. He had expected to be bored by a Magdalene repentant; instead he had found himself confronted by a challenging young Diana. His admiration went out to her for her courage.

Having come back and resettled herself on the couch, she smiled up at him through flickering lashes. "A nice frock, don't you think? Nothing like a new frock after a knock-out for restoring your self-respect."

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"It's a charming frock. Where's Terry?"

She clasped her small hands about her knees, leaning her head far back so that her eyes glinted up at his languidly. Perhaps it was necessary to do that in order to see him properly. He was still standing. And yet her attitude served another purpose; it called attention to the firm young lines of her bust and throat, and to the voluptuous curve of her lips, parted in patient expectancy.

"Terry!" Her voice sounded drowsy. "I forgot. I ought to have given you her message. She couldn't stop. She had another engagement."

"An engagement!" He was dumbfounded. "That's strange! She never said anything— Are you sure she didn't invent it?"

"Certain." Maisie sat up fully awake now. "Quite positive. But she had made up her mind not to keep it till, through no fault of yours, you gave her the chance. You don't want to believe that; it sounds as though she had cheated. You don't know much about women, Lord Taborley. You don't know because you refuse to learn. You're determined, in the face of every proof to the contrary, to live and die in the faith that we're angels." She shook her finger at him. He was amused to discover that he was being scolded. "Angels! We're far from it. We're very much like you men, with this difference, that we're cowards. What you need—this may sound entirely wrong—is a good sensible woman to take you in hand, and give you a run for your money, and teach you your own value. Why, with your position and charm——"

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"You must excuse my interrupting. Of course it all depends on what you mean by a run for my money. But are there many good and sensible women who are game for an adventure of that sort?"

"Heaps of them," she assured him, imitating his mock seriousness. "The more outwardly good and sensible, the more inwardly they're willing."

"Humph!" He pretended to be pondering this gem of information. And then, "But you have to own, Mrs. Lockwood, that Terry's not——"

She blocked his protest with a gay little laugh. "I make no exceptions. Terry's exactly like the rest of us—younger and more innocent looking, no doubt, but just as imperfect. As regards this engagement of hers, she breathed no word of it until you had gone. Then she began to flirt with the idea that she might be able to keep it. At last she couldn't resist the temptation any longer. Out she came with it, that she must be going. I'd lay a wager I could name the person with whom ——"

"You'd lose your wager."

"I think not." She met the threatened tempest in his eyes with calmness.

"Would you give a name to this person?"

"Where's the good?" She shrugged her dainty shoulders. "We both know it? Steely Jack. Isn't that what you call him?"

Instantly she leant forward. Her whole instinct was to touch him. She hadn't intended to hurt him like that. He looked so defiant, and gaunt and deserted—such a huge, scarred boy of a man. He reminded her of one of those early war-posters, in which a solitary figure was depicted, knee-deep in barbed wire, head bandaged, hurling the last of his bombs.

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"Please don't be angry," she pleaded. "I was clumsy; but I was trying to help. When you helped me yesterday, you too were clumsy. You can't put on a new frock, worse luck, the way I've done, to restore your self-respect. But I do wish you'd buy a new something—a new race-horse or a new car—I don't care what as long as it would make you swank. A little swanking would do you all the good in the world; it would keep Terry from knowing how much you care. Terry's not half good enough for you; one day you'll acknowledge it. Still, if you really do think you want her, you can bring her to heel any moment by putting on an indifferent air. Look how jealously she flared up at me at lunch. It makes a woman furious to see her rejections picked up as treasures by another woman. The only reason why Terry brought you here to-day was to see for herself just how deep an impression we'd made on each other."

At last she mustered the courage to touch him. Reaching out, she took his hand and drew him to her. He stood against her knees, looking down.

Her voice was tender. "Some one had to say these things to you, just as you had to say things to me that weren't altogether pleasant. So why shouldn't I to you? After all, we're both in the same box, and the box is labeled NOT WANTED. It pains me to see a man like you, wasting himself on a girl who hasn't the sense to appreciate what he's offering." She raised her eyes to his with a slow smile. "Don't mistake me, Lord Taborley, I'm not trying to secure what you're offering for myself."

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He began to see the drift of her argument. Before he could formulate it, she herself had put it into words. "Can't we do a little missionary work, you and I, by appreciating each other just a little?"

Flinging prejudices to the winds, he took a place beside her on the couch. Why shouldn't he? Why should he go on conserving himself so scrupulously for a girl who didn't value his loyalty?

"I should consider it a privilege to be appreciated by you," he said gravely. "But let's start properly. How about dinner at the Berkeley? After that, if you felt like it, we could do a theatre. Would that suit you?"

It was close on midnight when they returned to Mulberry Tree Court. Not until he was handing her out of the taxi and Porter was standing framed in the open doorway, did he remember that he'd imparted none of his important news concerning Adair.

"About Adair——" he commenced. "Or shall I put him off till to-morrow?"

"Till forever." As her feet touched the pavement, she swung around on him with laughter. They had been very happy in the last six hours. She pressed close against him. He caught the sparkle of her eyes as he stooped above her and the faint, sweet fragrance of her hair. She rested an ungloved hand on his arm. It looked dim like a large white moth that had settled there.

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"I have few principles to guide me," she whispered, "but the few that I have I observe. I never dig up my dead and I never botanize on the graves of the past. Good-night. Merry dreams to you, Lord Taborley."

With the suddenness of a phantom she went from him. There were a brief few seconds while he heard the ripple of her laughter and the rustling of her dress. Then the door closed. Save for the lamps of the waiting taxi night was again eventless and dark.

VI

That evening was the first of many such adventures. His tall limping figure became a familiar sight in Mulberry Tree Court.

Very early in their friendship he took her advice and delighted her by purchasing a smart two-seater runabout which he drove himself. Sometimes it was at her door shortly after breakfast to transport her to where saddle-horses were waiting in the Park. Sometimes it would turn up about lunch-time and stand impatiently chugging while she changed into sport's clothes, after which it would dash away with her, humming contentedly, into the depths of the country. It was the magic-carpet which obeyed all her desires. After war-days, with their petrol shortages and restricted travel, it seemed more than ordinarily magic. It made emphatic as nothing else could have done, the freedom and serenity which peace had restored. The very fleetness of its obedience prompted her to urge Tabs to take her farther and ever farther afield. There were evenings when they dined within sight of the sea beneath the red roofs of Rye and started back for London across the Sussex downs, driving straight into the eye of the sunset. There were afternoons when they drifted over the Chiltern hills to where the spires and domes of Oxford rise, placid as masts of a sunken ship in an encroaching sea of greenness.

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But it was most frequently nearing midnight when the quiet of the secluded Court was wakened by the merry buzzing of the engine. At first it would come from far away, drowsily like the song of a belated bee. Then it would gather in volume and grow more lively, till it panted round the little village-green and quavered into silence in front of Maisie's door. Porter, with the gold light of the hall behind her, would always be there on the threshold to receive her mistress. It was difficult to guess what Porter thought. There were impromptu jaunts to theaters and dances. Porter had seen many gay beginnings and tearful endings. Her face was immobile and respectful at whatever hour he called.

It was a curious friendship that had developed between them—a friendship which lived from hand to mouth, which had the appearance of being more than a friendship, in which nothing was premeditated. Nothing could be premeditated so far as he was concerned. Terry had first call on all his leisure—not that she availed herself of it very often; nevertheless, he held himself in readiness to break every engagement for her. Maisie was his consolation prize when Terry had failed. Maisie was not deceived as to the spare-man place that she held in his affections. She was painfully aware that at any moment their friendship might end as abruptly as it had started. On either side it was based on a common need for kindness, a common tenderness and a common desire for protection from loneliness. In a sense they were each a substitute for something postponed and more satisfying. While he was making up to her for the loss of Adair, she was trying to save him from the rashness of committing himself too fatally to Terry. They were altruists, actuated by self-interested motives.

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And yet it was a friendship not untinged by enmity. His enmity was awakened when she became too possessive in the demands which she made and especially when she let fall criticisms, however mild, concerning Terry. These occurrences set him thinking of the other casuals who had ventured on her doorstep, not meaning to stay, and had ended by hanging up their hats in her hall. Her enmity was roused by the courteous circumspection of his behavior. He never admitted her to the privacy of his inmost thoughts. He could be gay and gallant and bountifully generous, but he never permitted her to peep beneath the surface. He addressed her invariably as Mrs. Lockwood. The use of her surname held her at arm's length. She longed most frightfully to hear him call her by the name that was less safe. She denied to herself that she wanted him to make love to her; at the same time she was disappointed at the persistency with which he held her off. She liked to believe that, if he had made love to her, she would have rebuffed him. She rehearsed many times the indignant words with which she would have set him in his place; she would have reminded him that it was for Reggie Pollock she was waiting—as though he were not dead, but only round the corner. To her chagrin Tabs never gave her the least incentive to employ them.

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He saw her never more and frequently less than once a day. There was a week at a stretch when he saw nothing of her. She bridged these tedious intervals of expecting by the length of her

telephone conversations. Whenever he stayed away for long, she tortured herself with suspicions that his courtship of Terry had begun to prosper. If he returned debonair and smiling, she felt confirmed in these suspicions. He was most dear to her when he returned in an under-mood of distress. She knew then that she was necessary; to be necessary was the passion of her heart. Then she would become gay and tender and mothering—an altogether sweeter, gentler and more self-effacing Maisie.

Whither were they drifting—toward marriage or only toward infatuation? If you had asked Tabs, he would have replied promptly, "Toward neither." He had promised to tide her over the dull spots. She had advised him to take a course of education in his own value in order that he might increase his worth to Terry. She had told him that he ought to let some good sensible woman take him in hand and give him a run for his money. They had accepted each other at their word—that was all.

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At the same time he knew that that was not all. He knew that if there was one thing more irritating to her than being addressed as Mrs. Lockwood, it was his way of treating her as if she were good and sensible. Most women would feel affronted at hearing themselves spoken of as anything other than sensible and good. Good and sensible women are the pillars of society, but they are not usually regarded as attractive companions for joyous excursions in two-seater runabouts.

Neither of them was entirely insensitive to the conjectures that their sudden intimacy had given rise to in the minds of onlookers. They were both too well-known and were seen together in too many different places to avoid the breath of gossip—even of scandal. Men were scarce after the wholesale butchery of the war, especially bachelors of Lord Taborley's class. Had he only had the conceit to know it, he had returned to London a strong favorite for the season's matrimonial sweepstakes. More than one anxious mother of unappropriated daughters had set him down for preference on her list of eligibles. When invitations poured in on him and were politely regretted, there was consternation and puzzlement. The puzzlement vanished when the explanation was whispered across a hundred dinner-tables, "Haven't you heard? It's Maisie Lockwood."

Then would follow details of how they had been seen at sundry theaters, at half-a-dozen fashionable hotels and riding together in the Park. "She mounted on one of Lord Taborley's horses of course."

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"It's quite a case," people said. "If he doesn't mean matrimony, it would be decent to exercise more discretion. There used to be some talk of Terry Beddow; that's completely ended. Queer the women men fall for, even the quietest of them! No one's sane any longer. Had three husbands already, hasn't she? Quite a crowd! One would scarcely have supposed that an exclusive chap like Taborley would have joined in the queue to make a fourth. And he could have had almost any girl for the asking. There's never any telling."

Veiled references began to appear in the society columns; but not so veiled that they could not be recognized. "A romance is developing between a noble lord, who served in the ranks during the war, and a vivacious beauty, three times widowed, well-known in fashionable circles, etc." One paper published a photograph of them riding side by side. After that sceptics who had not seen for themselves, were persuaded.

It was a mad world—a world in which it was not safe to be censorious. The lid was off the conventions. Every one was shouting for happiness—happiness at all costs. When they could not get it for the asking, they were taking it without thought of law or penalties. There were few who could afford to sit in judgment and many who preferred to laugh. The day of authority was over. Traditions were no longer respected. While the war was on, men and women had been drilled into dumb acquiescence; now that the drilling was abolished, they had become a mob, avid, leaderless and uproarious.

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Tabs came to realize that he was not alone in his lost sense of direction. The right to live had been restored, but neither individuals nor nations were sure what they wanted to do with it. After having been as one in their sacrificial certainty, they had arrived at a cross-roads where there was no policeman to take charge. They had broken up into little groups, gathered about their own vociferous stump-orators. The result was babel. Of orators there were a plenty. They abused one another across the Irish Sea. They tried to shout one another down across the Atlantic Ocean. But the hammer-head men of righteousness were gone. After the apocalyptic splendor of mailed knights of Christ charging stern-faced down to Armageddon, the results of victory had been consigned to the weakling care of a race of talkers.

And yet there was music and laughter. Spring rushed on. Feet that had marched, now moved in the rhythm of the dance. Theaters were crowded. Jazz-bands clashed. There were endless processions. Youth beckoned. Chestnut bloom grew white and fell in flurries. Women were no less beautiful. The sun shone thunderously.

If Tabs were foolish, which he did not concede, all the world was his companion in foolishness. Blindly and gropingly he was still going in search of his kingdom. He ignored the gossip which his championship of Maisie had called forth. He despised it. It made him the more compassionate toward her—the more determined to help her to weather the storm. Well-meaning friends undertook to warn him. "She's most beautiful and charming. And she's Lady Dawn's sister, of course. But— Well, to put it frankly, a woman who's been married three times might just as well never have been married at all. Looks as though she'd only squandered her money in rising

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to the nicety of a marriage-license. I hope you don't mean to marry her, old chap, because she's not your sort."

When Tabs went to the trouble of assuring these well-wishers that he did not intend to marry her and that she was his sort, they slipped their tongues into their cheeks and opened their eyes wide, "Oh, so that's the way of it!"

Maisie reported to him similar experiences. "So you see how I'm regarded, as though I were no better than I should be. And I'm young and I've done nothing wrong. If it wasn't for your friendship, I should be tempted——"

"But you have my friendship!" he assured her.

He tried to rise superior to this petty talk of scandal-mongers, but it was not always possible when he remembered Terry.

VII

He met Terry as often as he could contrive, but he no longer forced himself upon her. He could effect nothing so long as her infatuation for Braithwaite lasted.

Now that Sir Tobias had lost faith in him as a lover, his opportunities for meeting her became more rare. When Sir Tobias lost faith in any one, he made no attempt to disguise it. In the case of Tabs, he let him know it with a fine air of magnanimity, as though he were doing him a kindness. His frankness took the form of communicating some new disparaging criticism, astutely attributed to Lady Beddow, every time he was paid a visit. [Pg 255]

Having separated Tabs from Terry by carrying him off to his library on one pretext or another, he would carefully close the door and commence, "You men who've seen service are all unbalanced; it would be unfair to hold any of you responsible. You're no exception, my dear fellow, though you probably don't notice it in yourself. As Lady Beddow was saying to me this morning, 'Poor Lord Taborley, he has a rambling mind. Most likely it's a species of shell-shock. There's a queer look comes into his eyes. It's not always there. It's a look as if he were haunted. You ought to speak to him, Tobias—you're his oldest friend—and advise him to see a specialist. It's lucky we found his weakness out before things between him and Terry went too far.'"

Or he would say, "Lady Beddow and I were talking about you, my dear fellow. You know she's very fond of you. She loved your mother before you. 'The little big lady from America,' she used to call her. She's naturally very much upset at the way in which you're getting yourself talked about. Unfortunately she holds me partly responsible for having induced you to visit this Maisie woman. 'You ought to have known him better,' she says. 'There's an immoral streak in him—an inherited taint, which I, for one, always suspected.' She was wondering whether you have any knowledge of there having been insanity in your family." [Pg 256]

After having invented such discomfoting surmises and given his wife the credit for them, the old gentleman would blink his crafty eyes and rest his hand affectionately on Tabs' arm. At the end of each visit he was pressed to call again; but when he called, it was to find himself shepherded into the library, safely out of reach of Terry, in order that he might hear his conduct discussed afresh, either directly or by insinuation.

He was unable to defend himself without betraying Terry. She maintained her silence with regard to Braithwaite, refusing to take her parents into her confidence. They naturally attributed the hanging fire of the engagement to Tabs, supposing that on the eve of his proposal he had been ensnared in the net of Maisie. In their eyes he cut a shabby figure.

Behind his back Terry came to his defense. She would hear and believe no wrong of him. This only proved to her parents that her heart still followed him. They thought her very brave and became more gloomy in their accusations. Matters took a serious turn: her health began to fail. When the doctor was summoned, he ascribed the cause to secret worrying and prescribed a complete change. Tabs received no word of this happening, for Terry had become increasingly shy, so that she created the appearance of avoiding him. She quite definitely avoided Maisie. [Pg 257]

There came a day in early June when he went to call on her and was informed by the velvet-plush James that Miss Terry was out of London on a visit of undetermined length. When he asked for her address, James shook his head mournfully. She had been ill and was to be spared all disturbing communications. His orders were that her address was to be given to nobody.

"But that order doesn't apply to me," Tabs urged.

James became more profoundly agitated. He averted his eyes, while he fiddled with the last button of his plump waistcoat. "I regret to say, to your Lordship most especially."

"Humph!" Tabs stroked his chin. "Is Sir Tobias at home?"

"Your Lordship would gain nothing by seeing Sir Tobias."

"You might mention to him that I called." With that he descended the steps and climbed into his runabout.

"Turned away!" he thought. "Turned away from Terry's house!" Then his mind went back to two months ago—the hopes he'd had, his meeting with her at the station, his asking her father for her

hand in marriage. It was like the old front-line trench, when reënforcements had failed to come up: there was nothing for it but to dig one's self in and stick it out.

He had been shown the door with as little ceremony as an intruding peddler.

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VIII

From Terry's house he went to Mulberry Tree Court, but the route that he chose was not direct. He drove all over the West End first, through Oxford Street, Bond Street, Piccadilly; then back by way of Regent Street, swinging to the left through Conduit Street, till he again struck Bond Street. He doubled and redoubled on his tracks, moving among crowds, feeling that he must hear the noise of crowds, yet seeing little of the sights on which his eyes rested. It had been like this with him before, after being in too close contact with calamity. It had been like this in war-days, when he had returned on brief leaves out of monstrous offensives to the appalling quiet of a normal world. He hadn't dared to be alone. He had felt that his sanity depended on his rubbing shoulders with people. He had been like a child in an empty house, leaning out of a window to catch the stir of life along the pavements.

The gayety of the London season was at its height. Khaki was growing rare. Signs of war had almost completely vanished. No one wanted to talk about it. No one wanted to read about it. Shops had redecorated their windows with the necessities and luxuries of civilian requirements. There was a wave of spendthrift extravagance abroad. Every one in the streets had the look of being out for a good time. The threat of torturing to-morrows no longer made life haggard. If there was one lesson that the past five years had taught it was that each new day was a gift from the gods, to be enjoyed separately and drained of every available drop of pleasure. The restraints of duty were indefinitely postponed. Men and women sauntered in pairs, aimlessly and joyously. Work was the bondage furthest from their thoughts. They seemed aware of no one but themselves in their ecstasy at being reunited. Racing had been restarted; up and down the gutters newsboys ran shouting the winners. London was a Tommy on leave, insubordinately, humorously, contagiously happy.

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As he drove, Tabs argued out his problem. From house-top to house-top the June sky sagged like an azure canopy. Across pavements the afternoon sunshine lay in bars of gold. Flower-sellers stood at intervals along the curb, scenting the air with their country nosegays. A lazy breeze ruffled drooping flags which had been hung out for the latest festival. Everywhere there were girls in their blowy summer dresses—girls of all kinds and sorts. Single girls, married girls, girls who worked for their livings, girls whose business it was to be beautiful, girls who were merely drudges. There were both pathos and urgency in the sight of them. It was not good that they should live alone. They had wasted their youth too long. The great necessity for that waste was ended. Not one of them was a patch on Maisie.

If he did not desire Maisie, why did he miss her? Was it that he would not allow himself to desire her? Why did he encourage his passion for Terry—Terry who in her mild and gentle way had become almost insolently unappreciative? Wouldn't he be wiser to content himself with the woman who was within reach rather than—?

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He frowned as the truth dawned on him. For the first time he had acknowledged it. He did love Maisie. Not as he loved Terry, of course; but in a more human way, to the extent of needing her companionship. He had made a discovery that amazed himself—a discovery that thousands of men had made before him: that it was possible for him to love two women at the same tune, utterly differently and yet with entire sincerity. He felt as lowered in his self-esteem as if he had committed bigamy. He was dumbfounded at this new twist that his emotions had developed. Without consulting him, they had played a trick on him which forever disqualified him for the larger rôle of constant lover. He felt himself pushed down to almost the level of a philanderer—a philanderer not much more august than Adair. The suspicion crossed his mind that, if he could believe himself in love with two women, he couldn't be very mightily in love with either.

But he was impatient of delays—worn out with procrastinations. The magnificent chances of the present were slipping past him. One day he would be old. "*Now, now, now*, is the appointed time," throbbed his engine. Out of the sheer disorganization of his thoughts a desperate scheme took shape. Why should he not go to Maisie and say, "We're neither of us first in each other's affections. It's a rough-and-tumble world! Why be thin-skinned about it? We may become first later. Let's stop dreaming of kingdoms round the corner and make the best of such kingdoms as are ours to-day."

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The idea took hold of him with force. It fascinated him. He turned his car about. In passing through Mayfair he made a detour to glance at Taborley House. The American Hospital had vacated it. It looked ruined and forlorn. He tried to picture it as it might appear if Maisie were its mistress.

Twenty minutes later he drew up before the retiring little villa with its marigold-tinted curtains. He had by no manner of means decided on his course of action. He could not have told you what he was going to say to Maisie. In this as in so many other ways, he believed himself abnormal. No one had ever told him that ninety-nine out of a hundred married men, if they spoke the truth, would have to confess that they had been unaware thirty seconds before they proposed that they were going to do so; and that the most incredible happening in their lives had been when, thirty seconds later, they had discovered that not only had they proposed, but that they had been

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH

SOME PEOPLE FIND THEIR KINGDOMS

I

He was in the act of shutting off his engine when he heard himself accosted. "I beg your pardon, but are you, Mr. Gervis?"

It was a pleasant voice—a man's. Keeping his eyes on what he was doing, Tabs answered in the negative. Then he recalled that Gervis had been the name of Maisie's second husband. "If it's the Gervis who used to live here," he indicated the house with a jerk of his head, "I'm afraid you won't find him. He's been dead these three years—killed at the Front."

A quiet chuckle greeted this piece of information, followed by a hearty, "Thank the Lord."

Tabs had finished what he was doing. As he stepped out of the car, he threw a contemptuous glance at the man who could be so callous. He was a slightly built, fresh-complexioned young fellow of middle height, with amiable gray eyes and a fair, closely-trimmed mustache. He belonged to the demobilized subaltern type and had the weary, drawn expression of over-strained nerves that so many young faces had at that time. He was dressed in a smartly fitting suit of striped navy-blue flannel and carried himself with the plucky alertness of a highly bred fox-terrier. He had a clean and gallant bearing which it was difficult to reconcile with the ungenerosity of his last remark. In a neat, unforceful way he would have been handsome, had it not been for a badly healed scar which ran straight across his forehead, only just escaping his eyes.

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Before Tabs could say anything, he was apologizing. "That sounded rotten. I'm sorry. But you see, I didn't know the chap. It's his wife that I'm trying to find. She was married to a man named Pollock when I knew her. I was rather a pal of Pollock's, belonged to the same squadron and was shot down at the same time. I've been a prisoner in Germany. Just got back, in fact. As you'll understand, I'm rather out of touch. I thought you'd be able to tell me whether she still lived here."

It was very damping to his ardor at this particular moment to have Maisie's matrimonial past raked up. Within the next half hour he would very possibly be asking her to be his wife. He wasn't sure that he was going to; but meeting this friend of her first husband on her doorstep didn't help him to make up his mind. He was no longer unsympathetic to the young fellow, but he was quite determined that he must be sent about his business.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "the lady you're in search of does live here. But she's not Mrs. Gervis any longer. She's married again. She's Mrs. Lockwood now."

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A glint of enmity came into the stranger's eyes. "Then you're Mr. Lockwood, perhaps?"

Tabs answered him with a note of irritation. "I'm not Mr. Lockwood. She's a widow. Lockwood also was killed. But I really don't see why you should stop me on the pavement to ask so many questions. You can find out everything by ringing the bell."

"That's right." The young fellow stroked his mustache. "But I didn't want to do that until I had made certain. Surely you can see how embarrassing— And now this third chap's gone West, you say. Poor little Maisie, she hasn't had much luck."

It was difficult to be brusque with a man of his own class, especially with a man so genuinely likeable. But he had to get rid of him. After having nerved himself up to the point of being at least prepared to propose to Maisie, he couldn't contemplate an evening of sharing her with a stranger and listening to the merits of her first husband.

"So you're an old friend! Well, I'm afraid she won't be free this evening. I have an appointment with her. But, if you like, I'll mention that I met you and I'll let her know that you'll call—when shall we say—to-morrow? Perhaps you'd care to give me your name—"

The young man smiled good-naturedly. "I couldn't think of troubling you to that extent."

"In that case, I'll have to ask you to excuse me. All kinds of luck to you on your return. It must be rather jolly not to be a prisoner. Good evening."

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Tabs crossed the pavement and rang the bell. In order that he might afford no opportunity for further conversation, he stood with his face towards the door while he waited for it to be opened. He was very conscious that the stranger had not departed, but was hovering immediately in rear of him.

It was Porter who answered his summons. "I'm sorry, your Lordship, Mrs. Lockwood is out— No, she didn't leave any word. She's bound to be back shortly— Why, certainly, if your Lordship has the time."

While she was closing the front door, he walked across the hall and let himself into the drawing-room. He went directly over to the empty fireplace and gazed up at Lady Dawn's portrait. It always seemed to challenge him—seemed to be trying to say something to him. It was almost as though it were his conscience hanging there on the wall. He had an idea that it reproached him for his silence with regard to Lord Dawn. He felt that, were he to do what his instinctive sense of justice had first urged—go to Lady Dawn and tell her that her husband had cared for her—the painted face would be no longer turned away and the stone-gray eyes no longer averted.

He was haunted by the obsession that he would never have any luck till he had vindicated the dead man's memory.

It was Maisie who had prevented him up to now—Maisie with her laughter, her breezy arguments, her short views of life, her contempt for sentiment, her sledge-hammer motto, with which she shattered the past, "I never dig up my dead." She had made him hesitant about reopening the subject. Her sister was the most beautiful woman in England. A man never knows to what boundaries a woman's jealousy spreads. He feared lest, if he persisted, she might impute to him less lofty motives than the desire to play fair by a comrade-in-arms who had gone West.

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Something stirred behind him. He swung about and found himself staring into the face of the stranger who had accosted him on the pavement.

"Sargent painted it ten years ago," the stranger said. "She's not as young as that now."

"How did you get in?" Tabs demanded.

The stranger laughed boyishly. "Not too loud or you'll give the show away. I followed you. The maid raised no objection. She thought we were together—which was exactly what I intended."

"But what do you want? What right have you here?"

"Want! I know what I want. As to my right, that's problematic."

He turned his back on Tabs and commenced to move about the room, picking things up and examining them with a purposeful curiosity. He showed no fear, yet in all his movements there was a calculated stealth. Tabs watched him in amazement, wondering what he ought to do. If it came to grappling with him, unless he carried fire-arms, there was little doubt as to who would get the better of the contest. The man might be a lunatic, a blackmailer, a burglar; by his odd mode of entry, he had laid himself open to every suspicion. But he looked perfectly normal; and if he had been a burglar, he surely would have selected an opportunity when no other man was present. It was an awkward situation, this being shut up alone in a husbandless woman's house with an unknown intruder. It seemed to be an occasion for tact rather than the possible fuss of police interference.

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At this moment the stranger made a discovery.

He had been examining the five silver photograph-frames, each in turn, with close attention. With his back towards Tabs he remarked, "It looks as though she hadn't forgotten him. Five reminders of his homely mug and not a solitary one of the also-rans! Numbers Two and Three couldn't have made such a deep impression." He caught his breath in a nervous shudder. "It's queer. Everything's queer when one's just come back. One's so changed that he could court his own wife without being recognized. You, too, were out there I should judge by the way you limp. I wonder whether you've got over the queerness yet. I haven't had time—"

From in front of the empty fireplace, Tabs interrupted him. "Look here, my dear chap, I don't want to be rude and this isn't my house; but what's your game?"

The stranger turned and smiled. His frank gray eyes were amused and friendly. "Upon my word, I haven't any game. I'm like yourself—just paying a visit."

Tabs shook his head and gazed at him fixedly. "It won't do; you know that. You're a gentleman. Gentlemen don't get into unprotected women's houses by your kind of methods."

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"They don't. That's a fact." He laughed carelessly. "I suppose this is what comes of having been a prisoner in Germany. One prefers to be underhand."

"Don't you think it's time you stopped fooling?" Tabs spoke in a conversational tone without temper. "There's Mrs. Lockwood to be considered; she may be here at any moment. It's no good coming this returned prisoner trick; all the prisoners in Germany were returned shortly after the Armistice. Eight months have elapsed."

"All right. Have it your own way."

The stranger ceased to wander and sat himself down at Maisie's end of the couch. Pulling out his cigarette-case, he offered it to Tabs. "Have a gasper?— You don't need to refuse because of Maisie. If she's the Maisie she used to be, she won't object.— Well, if you won't, I will."

Tabs noticed that his hand trembled in holding the match. The man was a bundle of nerves; he was only maintaining this display of coolness with an effort. Whatever the purpose of his bold intrusion, it was not social, as he had pretended.

"I don't like any man to think me a liar." The man spoke slowly between puffs at his cigarette. "You think it's all bunkum that I'm fresh out of Germany, but it isn't. Do you see that?" He ran his

finger across the gash in his forehead. "That and the ill-treatment I received in the prison-camps made me go wuzzy. The only fact about myself that I could remember in all those years was Maisie. So it's natural that I should come to see her first. I wasn't sure of my own identity until a month ago. I suppose I was released at the Armistice, but for seven out of the past eight months I must have wandered in rags over Central Europe. However, all's well that ends well, and here I am."

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"But you knew that she'd remarried," Tabs objected suspiciously; "you asked me if I were Gervis."

"A friend of Pollock's told me that," he explained. "Gervis was excusable. But this Lockwood fellow's the third. It's a bit thick! She certainly has been going it." He looked up suddenly. "I've been doing all the talking. What about yourself?"

Tabs crossed the room and opened one of the long French windows which led out into the rockery. The golden afternoon had faded into early evening and a refreshing coolness was in the air. When he came back, he seated himself at the other end of the couch. "Just to show that there's no ill-feeling, I'll accept one of your gaspers, if you'll allow me.— There's nothing for me to explain. My name is Lord Taborley and I'm a friend of Mrs. Lockwood. There's nothing else."

The stranger leaned forward. His humor left him, revealing his premature haggardness. He laid a hand on Tabs' arm and asked a question. "You're fond of her?"

Tabs eyed him in silence, trying to divine what was intended. "At any rate, you are," he said kindly; "I see it now."

"Not fond of her, I'm in love with her." The man's face softened as he made the confession. "I was in love with her when she was still the wife of Pollock. I've been through deep waters. I've had to wait for her like Jacob did for Rachel. I've lost most things—my memory, my health, my very likeness! but never for five minutes have I lost my love for her. She was the only star in my darkness—" The words fell from him with somber sincerity. "I don't know whether you understand—"

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But Tabs' thoughts had turned inwards. He was living again the englamored poignancy of the years when Terry had been for him precisely that—the only star in his darkness. The intensity of the vision was like a cry of warning rousing his sleeping idealism from its lethargy. His present errand became a treachery to be swept aside by his reformed strength. He recognized the intruder with new eyes, not as an enemy, but as a comrade—a comrade marooned on the selfsame island of loneliness and bound to him by the common experience of a kindred adversity. He was like Crusoe discovering the footprint. Here, quite close to him, was a fellow waif who had drunk deep of his own bitter sense of desertion. With a thrill of sympathy, his heart turned to him.

"The only star in the darkness!" He repeated the stranger's words. "For most of us there's been one woman who was all of that. If she fails us—" He stifled his pessimism. "When stars fail, one waits for the morning."

"So you, too, had your woman!"

The stranger smiled and relaxed against the cushions. "Foolish of me! You can't blame me. Twice I've believed that I'd lost her. First there was Gervis and then this Lockwood. Poor devils, I cry quits on them. But when I found you so at home here, you can guess what I dreaded. And yet you'll never guess why I followed you into this house." He lit a cigarette and crossed his legs. "I didn't want you to escape me till I'd asked a question— Has it ever entered your head that Pollock might not be dead?"

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Tabs started. Then he sat very still. It was the commonplace tone in which the question had been asked that froze his blood. It was as though this man had said, "I can bring him back." For a moment he knew genuine fear—the non-physical fear which the impalpable can awake in the bravest mind. Through the open window the companionable mutter of London entered. The normality of everything on which his eyes rested did its best to reassure him—the mellow evening sunlight in the friendly room, the flowers in the rockery, the toy-boat on the pond. "I never dig up my dead." He remembered Maisie's motto. But what if the dead—

He pulled himself together. Pollock not dead! An absurd suggestion! Maisie had changed her name twice since then—a sufficient proof! The poor fellow was demented. Everything that he had done bore the hall-mark of insanity. He had owned that he had been deranged to within a month ago. Everything that he had said might be quite true. He probably had been the dead man's friend and in love with Maisie at the time of her first marriage. The misfortunes that had befallen him had exaggerated his love into mania—a mania which the news of Gervis and then of Lockwood had rendered active. He felt an immense compassion for the man. There, save for the grace of God, sat himself. But what was to be done? Already Maisie was overdue. Not a second could be wasted. He must humor him and get him out of the house, if a scene was to be prevented.

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And all the time the stranger had been watching him—following his thoughts, no doubt. He spoke again. "Don't you agree with me? It would be damned awkward if Pollock came back."

Tabs forced a smile. "I'm not so sure that I do. She never loved any one but her first husband. She's told me so. The other two— I don't believe she herself knows how they happened. They were soldiers. They weren't long for this world. She didn't want to do them out of anything." He glanced at his watch. "By Jove, and I've not dined yet! I'm afraid I must be off. How about you? I'd

be awfully glad if you'd take dinner with me."

The man jumped to his feet, so that Tabs rose with him. But once they were on their feet an amused expression of cunning came into his eyes. It told Tabs plainly that he had seen through the strategy. He shook his head. "Very good of you. But I'm waiting for Maisie." He held out his hand. It was evident that he was determined to take Tabs at his word. "We'll meet again, perhaps. What you've just said piques my curiosity. Before you go, there's one more question. In your opinion what would Maisie's attitude be if Pollock did come back?"

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Tabs was instantly aware that he had made a false move. His bluff had been called. He'd made it impossible for himself to prolong his call; at the same time he didn't dare to leave this man behind in the house. It wasn't Maisie that he was thinking of now—he could warn her as she entered the Court—it was Porter. A madman was capable of anything; and yet, confound the chap's deceptiveness, he didn't look mad. There was only one chance of delaying his departure: at all costs he must involve him in an argument.

"If Pollock came back! Curious that you should suggest that! I've sat in this room and discussed the possibility with Mrs. Lockwood by the hour. For the past two months—that's as long as I've known her—I've been helping her to live as though he might come back."

The man's coolness instantly vanished. His excitement grew well-nigh beyond control. "You're not going. Sit down. You've got to explain." He rapped out his sentences in short, quick jerks. His voice had become harsh and imperative. "You can't have any idea what this means to me. It's ridiculous. Why should you, a living man, help her, when she's so beautiful, to save herself for a dead man? She didn't save herself in the case of Gervis and Lockwood."

With a sigh of relief Tabs reseated himself. The man sank down beside him, crowding against him on the couch. His anxiety was sharp-pointed as a dagger. "Quick," he urged.

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"I don't know that I can be quick." Tabs spoke leisurely. He paused, trying to think what he should say next. "Here it is in a nutshell. Mrs. Lockwood, as we both know, is a more than ordinarily charming woman. She's the kind who, without being able to prevent herself, draws men. There are women like that. Her three marriages, all taking place so close together gave her a reputation— You're a man of the world; you'll understand that I'm not trying to say anything derogatory. But three matrimonial adventures in such rapid succession gave her a reputation for lightness. She was young and pretty. She longed to live life. You can't blame her. For a woman life isn't a very full affair without a man. And yet there aren't many men who would be willing to choose a wife with three previous husbands to her credit. It would seem too much like a week-end experiment, without the option of parting when the week was ended. So here was the injustice of her social situation; without having committed a solitary indiscretion, she was damaged goods—debarred from matrimony, yet coveted by men. Do you realize the temptation ___"

The man half rose in his irritation. "You're not answering my question." The violence in his tone was unmistakable. "What I've got to find out is, what put you up to persuading her to live as though Pollock were not dead?"

"I was coming to that." Tabs spoke reassuringly. "Beneath all her gayety I found, when I began to know her, that she was desperate—desperate to live in the sunshine and mortally afraid of shadows. At the least hint of shadows she grew reckless. She believed that her happiness was in the past. So I taught her to play a game—a game that has often saved me from despair. It was just this—to act as though all the goodness one has known still lies ahead; in her case this meant living as though the man whom she had loved were not dead, but waiting for her round some future corner. So that was why— But I think I've answered your question."

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Tabs rose from the couch and limped over to the empty fireplace. He stood there beneath the portrait of Lady Dawn, supporting himself with one arm against the mantel. The room was beginning to fill with dusk. Beyond the threshold of the open window, the rockery-garden was still vaguely golden. The little pond was a silver mirror.

Perhaps two minutes had elapsed. Uncertainly the stranger struggled to his feet. He moved towards the door, halted and came slowly back. He looked very spent, and slim, and wasted in the gathering shadows. As Tabs gazed down at him, he noticed that his face was prodigiously solemn.

"I don't mind now." He swallowed like a small boy getting rid of his emotion. "I don't mind Gervis or Lockwood any longer; it's as though they'd never happened. And I don't feel hard to her, the way I might have. I'm glad you told her about things being round the corner. Because I'm Pollock. I have come back."

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Tabs stared at him. He was deeply moved. To humor him in his delusion seemed the height of callousness. Yet what else was possible under the circumstances?

"Of course you're Pollock," he assured him gently. "One wouldn't recognize you from your portraits, but I ought to have guessed."

The man caught the deception in his tone. He lifted up his puzzled gray eyes. "You don't— No, I see you don't. You don't believe me. Yet I am Pollock."

"My dear chap," Tabs said it coaxingly, "I don't see why you should think I doubt you. I'm quite

certain you're Pollock—Reggie Pollock, the first of all the aces: the man who brought down the Zeppelin over Brussels. You see I know all about you. Your picture was in the papers. I've told you that you were expected. So why——"

The front door was heard to open and close. There was the sound of Maisie's voice. They stood rigidly listening in the semi-darkness. Neither of them spoke or stirred. As she entered, a shaft of light from the hall preceded her. Quietly Tabs placed himself between her and the stranger. The stranger made no motion to thwart him; he stood like one turned to stone. Just across the threshold she halted, leaning forward slightly and peering through the shadows.

"Why, Tabs," she laughed, "how romantic of you to sit waiting for me in the twilight!"

Tabs came forward as though he were about to push her back. "I'm not alone, Mrs. Lockwood ___"

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"I know. Porter told me. But why are you standing in my way?" She laughed again. A shiver of fear cut short her laughter. "What's the matter? I don't see your friend. Why don't you introduce ___"

"He's not my friend. He says he's yours."

"Then all the more reason—— Why are you acting strangely? No, please let me into my own room, Tabs."

He had put out his arm to prevent her. Without warning the stranger advanced into the shaft of light. She saw him and fell back screaming, covering her eyes. With a vehemence that was unexpected, he pushed Tabs aside and clasped her to him. "Maisie darling, don't be afraid. I'm real. I know everything. And I don't mind——"

At sound of his voice, she uncovered her eyes. His face was close to hers. The fixed look of terror left her.

Putting out her hands timidly, she ran her fingers along the scar in his forehead. "They've hurt you. Poor you! My Reggie! Oh, my lover, they've hurt you!"

She buried her head against his shoulder and fell to weeping passionately.

II

Neither of them had seen him go. He had tiptoed past them like a ghost and out into the summer night. The sky was luminous with the dust of stars. A sleepy wind was blowing.

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He jumped into his car and sped away, making such haste that one might have thought he was pursued. He wheeled to the left in the direction that led to the Surrey hills. It was the direction he had taken with Terry on that March morning when she had met him at the station. He was making a discovery: that there is no tragedy more difficult to contemplate with charity than the sight of other people's happiness. Their follies we can tolerate and view even with compassion; but their joys are unendurable. Joy separates men with impassable barriers. It transfigures beggars into Lazaruses lying at rest in Abraham's bosom. We view them from afar off and their contentment increases the burning of our torment. No man has yet discovered how to share his joy. Only a god could say, "My joy I give unto you."

They had not seen him go. That was the neglect that rankled. Even though they had seen him, they would not have cared; they would have done nothing to delay him. They were past all caring. Like tired ships, having weathered many storms, they had furled their sails in the harbor of desire. He had slipped by them like a demon vessel, all canvas spread, out-going on his endless voyage.

From the door, before he left, he had looked back. The room was a-silver with twilight. The garden beyond was still vaguely golden. The pond glimmered darkly like a magic mirror. The murmur of London wove patterns on the silence. From the hall across the silver of the dusk, an intrusive shaft of light pointed like a finger at those two entranced, who had refound the peace that time had scattered.

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Even though Pollock had not returned, he himself could never have married her. There are violations of the austerity of the soul which the urgings of the flesh cannot accomplish. In the vivid flash of reality that had visited him he knew that now. He was angry—bitterly angry. But his anger was not for her; it was for himself. He could be so audaciously prophetic in the affairs of others. He could advise them and well-nigh compel them to conserve themselves for kingdoms of whose coming there was neither the slightest hope nor warning. His penetrating optimism could foresee the daringly incredible, so that it almost seemed in the case of Maisie that his optimism had created out of the incredible a fact. He could work these miracles of restraint for others; himself he could not restrain. His road ran straight as destiny, yet any lazy kingdom of mildness in a woman's eyes was capable of luring him aside. In his abasement he lost all faith in his self-knowledge. Hadn't he always been the victim of an imagination which had tricked mere liking into a resemblance to passion? He strutted, gestured, despaired till he almost persuaded himself that he was the part he was acting. But had he the faintest conception of what real love meant? Hadn't he always acted a part? Yes, even in the case of Terry!

His saner judgment intervened. He hadn't always been like that. Where had the point of

departure started? He traced back the weakness till he came to the moment when he had permitted his sense of justice to be over-ruled by a woman. It had started with Maisie, when he had allowed her to persuade him to hide the truth from Lady Dawn.

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He jammed on the brakes, bringing the car to a sudden halt. To go and tell her must be the first step in his redemption. Till that was done the curse of the dead man would follow him. It seemed to him now, as he looked back, that through all the spring and summer the shadow of Lord Dawn had crept behind him. He would go at once. He would go that night. He knew where he could find her. He would set out like a pilgrim of long ago through the moon-drenched, hay-scented sweetness of the country.

His vision turned outwards. He realized for the first time where he had halted. He was within sight of Richmond Park, outside *The Star and Garter Hotel*, the old haunt of merry-makers, which had now become a permanent hospital for the mutilated. There were lights to mark the windows of men who suffered. As he watched, some leaped up; others were snapped out. He could hear in memory the starchy rustling of nurses and the creaking of springs as the patients turned. There were men in there without arms and legs and faces; he had shared their danger and he had been spared. Surely the God who had covered him with His mantle, had had some plan—some design of goodness for him!

Far below in a curving streak of blessedness the Thames ran silvered by the moonlight. He could see the clumped shadows of woods and the flicker of ripples striking fire against the banks. More distantly London glowed—a golden flower cupped in the hollowed hand of night. Holding his breath he listened to the loudness of the quiet. Subtle ecstasies drifted to him, fluttering like moths against the windows of his mind—"lilies like thoughts, roses like words, in the sweet brain of June." *There was a design.* Maisie had found her kingdom. Was it too much to expect that round some future turning God had another kingdom waiting?

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III

He drove back to London by the directest route. He would have to get supper before he made a start. By the time he had done that, packed his bag, and refilled his tank it would be close on midnight. Dawn Castle lay somewhere down in Gloucestershire. He knew the road as far as Oxford; after that his ideas were vague.

He was a little daunted by the thought of Lady Dawn. Everything that he had heard about her, including his first meeting with her, had served to daunt him. He pictured her as a woman with a conscience clear-cut as a cameo—a woman, infallible and unsubdued, impatient of foolishness and gentle in her spirit with the cold tranquillity of a landscape under ice. How would she receive him, coming out of nowhere, unheralded and unexplained? And how could he explain the urgency that had compelled him to come to her? It was a delicate task that he had set himself, this seeking out a woman with whom he was unacquainted, that he might tell her that her husband had not hated her when he died. What concern was it of his, she might well ask. If she chose to be hostile, there were no arguments by which he could defend his interference. His sole justification was his deep-rooted conviction that he was doing right.

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She never cried. How often Maisie had insisted on her sister's abstinence from tears, as though it was something monstrous that summed up all her character! He would have felt far more comfortable in visiting her if he had been assured that she sometimes cried.

As he turned into Brompton Square, he thought he caught the door of his house in the act of closing. He might have been mistaken. It was dark under the shadow of the trees. Quite possibly it had been the door of a neighbor's house. Nevertheless, he hugged the curb as he drove so that he might scan the face of any one on the pavement. Forty yards from his doorstep, at a point where things were darkest, a man passed him. He was a tall man and walked with the erectness of one who had been a soldier. The way in which he carried himself and strode was extraordinarily reminiscent. Tabs slowed down and looked back; the man moved straight ahead, without hesitancy or sign of recognition. It couldn't be Braithwaite; Ann's vicinity was the least likely place in which to find him.

As Tabs let himself into his house, he found Ann in the hall. "Was there some one here to see me?" he asked.

"There's been no one to see your Lordship," Ann replied respectfully.

He scarcely knew what prompted him to say it. Perhaps it was the healthy neatness of her appearance—the extreme orderliness of her quiet. "Ann, you're the sanest creature I meet anywhere. You've the pluck of one in a million."

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She turned to him a face that was flushing and eyes that were unusually bright. "It's good of your Lordship. Your Lordship is always kind."

"No, Ann, only human. I know what you've been through and I'm glad you're getting over it—I have to be away to-night. I shall need some supper. While you're preparing it, I'll pack."

On the way upstairs he telephoned the garage to send for his car and to return it within the hour. Then he climbed the last flight to his bedroom.

While he packed, he kept pausing and knitting his brows. A ridiculous conviction was forming in

his mind. "It couldn't have been," he assured himself. Yet the more he recalled the man on the pavement the more certain he was that he had been Steely Jack. But what motive could Braithwaite have had for calling and why should Ann try to hide the fact that he had called? He had lost trace of him utterly since that day when he had handed him Terry's ultimatum at the Savoy. Since then Terry and he had had many meetings, he did not doubt. Braithwaite's influence clung to her like her shadow. But if he was so in love with Terry, the more reason why he should steer clear of Ann. To have called at Brompton Square would have been asking for a cloudburst. It couldn't have been Braithwaite. And yet—

And then there was Ann. Since that day when the General's portrait had appeared in the papers, she had given up watching for letters marked, "On His Majesty's Service." She had made no further enquiries as to how his Lordship's friend at the War Office was progressing. Her silence told its story; she had learned the truth. In what spirit she had accepted the truth Tabs had no means of guessing. Lady Hamilton, the little maid-of-all-work, had been the beloved of Nelson. Ann was not without her precedent. But the maid-of-all-work had become Lady Hamilton before the Admiral had set eyes on her. Steely Jack was a General, while Ann was still a servant. Her claims would not meet with much applause if they were brought before a jury.

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To all appearance she had resigned herself to the inevitable. Tabs was frankly surprised at her magnanimity and fortitude. About her fortitude there could be no question, but concerning her magnanimity he was not a little skeptical. More than once he had caught her singing as she went about her work. She didn't get all the words correctly; she sang them with improvisations, filling in the gaps where her memory failed. Throughout the war the song had been sung to men on leave at the Alhambra by the heroine who acted the revengeful part of *Tootsie*:

"Some day I'll make you love me.
Some day you'll call me 'Dear'.
You'll feel so lonely
And want me only;
I'm sure you'll want me near.
I know you can't forget me,
Though, dear, for years you'll try.
I'll make you miss me
And want to kiss me,
Bye and bye."

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She was a mystery. If she were playing a game, it was a game the intentions of which he could not fathom. The man whom he had passed on the pavement could not have been Braithwaite. Common-sense insisted on that.

IV

While he was at supper she gave him no chance to question her. "I'm motoring down to Dawn Castle," he told her. "I've left the address on my desk. Don't forward any letters till you hear from me. I don't suppose that I shall be there for more than a day. To tell the truth," he glanced up smiling at her seriousness, "I haven't been invited."

Ann refused to be lured off her perch of reticence. She set before him the dish she was carrying. "I'm sure wherever your Lordship goes there's a welcome."

He felt that he was being reproved. He had been conscious of her silent criticism from the moment he had announced that he would be away for the night. He respected Ann and was anxious for her good opinion. She was by long odds the most honorable woman of his acquaintance and the best, because she was the kindest. He had had the feeling throughout the past two months that there was very little that had happened inside his brain that had escaped her. She had disapproved of Maisie. She had shown no enthusiasm for Terry. She had been aware of his dangers when he himself was disguising them with excuses. All this he knew though no word had been exchanged. She had observed in all her dealings with him the decorum to be expected from a high-class servant. And yet she was his trusted friend, whose virtues compelled his admiration and whose loyalty commanded his affection. She thought ahead for him and smoothed his path. Her sense of responsibility was as tender as a sister's. Her humility lent it a touch of pathos. He looked up to her as men instinctively look up to good women in whatever grade of society they find them. The silent knowledge which each had of the other formed a bond of sympathy, the more delicate because it was unuttered.

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He said, "Long ago—it must have been before the war—I gave you tickets to see Peter Pan."

"It wasn't to me your Lordship gave them. It was to Braithwaite."

"Was it?" He held her eyes, striving to peer behind their curtained windows. It was the first time that that name had been mentioned between them in casual conversation. "You're right. It comes back to me now. It was the Christmas of 1913 that he took you. Do you remember the fairy who was dying? There was only one way of keeping her alive. Peter Pan had to make the children in the audience promise that they believed in fairies. When they did that, she got well. That's why I'm going to Dawn Castle to-night."

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Ann ceased abruptly from what she was doing and stared at her master in concern. He laughed mischievously. "Wrong again, Ann; I've not taken leave of my senses. Two hours ago I made the

same mistake. There was a man who asked me whether I believed that Mrs. Lockwood's first husband, who was killed at the Front, would return. While I was wondering how long it would be before he'd grow violent, he proved to me that he was her first husband. So I'm believing in fairies."

A secret happiness lit up her face. "Deep down beneath our doubts, most of us believe in fairies, I think, your Lordship." With a shy smile she left him.

The purring of an engine warned him that the car had returned and was waiting. He could hear Ann in the hall, handing out his bags. He had finished his supper; he might as well be off. As he drove out of the Square, he looked back; she was standing on the steps, gazing after him. He had the restless certainty, now that it was too late, that she had had a secret which, at the last moment, she would have given the world to have shared with him.

V

Of that night journey in after years he remembered only the deep peace and the ecstasy. He was doing something at last that was right; though why it was right, he would have found it hard to explain. He encountered none of the difficulties he had anticipated in picking up his direction. He flew unswervingly to the mark like a bullet traveling a predestined path. The first sixty miles were familiar; Maisie had covered them with him on many occasions. By every law of emotion each landmark should have stirred some poignant memory, some fresh wistfulness of regret. The fact was that he hardly gave her a thought. When he did, it was only to wish her luck and to congratulate himself on his escape.

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Having passed through Oxford lying blanched in moonlight, he climbed out of the Thames valley, striking through uplands across the wold to Burford. From then on all memories were left behind; he had become an explorer in an unknown country.

Everything was sleeping. How trustfully it slept! Trees were hooded like extinguished candles. Flowers throughout the fields clasped their faces in their hands. Birds, like fluffy balls, drowsed on branches. Stars alone were wakeful. They stooped to watch him with intent, companionable glances. Now and then he had to halt to flash his torch on a sign-post or to consult his map. For the most part he took chances and guessed.

Night engulfed him, rushed past him, broke over him. He was like a ship thrusting forward into a trackless ocean.

The paleness of dawn was in the sky as he neared Gloucester. When he entered, its roofs and towers were precipices of gold and fire, straining up to the New Jerusalem which floated in the clouds. The streets of the ancient city had a mystic look, white and hushed and tenantless. But already the cheeky sparrows were about, scandal-mongering beneath the eaves with an unholy disregard for the awe by which they were surrounded.

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He left Gloucester in a southwesterly direction. In fields the hay was lying cut. A largesse of dew had been scattered through the hedgerows like loot from the treasure-chests of emperors. Larks were battling up, striving to sing against the very bars of heaven. Every fragrance and sound was a messenger, guaranteeing happiness.

Round a bend in the road he came across a cluster of thatched cottages, their white walls gleaming incandescent in the morning sunshine. Beyond them lay a parkland, from the edge of which rose a wooded knoll, crowned by a moated castle. The next mile-stone warned him that it was the village of Dawn he was approaching.

VI

All day he had waited—a lazy summer day, drowsy with the hum of bees and heavy with the perfume of cottage flowers. On entering the village he had put up at *The Dawn Arms*, an old-fashioned hunting hostel which owed its prosperity to the fame of the Dawn foxhounds. Having bathed and breakfasted, he had started off to leave his card on Lady Dawn. Arriving at the Castle, he had been informed that her Ladyship had left early that morning and was not expected back till early evening. He had filled in the morning by sleeping and the afternoon by joining a band of sight-seeing trippers who had driven over from Gloucester in gayly-painted chars-a-bancs.

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With a spice of amusement, he had paid his shilling for admission at the wooden booth outside the Castle gate and had found himself herded with a crowd of affectionately inclined young women and young men who perspired freely—the latter for the sake of greater comfort had removed their coats and knotted handkerchiefs about their throats. In good time a decrepit ex-butler had appeared to act as guide and had led the excursionists over the Norman part of the ruins. He had shown them the dungeons, the room in which a prince had been murdered and the havoc wrought upon the walls by Cromwellian cannon. The ever recurring theme of his trembling narrative was the prowess and the splendor of the Dawns. He was like a weak-voiced cricket chirping in the sunshine. His stories of bygone lords, who had died in rebellions and crusades, were too ancient to grip the imagination. At first his veneration for the race which he served inspired an outward show of respect on the part of his hearers. But soon, in straggling twos and threes, they lagged behind to explore and pluck wall-flowers from the crannies. Girls, feeling the pressure of lovers' arms about their waists, giggled shrilly. They wandered off to shady nooks in

the grass-grown ramparts where woolly sheep looked up somnolently to watch them.

To the few who remained the old man mumbled on. It was the nobility of the late Lord Dawn that he was now recounting—the daring horseman he had been, the deviltry of him, the lust of life he had had, the greatness of his possessions and how he had foregone all this beauty to be hammered into the defilement of the trenches like a rat, cornered in a sewer.

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"Visitors are not allowed in the part of the Castle that is inhabited. But, since her Ladyship's away——"

Unlocking a door, he led them through a tunnel to a grilled gate, through the bars of which they saw the Castle's terraced rose-gardens, falling away steeply in a cascade of petals to a water-lilled, green-scummed moat which encircled the stronghold like a necklace of jade. Beside the water's edge a fair-haired boy in a white sailor suit was deeply absorbed in sailing a boat.

"His little Lordship," the old man whispered.

"But I didn't know—— How old?" Tabs questioned.

"Eight years, sir, come December."

Long after he had returned to the inn, the picture of the little boy remained with him. This discovery that Lord Dawn had left a son made him the more certain of the justice of his errand.

The azure and emerald of late afternoon drifted into the ensanguined gold of sunset. The long-tarrying twilight had already settled when a messenger arrived, bearing a note. It was from her Ladyship, regretting her absence and saying that she would be happy to receive a visit from Lord Taborley that evening or at any time that was convenient.

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VII

He set out at once. Heretofore, with the exception of Terry, women had meant little to him. But he was curious to meet this woman—curious and eager in a strangely boyish fashion. Every one who had mentioned her had spoken of her with a certain hint of fear, not untinged with adoration. He hadn't been aware how anxious he had been to meet her until her note had summoned him. He wondered whether she had any of the endearing humanity of her sister. He wondered whether what Pollock had said was true, that she looked much older than her portrait. He didn't want her to look older——

He came to the bridge across the moat and the gateway which bore the grooves in which the old portcullis used to slide. He passed through the gateway, under the tower, into the graveled courtyard of the Castle. On three sides the courtyard was loop-holed and sullen, but on the fourth modern windows and a brass-knobbed door had been let into the solid masonry. Above the door, shining down on the whitened steps, a lamp burnt in a wrought-iron socket. Several of the windows were also lighted.

His knock was answered by a gray-haired man, with the gravity of deportment which is peculiar to lawyers, undertakers and footmen. While the man went to inform his mistress, Tabs was left to note how the hall was hung with hunting trophies. Then he heard himself being requested to follow.

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Having climbed a winding stair, he was shown into a room in the turret, one side of which was filled by a tall leaded window gazing westward. The landscape which it framed, hung against the darkness like a painted canvas—a far-reaching expanse of tree-dotted pasture, vague with islands of mist and rimmed by the last faint sparks of the sunset. The ceiling was heavily beamed, the furniture Jacobean, the walls paneled and hung with many generations of family portraits. In a wide hearth a fire of coals and logs was burning. In the room's center stood a carved table on which was set a massive silver lamp, casting a solitary illumination.

"Lord Taborley, my Lady."

As his name was announced, he heard the rustle of her dress, and discovered that she had been seated in a low chair by the window. She rose with a slow grace. There was something indefinably tragic and foreordained about her every movement. Maisie's name for her flashed into his mind, "The Princess Czarina Bolsheviki." It suited her exactly. In those surroundings she might have posed as Mary Queen of Scots in prison—a queen without a kingdom whose pride was unbroken. In the dimness his first impression was of her queenly gentleness.

"I can guess why you've come."

The same deep voice that had taunted him at Maisie's, only now it was no longer taunting! He noticed the way she offered him her hand, with the arm fully extended as if to hold him away from her. She was a smaller woman than he had remembered; it was the courage of her bearing that had made her seem taller. He could not see her face distinctly; it was in shadow. But, when she turned, he caught the whiteness of her profile on the dusk, clear-cut and tranquil as a cameo. After having gazed so long at Sargent's painting, he would have recognized anywhere the rounded shapeliness of her head, the hair swept smoothly back from the calm forehead, the splendid strength of her throat and the delicate, wholly feminine half-moon of her shoulders.

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"Won't you sit over here? If you would prefer it, we can have more lamps. But they would spoil

—" She indicated the vague stretch of country, across which mists were drifting like gray ghosts.

He drew up a chair at an angle to her own, so that he could study her. "You say you think you know why I've come?"

"I was expecting you," she said quietly. He could feel rather than see the steady kindness that was in her stone-gray eyes.

"If you were expecting me, then your sister must have——"

"My sister had nothing to do with my expecting. Can't you think of any one closer?"

He shook his head. At first he had hoped that Maisie had told her and done his work for him. Evidently it wasn't that. She was attributing some other motive to his visit. It was a motive the disclosure of which called for delicacy. She had prearranged his reception. It was no accident that had caused him to find her alone in the dimness of the gathering evening. The scanty lighting of the shadowy room had been stage-set to spare them both embarrassment. "If it wasn't your sister——" He paused at a loss to know how to proceed further.

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Her hands came together gently in her lap. When she spoke, her emotional voice had a new tenderness. "Will you allow me to help you? We're not such strangers as we seem. For years I've been interested in you. I was always hearing of your adventures in Mexico, Korea, the Balkans and last of all at the Front. You've been quite a romantic figure in my life. You've always seemed so strong; and I admire strength immensely. I never dreamt that a time would ever come when I would be able to help you. You're in love and she's not in love with you. You're older than she is and it makes you unhappy. She has time to experiment, but for you it's different; your love is bound up with the last of your youth. Because you've been unhappy, you've been unwise. Your foolishness ended yesterday with the return of Reggie Pollock. I received the news of his return this morning. So you came down here to me, which was perfectly natural."

He shifted his gaze and stared out of the window, puzzled and troubled. "Unfortunately for me, Lady Dawn, a good deal of what you've said is true. But I don't see how it makes it natural that I should have come to you. I've been wanting to come for a very long time, but was given to understand that what I had to say might be distasteful."

"You must put that out of your mind." She said it comfortingly, as though to a little boy. "There's nothing distasteful in what you have to say. It may cause awkwardness with Sir Tobias; but if you can assure me that you're really in earnest over Terry, I'll be quite willing to risk that in order to become your ally."

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He smiled towards her through the darkness. "There's nothing I should like better than to reckon you as my ally. And now I see why we've been talking at cross-purposes. You think that I've come to wheedle Terry's address out of you. Perhaps I have, since you've put the idea into my head. And with regard to my earnestness, nothing except Terry in the whole world matters. She's romance, self-fulfillment and, as you've said, the last dream of my youth. If I supposed that I were going to lose her, I would rather not have—— But I didn't come here to burden you with my troubles. I came to do something for you—something which I've tried to avoid doing. Something which has forced itself upon me and followed me until—— It's as though I'd been compelled by a personality outside myself. I may make you very unhappy——"

She leant forward, bringing her face so close that he could feel the fanning of her breath. The moon was newly risen; as it shone on the mist, low-lying in the meadows, it made the countryside luminous like a vast lake of milk which washed about the trees and submerged the hedges. In its reflected radiance for the first time he saw her features clearly. They startled him, leaping together out of the white blur that they had been into something more lovely than he had imagined. He had never seen such calmness. And the calmness was not alone in her expression; the same sculptured quiet was in the white curve of her arms and the gentle swelling of her breast. He knew now why she was declared to be the most beautiful woman in England. But it was the wisdom of her far more than the beauty that enthralled him. There was no weakness that her sympathy could not encompass—nothing that he need be ashamed to tell her. Though she appeared to be about the same age as himself, by reason of her experience she made him feel younger. No woman who had attracted him before had been able to make him feel that. Already he was filled with a strange sense of gratitude.

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Very simply she took his hand and folded it between her own.

"You, who have been a soldier, were a little afraid of me. Don't be afraid of me, Lord Taborley. Whatever it is that you've come to do for me, I shall try to be grateful. As for making me unhappy, no one—not even you—has the power to do that."

VIII

He looked at her wonderingly. "They say you never cry."

A slow smile flitted across her face and died out. "You want the truth? You yourself tell the truth—— When they say that I never cry, they mean that I never let them see me."

He laughed softly. "I thought it was that: you cry in secret like a man. Not to cry at all would be

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monstrous; it was that which made me afraid of you. A man doesn't like a woman to be stronger than himself. It was about a man who didn't like a woman to be stronger than himself that I came to talk to you."

She had guessed. Through her hands he could feel the commotion of her life struggle and die down till it grew almost silent. The stillness of the room seemed a backwater of the intenser stillness of the night without.

Her lips scarcely moved. "And the man?"

"Your husband."

"But he's dead."

"I know."

He waited for her to flame up at the indelicacy of his intrusion. He almost hoped she would. When she sat motionless as a statue, he continued apologetically. "I'm trespassing on things sacred. Because of that I've fought to avoid this meeting, knowing all the time that it was inevitable. I've tried to persuade myself that it would be kinder to leave you in ignorance——"

"Of what?" She strove to subdue her apprehension. Her profile showed pale and expressionless, as if chiseled in the solid wall of darkness.

"In ignorance of his grandeur."

He had said the thing most remote from what she had expected. He was aware of her relieved suspense—at the same time of her gentle skepticism. He felt irritated with himself at his choice of words. Grandeur did not express the meaning he had intended. When he made a new start, he stumbled his way gropingly, confused by his consciousness of her unuttered doubts.

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"Why I have to tell you this I can hardly say. It's not for his sake. It's certainly not for mine. It's for yours, I fancy. Yes, I'm sure. By doing him justice I shall be able to help you, though I have no reason for supposing that you stand in need of help. It's to do him justice that he's been urging me. Yet why should he have selected me to be his spokesman? I wasn't his friend. I never met him till I reached the Front; out there I really never knew him. No one did. He was like a sleep-walker—a very silent man. You'll be wondering why, if this was the case, I should be so impertinent as to mention his name to you—to you of all persons, who can claim to have known him infinitely more intimately than any one else. And you'll be wondering why, after two months of procrastinating, I motored through the night from London to force my way into your privacy, without forewarning or introduction. If I'm going to be honest, I must run the risk of appearing absurd. I could resist him no longer. He coerced me with ill-luck. Ever since I entered your sister's house and discovered who you were, he's been urging——"

"Who I was!" Her head turned slowly. It was her first intense display of interest.

"I mean your relation to him—that it was you who were his wife. At the Front I didn't know that he was Lord Dawn; he'd blotted out his identity. He was merely gun-fodder like the rest of us—something to be sent over the top to be smashed and then to be left to sink into the mud or else hurried back to be patched up in hospital. He was a company-commander in my battalion. I knew nothing of his past. My acquaintance with him began and ended in the trenches. I don't know much now—only what Maisie's told me." He had been speaking with growing earnestness. Suddenly he flashed into indignant vehemence. "What Maisie's told me! It's false of the man as he was out there. He wants you to believe that. Out there he was different. He may have been paltry and base once; but he was reborn into a new nobility. He was white all through. He was overpoweringly heroic. From the humblest Tommy we all adored him—adored him for the example he set us. He was only cheerful when there was dying to be done—out at rest and in quiet sectors he was gloomy. The men loved him for that; it struck them as humorous. And yet he was utterly indifferent to their love. He'd got beyond caring for what anybody thought of him. He was too absorbed in establishing reasons for thinking well of himself. I learnt things about him—one does in the presence of physical torture. I learnt secrets about the fineness of his spirit which, I believe, he never allowed you to suspect. Probably he never suspected them himself until the ordeal of terror had sifted the gold from the dross. It was the dross that Maisie remembered. But we, who were his comrades in khaki, saw nothing but the gold—his untiring ability to share. You weren't there; nevertheless, that's what I've got to help you to understand. I've got to make you see the new Lord Dawn who was born out there. It was last night, after Pollock returned, that I saw my duty clearly. It came on me in a flash that, if a man who had been counted dead could come back, it was not impossible that this pleading from beyond the grave, which I'd tried to thwart and ridicule——"

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He broke off abruptly. It was the wideness of her eyes that warned him. He was conscious that she, too, was feeling that invisible pressure. She was expecting to see something. He followed the direction of her eyes, glancing behind him into the hollow dimness of the room, where the solitary lamp was burning and the vanished lords of Dawn gazed stonily down from their canvases. In that moment he was aware that he had been stating facts as he had never owned them to himself. It was as though his lips had been used——

"Things that he didn't allow me to suspect!" She sighed shudderingly. "He allowed me to suspect so much. But tell me. What were these things? Since they're the reasons for your visit, they must be important."

"They're only part of the reasons."

"There are others?"

"The chief reason is yourself." He spoke cautiously, fearful lest he might lose her attention by rousing her incredulity. Even to himself it sounded preposterous that he, an outsider, should claim to bear so intimate a message from a husband who was dead. "You believed, Lady Dawn, that you had ceased to count in your husband's affections; yet wherever his battalion went, you were present with us. The men and officers knew you, without knowing who you were. You were with us in the mud of the Somme; you went over the top with us in our attacks. More than one young officer believed himself in love with you. Yours was the last woman's face that many a poor fellow looked upon before he went West. We were an emotional lot. Death made us natural as children. Women meant more to us than they ever had before and than they ever will again, perhaps. The nearness to eternity purged us of impurity. It fired us with a wistful kind of chivalry. The change is hard to express. I've known men, who hadn't a wife or sweetheart, cut strange women's portraits from the illustrated papers and treasure them. As we sit here it sounds a waste of sentiment; out there it seemed tragically pathetic. Every man wanted to believe, even though his believing was a conscious pretense, that there was one woman peculiarly his, who would miss ___"

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He interrupted himself to glance again across his shoulder, following her eyes where they probed the stealthy shadows. Then he brought his gaze back. "That was how I first learnt to know your face—from the portrait which your husband carried. Into whatever danger he was ordered, you went—you accompanied him in the most real sense: he carried you in his heart. From time to time I got glimpses of you. When he thought no one was looking, he would prop your portrait against the walls of dug-outs with a candle lighted before it, as if you were a saint whom he worshiped. You were the inspiration of his steadfastness to duty. What he did, he did for you. His courage was your courage; his kindness was your kindness. He was striving every minute to be worthy of you. I know of what I'm talking, for I did the same for Terry. Late at night one would stumble down greasy dug-out stairs, coming in from a patrol, to find him lost in thought and gazing at you. Or one would find him covering page after page of letters which he never sent. When he was dying, alone and far out in No Man's Land, he must have drawn out your portrait from next his heart. It was so tightly clasped in his hand when we found him, that we couldn't take it from him. I'd almost forgotten all this until two months ago, when I recognized Sargent's painting of you in your sister's house. Then for the first time I discovered your name and who he was. Since then he's given me no rest."

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She had been leaning forward, her arm supported on her knee, her chin cushioned in her hand, the white light from the mist-covered meadows falling softly on her through the tall window, revealing the pulse beating in her throat and the trembling of her thin sweet mouth.

"What was it that he wanted you to do for me, Lord Taborley?"

He hesitated, clasping his forehead, like a man whose memory had suddenly gone blank. "I'm not sure. And yet I was sure before I started talking. Didn't you believe that he died hating you?"

She shook her head. "He left a child by me."

"Then, perhaps it wasn't that he hadn't hated you, but that he'd loved you in his last moments. Was it that which he wanted me to tell you?"

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Again, with a gesture, she negatived his suggestion. "He'd never have doubted that I would know he had died loving me."

"Then why did he send me?"

Even while he asked it, he marveled at his certainty that she shared his conviction that he had been sent.

She turned her eyes full on his face and let them dwell there searchingly. As he returned her gaze, he noted that she was less young than he had supposed. She was older than her portrait. Her hair, which had looked night-black in the shadows, was prematurely frosted. The moonlight, strengthening, picked out remorselessly each silver thread. She was no longer capable of putting back the hands of time for any man.

She had read his thoughts. The pride went out of her voice. "Perhaps he sent you," she faltered, "that he might give me back a little of what he took."

"What did he take? Anything that I have—"

She leant back in her chair. Her face was again in shadow. "My youth. My happiness."

In the silence which followed he was aware that the third presence had departed.

IX

"Your youth! Your happiness!" He was astounded. "Strange that you should say that! I thought that I alone was searching."

"Let me talk," she begged. "I want to speak about myself. Not for my own sake, but for yours. To men like you who have lived at the Front, life has become a terribly earnest affair. You're like

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impatient children; what you want you want quickly. You seem to be afraid to postpone anything lest death should carry you off before your desire has been granted. But you're not really different from women like myself. Crises come to all of us, when life grows desperate—when to be alone becomes intolerable: when everything, even one's pleasures, becomes a burden, because they are unshared. Such a crisis would have come to you sooner or later in any event. It comes to every unmarried man and woman. The war only happened to be the means of bringing home to you your loneliness. When it broke, you didn't have time to choose; you seized on Terry, because she was young and pretty and susceptible. You were terrified by the calamity of being blotted out before you had known love. You forgot that there's a worse calamity—and that's being compelled to live forever with a person for whom you have ceased to care. A man like yourself can have any woman he likes, only any woman wouldn't suit. She would have to be unusual—of a high type like yourself. Such women are rare. The thought of Terry attracts you because a marriage with her would seem to halve your years. But why should you want to halve your years? To have lived ought to mean that you have gained experience, which is the most dearly purchased form of knowledge. Why should you be ashamed of it and so anxious to be rid of it? You purchased your experience with blood. It's the most valuable of all your possessions. And if you were to marry Terry, what could she contribute? A pretty face, an unbroken body and all the intolerance of her youth. A pretty face doesn't go far in matrimony. Husbands soon get used to mere prettiness and learn to look behind it for character. A wife, in order to be your friend, would have to be your equal in her understanding of suffering. How much suffering has a girl like Terry had?"

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He wasn't angry. He wasn't even offended. What she had been saying had so clarified his thoughts that it had been as if he had been thinking aloud. Her voice was a dark mirror, glancing into which he had recognized himself. His self-knowledge carried him far beyond any arguments of hers. He sat perfectly still with a face of iron, gazing straight before him.

What he had mistaken for chivalry and romance had been nothing but foolishness. He had been enacting the un wisdom of an infatuated boy with the solemnity of a mature man. His clamor had been unprofitable, undignified, absurd—on a level with the amorous hysterics of Grand Opera, save that it had lacked the redeeming storm of contending music. The utter futility of so much wasted feeling bordered on tragedy; the need which it had expressed had been so primitive, so distressingly sincere. He was confronted with the necessity of confessing that his passion for Terry was at an end.

When had it died? Perhaps only since he had entered this quiet room, with its moonlit landscape, its lowered lights and its wise mistress, sitting so gravely alone with her patient beauty and her gently folded hands. But even before he had entered, it must have been dying. For weeks he had been flogging it, like an over-tired horse, into a feeble display of energy. More than anything, his conduct with Maisie proved that.

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Maisie's excuse for the error of her many marriages recurred to him—that Gervis and Lockwood had hung up their hats in her hall. Frivolous, yes! But had he been less frivolous in his treatment of Terry? He had felt the compulsion to concentrate his craving to love and be loved on some special woman! Terry had been handiest, so he'd hung his idolatry on her.

But to acknowledge this implied a fickleness of temperament that was disastrous to his self-respect. It deflated him to the proportions of an Adair. It toppled his lofty standards in the dust. It changed him from a loyalist, making a fanatical last stand, into a haggard runaway.

His pride leapt up in his defense. Turning to Lady Dawn, with grim despair he muttered, "But I want her. I can't do without her. I want no one else."

X

Her voice reached him out of the darkness. "To own that we've been mistaken takes more courage than to persist in the wrong direction. 'I want no one else!' We've all said that. It was through saying it that I brought about my shipwreck. But if you're sure that you want no one else, you must have her. If there's any way of getting her for you, I'll do my best to help."

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She made an effort to rise. She stood before him swaying, a blinded look on her face, her eyes closed, her hands stretched out. He placed his arm about her. Her weight sagged against him.

"Not the servants," she whispered. "You and I. Give me air."

With his free hand he jerked the catch and pushed the window wide. The cool dampness of the night streamed in on her. He stood there with her clasped against him, her head stretched back, her body drooping. In the bowl of darkness at the foot of the turret, the rose-garden floated. Out of sight, in the green-scummed moat, a fish leapt with a sullen splash. A bird called. Wheels rumbled on a distant road. Again the silence was unbroken. The moonlight, falling on her face, gave to it an expression of childishness. Her breast and throat, gleaming white as marble, reminded him she was a woman.

She stirred. Her eyes opened. She gazed up at him wonderingly. "I'm better. Foolish of me!" Then, inconsequently, "How tall you are, Lord Taborley!"

He supported her till she could lean across the sill. They leant there together, their faces nearly touching. His arm was still about her; she did not seem to notice it. He was dumb with tremulous

expectancy.

"It was about myself that I had to tell you," she whispered. "I was once like you. I wanted no one else. I knew, even while I wanted him, that he could never make me happy. Even when I was most in love with him, he had qualities which I distrusted. After marriage the distrusting grew. Yet all the while I was sorry for him. I would have given anything to undo— His sins were mine. With another woman, less virtuous, he might have been good. In his yearning he tried to drag me down. I couldn't go, not even if going would have saved him. There was something in me, not exactly pride, that prevented. I have never spoken of this to anybody. I'm saying it to you because ___"

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She broke off. Why was she saying it? The perfume of June roses under moonlight, mingling with the fragrance of her hair, was intoxicating. His arm about her tightened. Was she only allowing him to hold her out of pity because of his confession?

"Because," she said, "I think before she knows of your visit it would be better that you should go."

He failed to grasp her logic. "But if I stay, she will never know."

She released herself gently and gazed at him reproachfully. "Never know! But you came in order that she might know."

He was more than ever puzzled. He had come to tell her of her husband. Did she not believe him? She seemed to be accusing him. He remembered how she had claimed, when he had entered, that she could guess what had brought him. "I came solely to see you," he said, speaking slowly. "I was compelled, as I've told you. I give you my word of honor that my visit wasn't even remotely related to—"

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A sharply indrawn breath cut short what he was saying. They turned quickly, moving instinctively apart. Gazing in from the open door, across the pool of lamplight, was Terry.

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CHAPTER THE EIGHTH

ROUND THE CORNER

I

Lady Dawn was the first to recover her composure. "Why, Terry, I thought you were in bed!"

"I was."

Terry's eyes shifted from Lady Dawn to Tabs. They were startled and misty with sleep. She seemed only half-awake. Her hand rested on the door as if ready for retreat. Her square little face was flushed; her gold, bobbed hair was flattened where it had pressed against the pillow. She was clad in a filmy negligée; her bare feet had been pushed hastily into slippers and peeped out rosily from beneath the hem. She looked immature—the way she had in days gone by when he had tiptoed to her bedside through the darkness to feel her tight little arms leap stranglingly about his neck. She had been really a tiny girl then. Why couldn't she have stayed like that always? Why need she have roused in him this torturing desire which she did nothing but rebuff?

"I was asleep. I heard voices. I thought—"

What had she thought? How much had she seen and heard? How long had she been standing there?

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Tabs attempted to bridge the awkward silence. "I drove down from London." Then he added, "That was last night."

None of them had stirred. Lady Dawn advanced from the window into the pool of lamplight. "I think I know what you thought—that something was wrong. It was. I nearly fainted. If it hadn't been for Lord Taborley— But come inside. Why do you remain standing there?"

Terry stepped just across the threshold. Having closed the door, she leant against it, still holding the knob in her hand. It was plain that she was making an effort to be valiant. She looked fragile as a peeled white wand; like a flower, shy and dew-wet. Life had not yet commenced to break her. The clinging folds of her wrap emphasized her slenderness, the grace of her lines and the girlish contours of her figure.

Lady Dawn went to her and put her arm about her. "You're afraid. Of what are you afraid? Surely not of Lord Taborley? He's been telling me— To be loved like that— There was a time when I would have been proud."

Terry's left hand went up to her breast. Her wild violet eyes looked straight before her, seeking always the face of Tabs. They seemed to call to him. He came slowly to the table where she could see him. It was his chance. Lady Dawn was his advocate. It was the chance for which he had waited.

He was contrasting the two women before him; the one in her dainty, enviable promise and the dumb hostility of her youth; the other in the gentleness of her experience and the charity of her dearly purchased understanding. Terry, whom he had loved since she was a child, had become inscrutable. But Lady Dawn— Was it her suffering that made him know her as he knew himself?

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"I hadn't meant to intrude on you," he apologized. "I hadn't the least idea you were here. How should I have had? You disappeared without warning; at your father's house your address was refused me. Lady Dawn will bear me out that, at the very moment you entered, I was assuring her that my visit had nothing to do with you. Probably you heard."

"Nothing to do with me!" There was relief in her way of saying it. She visibly relaxed. "Then it isn't because of me at all that you're here?"

The suppressed eagerness of her question was wounding. She wanted to hear him state more positively that she had had nothing to do with his visit. Whatever she had seen before they had become aware of her, had had no power to rouse her jealousy. She could have given him no stronger proof of how absolutely he had ceased to count. He smiled bitterly. "Not because of you at all, Terry. The reason for my being here is strictly private between Lady Dawn and myself. I didn't come to worry you. You may set your mind at rest."

"Then you didn't know or even suspect——"

He laughed unhappily. "What more can I say to convince you? I haven't the least idea what you suppose I could suspect. What business is it of mine to suspect anything? And if I did, what license should I have to interfere? We're not as we once were. There are no longer any sentimental obligations that would hold us accountable to each other. You've shown me that you consider our relation ended. In the face of that, I should scarcely follow you into the country where, by all accounts, you've come to escape me. It's purely a coincidence that you find me here."

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He caught Lady Dawn's eyes resting on him. They were wide and clear and interrogating. He knew what she was remembering: that it was in this room within the hour that he had said, "But I want her. I can't do without her. I want no one else." Self-ridicule tempered his spirit into sharpness. He turned again to Terry.

"Once and for all I should like to set your doubts at rest. You need have no fear that I shall ever inconvenience you. We're bound to meet from time to time, but I pledge you my word that I shall never refer to the past. You're of an age to make decisions for yourself; you've decided against me. You're acting quite within your privilege when you discard old friends. You'll wonder why I state obvious facts. I'm doing so in order that you may feel certain that I've withdrawn whatever claims I had for influencing your movements. I shall always be interested—— But as for presuming that anything that I might say or do would make the least difference to your plans, I shouldn't be so foolish——"

Breaking away from Lady Dawn, she crossed over to him. Resting her hand on his arm, she sank her voice and commenced speaking so hurriedly that he alone could make out what she said.

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"I've been false and foolish. I don't need you to tell me. If you knew how miserable I've been and how I've despised myself—— But I can't help it. I go on doing things. I never used to be a beast—— least of all to you; never until you wanted me to marry you. If I can act like this now, what sort of a wife—— Can't you understand? I'm trying to spare you. But I won't have you hate me, Tabs. I can't endure that. Every second that I've kept away from you, I've been wanting—not the *you* that you are now, but the old you. Won't you start afresh, liking me the way you did when—before this happened?" She seized his hand on the impulse and pressed it to her lips. It was the humble act of a small girl. "Love me just a little. I'm not really bad. Please, please forgive me my wickedness, dear Tabs."

He stood dumbfounded and embarrassed. If they had been alone, he would have known what to do. He was at a loss to find a motive for this display of passion. Was it a ruse to get him back? He crushed the suspicion as unworthy. Then was it what she had seen that had made her possessive? Her tears fell scalding on his hands.

He drew her to him. "There, there, little Terry! You mustn't. There's nothing to cry about. There's nothing wicked in not having loved a man. It's a thing that can't be helped."

At the sign of his relenting, she threw away the last of her control. Burying her face against his coat, she clung to him. All that he could see of her was her golden head and her slight body, quivering with sobbing. Her voice reached him muffled. "But I am wicked. I've pushed you from me. If you knew—— If you did, you wouldn't touch me."

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There had been no sound, yet something warned him. He looked up. The door was closing.

"Lady Dawn," he called. In his voice there was the tremor of anxiety.

On the point of vanishing, she glanced back across her shoulder. "What is it, Lord Taborley?"

The calmness of her austerity made emotion seem shallow. There was a touch of scorn in her repose.

"Won't you help?"

She smiled faintly. "I was. I was going."

"Then please don't. It's late. Both you and she must be worn out."

Like a figure of silver, she came coldly back. But there was only tenderness in her voice when she spoke. "Terry, did you hear what Lord Taborley said? He thinks he ought to be going."

Slipping her arm about the girl, she led her from him. Their footsteps died out on the turret stairs.

He waited, hoping that Lady Dawn would return. Now that she was gone, he was invaded with his old loneliness. The dead lords eyed him cynically from their canvases. Through leaded panes the moonlight fell. It seemed the sorcery of her spirit. The perfume of the rose-garden was her breath. How pale she had made his dream of Terry! How trivial she made all women look when she stood beside them! There was nothing in this gift of youth for which he had clamored. Terry's youth, had he married her, would have been his scourge. He knew at last what it was that he required at the hands of a woman—it was rest.

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There was no sound. The Castle was intensely still. He lowered the wick of the lamp before he left, watched the flame splutter and waited till it sank. Tiptoeing softly down the stairs, he slipped out noiselessly into the romance of the summer's night.

II

Next morning, for the first few seconds after he had wakened, he lay wondering why he was so happy. Then he remembered.

He had never had a friendship with a woman. From the start, though he had hidden the fact from himself, his supposed friendship with Maisie had been nothing less than lazy courtship. Terry had detected that when she had said that he wouldn't have been so interested in Maisie if she hadn't been so desperately good-looking. Until this morning he had had no faith in such friendships. He had believed that their fundamental attraction, however well concealed, must always be sex. They could never be more than a pretense, in which either the man or the woman was cheating—the one being anxious to give more than friendship, the other deriving amusement from giving less. He had held that such relations between men and women were inherently dishonest, doomed to end in a clash of desire or to broaden into an honorable love affair. There was no middle course between coveting a woman and neglecting her as entirely dispensable.

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But this morning his point of view was altered. He was confident that his interest in Lady Dawn was on an utterly different footing. He had never had this peacefulness of feeling for any woman. He marveled at it. He had to fight the disillusion that it might be no more than a mood. His liking for her had come to him so suddenly. Suddenness in the emotions prompted him to distrust. Yet his present contentment seemed as secure as it was incomprehensible. His new affection compensated him for all previous failures and atoned for the humiliation of every past regret.

At that word "affection" he halted himself. Was it affection that he entertained for Lady Dawn? He took a good look at the suspected word and decided that it was. But it was the affection of reverence. In owning this much he qualified his admission by insisting that his affection was totally devoid of passion. Passion in the presence of Lady Dawn looked hysteric and paltry. She inspired a serenity which had nothing to do with the physical. It was the charm of her character that entranced him. Her body scarcely figured in his thoughts; when it did, it failed to stir him. It was no more than the gracious vehicle through which the beauty of her spirit was expressed.

His paramount emotion was gratitude—gratitude that she, who was reputed to be so cold, should so instantly have unveiled herself. There was a startling purity in the frankness with which she had bared her spirit to him. It left him awed and touched. He recognized the generosity which had prompted her; she had realized his need of a woman's trust. And so she had withheld nothing that would comfort him. She had made him feel safe, the way a mother does. She had picked up the little boy that lies hidden in the heart of every man, and had folded him in her breast.

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It had been shameless of her. He had not guessed that a woman could be so good.

And she had made him so finally sure of her. He felt that he could leave her and know that her protection would follow him. He could return and be equally certain that none of her understanding would have vanished. She was the first woman who had impressed him with her wisdom; the only one who had had the courage to offer him her strength.

And this was not love. He smiled exultantly. It was nobler and infinitely more rare. Love, as he had read of it and mistaken it in his experience, was a devastating energy, greedy and devouring. It was a continual, nagging contention between self-abasement and hostility. It was a humiliating attempt on the part of a man to barter something, which was persistently undervalued, for the feminine equivalent which was as persistently hoarded. It was an amalgam of physical yearning, wounded vanity and resentment of contempt. It was egotism masquerading as altruism. It was a dancing bear lumbering at the heels of insanity. Of all the passions it was the most hypocritical—a snare-setter, a digger of pitfalls, an enemy disguised as one's dearest friend. He thanked God there was no hint of love in his new-found friendship. Like an outcast fleeing from a storm, he had blundered against the door of this woman's charity, had felt it yield beneath his touch, and had found himself immersed in the blessedness of instant and unmerited rest.

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Lazily he commenced to dress. From his window he could see the Castle, perched grave and gray against the forehead of the clouds. He wondered whether she was up, how she was occupying herself, whether she was expecting him? He listened to her voice in the silence of his brain, like the far-away singing of contralto bells. He saw her still face, her slow smiling, the proud, sweet stateliness of her pacing steps. Then his thoughts went back to whether he was expected.

If he were not— The thought chilled him. She had said nothing to encourage him to seek her afresh. What if his reappearance should cause her embarrassment—an embarrassment which she would betray by withholding herself? It was quite likely she would impute to him wrong motives. Already she might have repented of intimacies she had allowed. He had placed his arm about her. With the injustice of most women, though she had permitted it, she might be blaming him because the act had been witnessed by Terry. Terry of all persons! Having had time to reflect, she might be accusing him of gallantries. It was not so long since she had confused him with Adair. From her untypical knowledge of him she was entitled to estimate him as the kind of man to whom promiscuous caresses were a practice. He turned coward at the recollection of his daring. Last night it had been so involuntary and had seemed so natural. Why had he done it? Why had she allowed it? It had been the liberty of a plow-boy with a village-girl. There would be little room for wonder if, when next they met, she fixed a No Man's Land of pride between herself and his familiarity. She would have good reason, for their companionship would be shared by Terry. Poor little Terry, with her exaggerated sins and distorted self-accusations!

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He wandered down to breakfast disturbed by these apprehensions. As the morning dragged by they took shape as facts. Towards noon he could tolerate his uncertainty no longer. He turned his steps in the direction of the Castle, having first determined, if he found himself unwelcome, to announce that the purpose of his visit was to bid good-by before setting out for London.

III

He had been shown into the turret room and supplied with the daily papers, while the same grave image who had admitted him the night before, had departed in search of her Ladyship. More to calm himself than to satisfy his curiosity, he commenced to glance through the news.

It was a disjointed world that the pages reflected—not at all the kingdom round the corner for which the war had been fought. Honor, patriotism, heroism seemed forgotten words. The old ruthless scramble of commercialism had restarted. The honesty of everybody, whether individuals, governments or nations, was being doubted. Class and race hatreds had broken loose. Strikes were pending. The Allies were allied only in name; they gnashed their teeth at one another across the council-table in Paris. The lying game of diplomacy had been revived. Poison-notes were being exchanged. The tabby-cat statesmen who had been too old to fight, were busy sowing the seeds of future wars. The politicians who had nailed mankind to the cross, were casting lots for the raiment which had survived the sacrifice. No one asked, "Is this righteousness?" The only question was, "How much of it belongs to me?" Meanwhile, the children of honest men who had died, starved by their hundreds of thousands. Mothers pressed sick babies to their milkless breasts. The mutilated, stoical with neglect, shuffled along the pavements. Fanatics of despair turned hopeful eyes to Russia where a devilment was brewing which, should it overboil, would pour destruction across five continents. No one cared.

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He glanced through the window at the quiet landscape, lying green and sun-dappled against the wet, gray streak of summer sky. Was his own experience so universal? Were kingdoms perpetually round the corner, always and always out of sight?

As he again took up the paper, his eye was caught by a head-line: STEELY JACK RUNS FOR PARLIAMENT. Immediately he forgot his pessimism and became absorbed. Braithwaite had come out with the true story of his life. He was calling on the seven million men who had seen service to fight on in peace for the ideals for which they had fought in war. He insisted that if they cast their votes together as one man, they could control any election. If they combined with the patriot ex-soldiers of other nations, they could control the world. He was out to smash politics and the disastrous iniquity of political compromise. His aim was to restore the comradeship and sharing which had enabled the old front-line to stand fast. He was establishing a paper. He was speechifying. He was to hold an immense mass meeting in the Albert Hall—

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Tabs laughed in sheer excitement. Here was one man at any rate who wasn't content to miss his kingdom. He might have known it. He could see Braithwaite's bleak look as clearly as if he stood before him. His instinct was to join him and say to him, in the words of the coster, "You and me was pals out there." He'd never lost an inch of trench.

"Bravo, Braithwaite!"

IV

"I beg your pardon, your Lordship."

Tabs looked up. The dignified image had returned and was standing in the doorway, with his chin thrust out and his nose at a high angle with his collar.

The man coughed deferentially. "If your Lordship will follow me——"

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But at that moment he heard her calling from beneath the turret wall, "Lord Taborley!"

Jumping to his feet, he hurried to the window and leant out. She was in her riding habit, standing on the terrace above the rose-garden. "I've just got back from my morning ride. I have to visit the kennels. I was wondering whether you would accompany me."

He turned to the footman. "If you'll show me the way out to the terrace, I can find Lady Dawn myself."

She had moved farther away to where the steps led down between the rose-bushes. As he came towards her through the sunlight, she pretended not to notice him, but stood meditatively flicking the dust from the toe of her boot with her crop. Even when he joined her, she did not look up. They descended the steps in silence. When they had turned along a path, where no one could observe them, she raised her eyes. "I was afraid you had left."

He smiled, unconsciously imitating her quietness. "And I, too, was afraid. I was afraid you would not want me."

"Why not?" She stopped to pluck a bud in passing. "I should think any woman would want you."

He looked to see if she were chaffing. "Last night," he explained, "you were present when at least one woman didn't want me. That was why——"

She shot a glance at him with her honest, stone-gray eyes. Her hands started out to touch him, but she recalled them. "You must feel sorry for her," she said softly. "She's so young. I think you'll live to thank her. She'll learn that men like you don't come every day—only once in a lifetime."

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"I was afraid you had left."

"I was afraid you had left."

Uneasily he harked back to her first statement. "Why did you fear that I had left?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "You had nothing for which to stay."

"There was you."

"Me!" She laughed wisely. "You had to say that out of politeness. In a man's world I'm of no consequence. I know how I appear in your eyes. I've been married, so I'm no longer a novelty. I'm not so young as I was; I shall be older. And then I'm a mother—you forget that, Lord Taborley. Oh no, I have no attractions to offer."

"You have friendship."

"Friendship!" She repeated the word with a shake of her head. "Men never want merely friendship; they want less or more. They want vivacity—some one who will halve their years, with whom they can sport and romp. Some one who can have babies to them—little pink babies, with squirmy toes and baldy heads. They want to begin everything afresh. They're not looking for another man's left-overs. Even in the matter of disillusionizing a woman, they want to do that for themselves. Men who've not been married, demand that a woman shall be doing everything, as they are doing it, for the first time. It's their right."

"But there's another side," he protested. "A woman who's been married has gained experience—the most dearly purchased form of knowledge, as you yourself have told me. She can be trusted not to expect the impossible. She's been over the course and knows the pitfalls. She's learnt the value of compromise. She ought to have learnt how to be kind. I think kindness is the thing that matters most. Few people are born with it. You have to have been wretched to acquire the knack of it."

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"And yet you have it," she glanced sideways at him humorously, "and you haven't been married."

Realizing the drift of their conversation, he pulled himself up. He feared lest she suspected him of flirting. "You're very generous, Lady Dawn."

They had arrived at a lookout point, where a lichen-covered summerhouse stood, protected on the steeper side by a low stone wall. Below them lay the moat, green-scummed and starred with water-lilies; throbbing in the midday haze, the emerald sward of the parkland seemed to float. Against the wall she halted. "What makes you say that I'm generous?"

For all his thirty-six years, he blushed like a boy. "Because you take me seriously. After last night you might have been either amused or annoyed. The position in which I placed you was false. You thought that I'd come from London to urge Terry to marry me. When I told you that there was no one else in the world, you believed that I knew she was staying with you—that I was trying to persuade you to plead my cause. The anti-climax, after she'd surprised us, was the height of tragical absurdity. It reduced all my high-flown sentiments to farce. I wonder you were able to prevent yourself from laughing. Terry could afford such a scene; she's little more than a child. I can't. With four more years to my age I could pass for her father. No, please. I want to be hard on myself. Let me finish what I'm saying. I've only met you twice; on each occasion I've suffered a loss of dignity. The other time was when I tried to turn you away from Maisie's door. You're probably aware that since then, until Pollock's return, I've seen far more of your sister than was wise. In fact I've offered myself like a job lot. And yet there was a time when I was content to wait. I believed that one had only to be faithful and he'd find what he hoped for round some future corner. You're a proud woman, Lady Dawn. You admire strength almost cruelly. You're inhumanly infallible—"

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Her eyes filled. She slipped her hand through his arm and patted it comfortingly. By the contact she was comforting herself as well. "I'm not. I wasn't infallible when I married. My pride came later to cover up my fault. I don't say it to flatter you—any woman would want you."

He gazed down at her. "How gentle you are!"

"I understand."

They strolled along in contented silence. They had trespassed far beyond the bounds of discretion. A diversion was caused when they reached the kennels. He watched her among the leaping hounds. She employed the same tactics to quiet them that she had used with himself. With a coaxing word and a caress she had them crouching at her feet. He listened to the precision of her orders and the definiteness of her enquiries.

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"You'd have made a business woman," he remarked.

She laughed. "I could if I'd been forced." And then, "By the way, you're lunching with me, aren't you?"

"I'll be delighted. But, since confessions are the fashion, I may as well make a clean breast. If I had found that you were upset with what happened last night, I'd planned to tell you I was off to London."

"But you're not?"

"One doesn't run away from happiness."

He was afraid he had offended. Her expression clouded. She withdrew and walked a few paces apart. He had come almost to the point of apologizing, when she turned to him eyes that were misty—suspiciously misty for a woman who never cried. "I'm glad you had the courage to tell me, because I haven't felt so happy for—I daren't own how long."

On entering the Castle, she left him while she went to change for lunch. As he waited, he reminded himself that in a handful of seconds he would be meeting Terry. The anticipation provided him with none of the old elation. With what ecstasy he used to watch for her in days gone by, as though the world was reborn when she stood before him! Far from feeling ecstasy, he was filled with uneasiness. Her presence would recall to him his failure and would mock something beautiful that had commenced in his life. What that something was he hadn't estimated. All he knew was that, with the coming of Lady Dawn, every one of his problems had mysteriously found settlement. He was no longer humiliated. He was once more sure of his direction. He felt unreasonably strong and triumphant, as though the goal of his striving was in sight. His old dread of growing middle-aged impressed him as puerile. Whatever his age, she would always keep pace with him. She was the same age as he was. Had he been younger or older, he might have missed her or gone by her with unseeing eyes.

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When he entered the room in which lunch was served, he found that Lady Dawn was alone. Glancing at the table, he perceived with surprise that only two covers had been laid. She read the question in his eyes and answered it.

"Terry's away. I forgot to tell you. She had an early breakfast and motored into Gloucester before I was up. The car's come back without her. She's sent no word as to when or how she proposes to return."

"Something urgent?" he asked casually.

"More likely shopping. A woman's shopping's always urgent. I'm no wiser than you are. The first I heard about her going was when I was informed she had gone."

He relapsed into thought. It wasn't difficult to conjecture the reason for Terry's errand. She'd been no more anxious to meet him just at present than he had been to meet her. She'd taken the

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day off in the hope that by nightfall he would have departed.

Another solution occurred to him. "Did she ever mention to you a General Braithwaite?"

Lady Dawn met his eyes with a hint of warning. Listeners were present. "I believe she did," she admitted discouragingly.

"The only reason why I asked was that his name's in the morning papers. She may have seen it before she started. If so, it might explain——"

"John will know." Lady Dawn turned to the footman. "Did Miss Beddow read the papers, John, this morning before she left?"

"She did, my Lady. It was after she had read them that she ordered the car."

"Then that's it." Tabs dismissed the subject as unworthy of further discussing. "She went to Gloucester to hurry off a telegram of congratulation. Braithwaite's had a stroke of luck."

"If that is all," Lady Dawn smiled mischievously, "I wonder that she didn't come back in the car. A telegram can be dispatched in five minutes."

From then on, the threat of Terry's return hung over them, urging them to make the most of their respite. Everything that had started between them was so new and uncertain. No time-limit had been set to Tabs' visit; his original reason for coming to Dawn Castle was exhausted. There was no sufficiently plausible excuse for prolonging his stay in the village longer. A little absence, a little carelessness of forgetting, a few new interests and who could say but that this sudden need of each other, which had rushed them together with such compelling impulse, might not subside as unaccountably as it had occurred. In both their hearts this dread was present—this distrust of the permanency of their emotions. If they parted, they might meet again to find the magic irrecoverable.

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After lunch they retired to the room in the turret. She chose her favorite chair by the window and sat there sewing, with her work-basket at her feet. He sat opposite, watching the busy occupation of her hands. He noticed that many of the garments which she mended belonged to the small boy whom he had seen in the rose-garden.

She looked up. "I always do everything for Eric."

It was later, when tea was being served, that the small boy himself peered in on them. Tabs caught his jealous eyes peering round the doorway. "Won't you come and talk to me?"

But the child ran away, despite his mother's coaxings, and refused to divulge his place of hiding.

She apologized. "He's not quite eight yet—the only sweetheart I have." Later she said, "I've been thinking of what we talked last night—I mean his father. Would it be too far-fetched to believe that it was really he and not your imagination, that piloted us together?"

"Not far-fetched at all. I'm sure of it. He wanted us to meet that I might tell you——"

"What?" She bent forward, folding her hands in her lap and watching him searchingly. "Not about his heroism; he'd take that for granted. Not that he'd loved me; we both knew it. Not anything self-pitying or weak that would rouse my regret——"

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"You know." His assertion was almost a question. "Somehow he's got his message across to you."

She lowered her eyes and resumed her sewing. "I couldn't sleep last night. I lay awake puzzling and remembering—remembering the long waste of years, the loneliness and the love that had turned to bitterness. And now, when ordinarily there would be no chance to make amends, he sends you to me, speaking through your lips and taking possession of your thoughts. He's trying to do something for me—something that will blot out my past for me, as his sacrifice has blotted out his past for him. Something comforting and tender——"

The seconds ticked by. If she had guessed the dead man's desire, she refused to put it into words. The silence grew painful.

Tabs looked at his watch. It was nearer six than five. He rose reluctantly. "I suppose I should be going."

"But you're staying in the village to-night?"

"I hadn't intended. There'll be moonlight. I was planning to be in London by morning."

"Don't do that. You'll make me think you're afraid of meeting Terry. Dine with me to-night."

She had risen. Her gesture was almost one of pleading. He smiled tenderly and took her hand. "Your wishes are mine. I'll run down to the inn and dress."

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By the time he returned it was nearly seven. She met him with ill-concealed trouble. "Terry's not back. It's strange. You see I'm responsible for her. And——"

The footman entered with a letter. "For your Lordship."

"Are you sure?" Then Tabs recollected. "Yes, of course. I left my address with Ann."

As he took the letter he scanned the handwriting. "Odd!" When the man had left, he turned to

Lady Dawn. "It's from her. Did you guess?"

V

"But why should she be writing when she'll be seeing you any minute?"

Tabb squared his lips. He began to feel the stirring of a storm of anxiety. "Perhaps, because she doesn't intend to be seeing me any minute." He looked at the postmark. It had been mailed at eleven o'clock that morning in Gloucester. He tore the envelope and commenced to read. Before he had read far, he turned with a worried expression to Lady Dawn. "This concerns you as well." She came and stood beside his elbow. They glanced through the pages together. It was written on commercial note-paper of *The New Inn*, Gloucester, and ran:

DEAREST TABB:

I love you very much—just as much as ever. I always want you to feel sure of that. But my love isn't the kind you've asked for. It never can be. Because of this there are so many things that I've not been able to tell you—so I've been avoiding and deceiving you ever since you came back. I know I've not been honorable. A promise once given ought to be sacred; I gave you my promise that I would marry you. But that's all I could do for you now—just marry you; I couldn't give you the other things you would have a right to expect. I ought to have said, the other things you have earned and deserved more than any man. So, though I married you, I should still be robbing you, which would be even more treacherous than not fulfilling a promise.

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That I'm in love with General Braithwaite is no news to you. Love may not be the proper word. At least I'm so infatuated with him that there's no room in my heart for any other man. Do you remember that night in March, when you dined with us and asked my father for my hand, and next morning early I came round in a panic to your house? I didn't dare tell you all my trouble. The General had urged me to elope with him. I *wish, wish, wish* that I had. I should be his now and sure of him. By delaying and suspecting I've all but lost him.

I always knew that he would be a big man—as big after the war as he was while it lasted. What this morning's papers say about him proves it. So for all these reasons and because I can't bear to face you at the Castle, I'm taking my fate in my hands. Please tell Lady Dawn that I shan't be back and excuse me in any way you can. I'm only carrying one small bag; she can send the rest of my things after me.

There's one request I have to make—that neither of you will notify my father till at least twenty-four hours have elapsed. All my future happiness may depend on your granting this request. It's the last favor I shall ever ask you.

And now, my very dear Tabb, almost my brother, if this hurts you, please take revenge by bundling me out of your mind. I was never your equal, never worthy of you, though you placed me on a pedestal that was far above you. Comfort yourself by believing that if you'd married me, you would have found this out. What a wretched quitter I appear in my own eyes after all you suffered in the trenches, to have reserved this worse suffering for you, when your life has been spared and you had counted on me for happiness. My entire body's not worth your little finger. And yet how good you've always been to me—

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You'll get a better woman than I am. I think I already know who she'll be; if I'm right, I shall be so very glad.

I feel so humble—so apologetic. It's such a different ending from the one we dreamt when I saw you off on the troop-train with my hair all blowy down my back. There's nothing gained by recalling that. I meant so well by you; you've always been so much to me, my dearest, loyal Tabb.

Even though you despise me, I still insist on signing myself,

Your ever affectionate

TERRY.

"I'm sorry." It was Lady Dawn.

He shook himself. He was so raw that even her sympathy almost wounded. "Don't pity me. It's she we've got to help. What's to be done?"

"Done! I haven't thought. What can we——"

"We can follow her and bring her back. We've got to—and we haven't much time. You must have read between the lines what her letter meant. After having turned Braithwaite down, she's gone off to beg him to elope with her. When a girl puts herself at a man's mercy like that, there's no knowing how he'll act. The chances are that, whatever he does, it won't be honorable. We're got to prevent her, not only for her own sake, but for his sake as well. He's just started on a great career; if this story leaks out, he'll be smashed. They'll both be smashed, for that matter. If she'd

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give him time to marry her honestly, it wouldn't matter whether her family had consented. But she doesn't intend to—that's why she's asked us to keep quiet for twenty-four hours. What we've got to do is not to stop her from marrying him—no one cares about that; but to catch her before she runs off with him."

"But we don't know where——"

"No, we don't." He spoke rapidly. "But we can find out. Ann can tell us. Ann's a maid in my house; she was practically engaged to him when he was my valet. Now that I look back, I'm sure she's known everything from the start and has seen this coming. We can get Braithwaite's address from her; when we know that, we shall have laid our hands on Terry."

While he had been speaking, Lady Dawn had been rummaging through her desk. He went and bent over her, his hands on her shoulders. She was fingering a time-table. She looked up at him with her head leant back. "There's no train—nothing that will reach London till morning."

"Then we must motor."

Her face was still raised to his. She spoke softly. "*We!* You say *we* every time. Do you mean—— What do you mean, Lord Taborley?"

His intensity relaxed. Flushing with confusion, he stared down at the whiteness of her breast, the queenliness of her, her graying hair and her expectant, tender mouth. "I want you to come with me. I ought to have asked you properly. I've been taking you for granted and ordering you about."

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She remained very still, gazing directly up into his troubled eyes. He thought she was judging him. At last she whispered, "Don't be sad. I like you to order me."

VI

They had all night before them. If they left the Castle by ten, they could be in Brompton Square by five in the morning. Nothing would be gained by arriving earlier.

Now that the first shock was over, they went into dinner as if nothing had happened. In the long, dim banqueting-hall there were only the two of them. They sat close together at the illuminated high-table like castaways, marooned on an island, in an ocean of brooding shadows. While they dined they conversed in lowered voices to prevent their plans from being overheard. It was decided to take Lady Dawn's Rolls Royce and to leave the runabout behind. The reason acknowledged was that it would be more dependable. The reason unmentioned was that the presence of a chauffeur would lend an air of much needed propriety.

Gradually as they talked, the seriousness of their errand dropped from sight; their journey took on the complexion of an adventure. Its unconviction clothed it with romance. How unconventional it was they realized when Lady Dawn gave the butler orders concerning her departure. He was an old man, rigid with tradition, who, having served the family for three generations, had acquired the aristocratic bearing of his masters.

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"At ten o'clock, your Ladyship. To where? To London! That's a long journey to take at night. And the car will call at the inn first to pick up his Lordship's luggage. Oh, I see, my Lady. I thought at first that your Ladyship was going."

"I am," she corrected with quiet dignity. "Lord Taborley and I are going on an errand of great importance. I don't want this talked about. You understand? And who'll be driving? Witherall! Then warn Witherall to keep silent."

When the butler had withdrawn, she turned to Tabs. "I'm breaking all my precedents for you. I couldn't have told him, if I hadn't had you to keep me in countenance. He looked so shocked that he made me feel as if it were you and I, instead of Terry, who were doing the eloping. I'm sure that's what he thought. There'll be gossip. I shall have to pay the piper; but I'm too happy to-night to look ahead."

"It hadn't occurred to me——" Tabs hesitated. "I've been unpardonably inconsiderate. I see it now—you'll be what they call compromised. In that case, it will be wiser——"

"It won't." She bent towards him laughing. Her pearls, nestling in the white cleft of her bosom, gleamed dully, shaken by her quiet merriment. In the short time that he had known her, she had become extraordinarily girlish—almost girlish enough to put back the hands of time for the proper man. "It won't. It won't be wiser. It's never wiser to turn your back on happiness. I'd dare anything to-night. You've invited me; you can't wriggle out."

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"If that's how you feel——" He checked himself. Her mischief warned him. Instinctively he knew that she was about to ask precisely how he thought she felt. He cancelled what he had intended saying and substituted, "It's an ill-wind that blows nobody any good. And it's poor Terry we have to thank for this chance of being together a little longer!"

"Is it a chance? You're not bored? You do want me?"

He raised his eyes slowly. Her pain had startled him. Up to that moment he hadn't been awake to how utterly he had come to want her. For an instant he had a glimpse of the emptiness of life, should he find himself deprived of her comradeship.

"You didn't need to ask me that!" he said quietly. "And now it's my turn to be inquisitive. Does it make you glad to hear me own that I want you?"

He watched her color rise. It was like the elfin tiptoeing of her spirit behind the white transparent walls of her flesh. It climbed the smooth ascent of her breast, passed up the columned tower of her throat and stared out at him excitedly in the brightness of her eyes.

"Men don't ask things like that," she said reproachfully, "at least, only when they're flirting. I sometimes think—— Don't treat me like all the others who were before me."

"What others?"

She held his gaze. "The emotional women and silly girls—— You must have been loved very often, Lord Taborley." [Pg 340]

To have defended himself against her tender jealousy would have been futile. She was plainly anxious to believe her accusation. Perhaps it flattered her a little. Perhaps it lent him an added touch of glamor. He was wondering how he should satisfy her. He could remember no hearts that his fascination had broken. He could rake up absolutely—— She was speaking again.

"And yet I'm glad you compelled me to tell you that I wanted you. You're making me do things that I never did before in my life. I'm supposed to be a cold woman. You'll find people who'll say that I'm remote and domineering. I've only one big affection——my little boy. For your sake I'm leaving him alone to-night."

"For mine?"

"For whose else?"

"I thought for Terry's."

Her lips parted. The laughter died in her eyes. "In your heart you knew better."

Then he left her and went down to the inn to pack his bag.

VII

He had paid his bill. His luggage had been carried downstairs. There was still a full quarter of an hour to wait. He sat in his bedroom smoking furiously. Before he met her again, he wanted to know precisely what had happened to himself——and, perhaps, to her. [Pg 341]

He was filled with self-distrust. His newly discovered propensity for falling in love was genuinely alarming. It wasted his time, upset his plans and robbed him of his mental vigor. It made him a rudderless ship at the mercy of any chance winds of sentiment. Up to less than three months ago the solitary woman in his life had been Terry. Throughout the war, while the masculine world had been making an amorous idiot of itself, he had kept his head clear and gone straight. Things had come to a pretty pass if now, when normality was returning and the excuse for running wild was out-of-date, he should start on his emotional escapades. His love for Terry had been deep-rooted. His fondness for Maisie had been the attempt of a starved heart to satisfy its craving with a substitute. But where was this pursuit of substitutes to end? If it went much further he would gain for himself the reputation of being a limpet who attached himself to any chance rock of feminine amiability. The kind of woman he cared to associate with would avoid him. If ever he were to fall in love again, his attentions would be so shop-worn that——

If ever he were to fall in love again! Within the last twenty-four hours his irresponsible heart had committed this disastrous folly for a third time.

He smiled cynically, as though he were two separate persons, one of whom was cool and calculating, while the other was improvident and scape-grace. How Lady Dawn would despise him, were he to reveal to her the stupid commotion of his mind! His excuse for blundering his way into her privacy had been sufficiently fantastic: that her late husband was employing his living brain to communicate with her from the dead. It must have strained her credulity to the breaking-point. If on top of this he were to propose to her, what possible conclusions could she draw? Either that in order to gain her intimacy, he had perpetrated a cruel fraud; or else that he was so lacking in humor as to believe that Lord Dawn, from beyond the grave, was arranging for his wife's second marriage. The drollery of a dead husband acting match-maker made him smile. In the middle of his smiling he pulled himself up. Why not? Why shouldn't a husband who had wrecked his wife's happiness, try to repair the damage, if that were possible, when through death he had attained a kinder knowledge? The Roman Church prayed to the dead whom it canonized. There were thousands of parents, wives, sweethearts, bereft by the war, who were asserting that their longing had bridged the gulf and penetrated—— [Pg 342]

He shook himself, as though to struggle free from an invisible assailant. Hallucinations! All these so-called spiritualistic manifestations were the result of over-taxed imagination. To stick to facts was the only safe course; and these were the facts in his case. He had approached Lady Dawn as a matter of duty to tell her the truth about a husband whom she had not known at his best. She had misinterpreted his motive and had believed that he had come to confess to her his own failure. She had been thrown off her guard, had dropped her mask of stoicism and had lavished on him a reckless kindness. But other women had been reckless to him in their kindness. Terry had: so had Maisie. Women's kindness had caused his present predicament——their kindness, plus [Pg 343]

his awkward knack of valuing their kindness at more than its face worth. He had learnt his lesson. Never again would he be lured into the net of feminine fickleness. When he felt the temptation rising, he would suppress and ignore it; at any rate he would ignore it until the woman, who was rousing his affection, had declared her intentions beyond any chance of mistaking.

And Lady Dawn? She was in a class by herself. He held her sacred. The mere thought that she should ever fall in love with him was impertinence. To talk cheap sentiment would be insulting. It would cause him to lose her friendship—a loss which he could not bear to contemplate. It would be taking a mean advantage of a situation created for an entirely different purpose.— And yet, dare he trust himself, now that he was in love with her, in the intimate aloneness of a long night drive to London?

He rose to his feet disgusted. If this was the loss of self-control that peace had brought, better a thousand times the rigors of the sacrifice that was ended. Out there he had been strong; here he was a sick dog, licking his sores and whimpering at his own shadow. Self-pity had wrought this wholesale impotence—an impotence which was infecting the entire world. While individuals and nations had thought only of others, they had been valiant; they had raced in generous competition, clean-limbed as athletes, towards the tape, where endeavor ends and eternity commences. And now this lethargy, this cowardice—this monstrous fat of quaking emotion!

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A memory flashed back on him—an afternoon in March when he had been obsessed by a similar discontent. It had happened in the Mall, after his interview with Braithwaite and just before his introduction to Maisie. He had come across a sign-board which had announced that, by following a certain path, one would arrive at the Passport Office. That narrow track, vanishing into the bushy greenness, had seemed to him the first five hundred yards of the road that led to world-wideness and freedom. At the end of it lay Samoa, Tibet, the Malay Archipelago—jeweled seas and painted solitudes which human disillusiones could not wither. Instantly his will concentrated. By following that road he could become lean-souled again. By reseeking hardships, he could recover his lost discipline. The idea held him spellbound. It meant escape. It meant a return to monasticism. Then and there he determined that he would commence his preliminary enquiries to-morrow.

Going to the window, he leant out. The quaint village street was sleeping. The night was so still that, it scarcely breathed; it lay like a tired child in the firm white arms of the moonlight. Coming smoothly to a halt before the hostel was a powerful car. It was a landaulet and the hood was lowered. Lady Dawn must have altered her plans at the last moment; instead of sending for him, she had come herself! Catching sight of him, she waved her hand. His heart became quiet. Like the night without, his being was flooded with a drifting whiteness that robbed the darkness of its terror.

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VIII

As he stood by the side of the car talking to her while his bag was being stowed away, her manner was chillingly conventional. It was so conventional that it bordered on the unfriendly. About the unfriendliness of the chauffeur there could be no doubt. The elaborate care with which he tucked the robe about her Ladyship had a distinct air of alert possessiveness.

When Tabs had taken his place beside her and the village was left behind, she relaxed and laughed softly. "Such a trouble I've had! They all disapproved of our expedition—I mean the servants. Their eyes accused me of— Perhaps it's better not to be explicit. But that was why I called for you, instead of letting you come to the Castle. Did you notice anything queer about Witherall?"

"Your chauffeur? I thought he rather overdid his superciliousness and that he treated you a little as if he were your husband. Apart from that—"

"Apart from that," she laughed, "he made you feel entirely welcome. You mustn't mind him. My servants aren't used to seeing me with an escort. And then— Well, an all-night ride would be a little difficult to explain to anybody."

"I suppose it would."

They relapsed into silence. It was jolly to be so near to her and, after the fears he had had, to know himself so trusted. She sat quite close to him, so that he could feel the warmth of her body. Her shoulders touched him; sometimes she leant against him with a gentle pressure. Her fragrance was all about him. The robe spread across their knees gave an added touch of intimacy. He glanced down at her sideways. She was wearing a moleskin coat with a deep collar of silver-fox. She had on a moleskin hat, close fitting to her glossy head. Her face was partly hidden by a smart veil. She was immaculate as ever—as composed and stylish as if she were going to a theater-party instead of on an all-night ride to London. But it wasn't her stylishness that impressed him; it was her littleness. She looked very tender and pale as she sat beside him. The moral back of her chauffeur, as seen through the glass, condemned him of unkindness. He had had no right to ask her to accompany him. Why should he have burdened her with his troubles? She must have plenty of her own, with her boy to care for and her estate to manage.

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"I've been selfish," he said. "You ought to be in bed and sleeping now."

She smiled. "Always blaming yourself, aren't you? I shouldn't be here unless I'd wanted."

"But why did you want?"

Beneath the robe her hand commenced to grope. It stole into his own and lay there quietly. "Because I couldn't bear to see you hurt. You're so good. In some ways you're so strong; in others you're just as tiny as my Eric. I felt you needed me for the moment." [Pg 347]

"For the moment! I shall always need you."

"I wish you might." She shook her head slowly. "But you won't. You'll go away. I shall hear about you—all the big things you're accomplishing and planning. And then I shall remember that for just one night I had you for my very own."

"But we're always going to be friends. I shall be always coming back to you."

"Men don't come back, Lord Taborley. A man of your temperament is least likely to come back. You press forward. You're eager. Wherever you go you form new affections. I'm not like that. I'm cold. You don't think so, but then I'm treating you as I never treated any other man. You slipped under my reserve and reached my heart before I could stop you. Do you know how I'm treating you? Just the way I'd like some good woman to treat my little Eric one day, when I'm not here and he's a man."

"But you're going to be here for a long time—just as long as I am." There was alarm in his assertion. "I couldn't bear to think of your not being in the world. It wouldn't matter so much whether I saw you; it would be the knowledge that I could see you; that would make all the difference."

"Would it?"

"Yes, I'm sure. You mustn't think that because there was Terry and—I'm ashamed to have to own it—a passing fancy for your sister, that I'm fickle."

"I don't. I never thought it for a moment. What I thought was that you were unhappy. People do a lot of foolish things when they're unhappy." [Pg 348]

"It seems so long since I was unhappy," he said gently. "You've healed everything."

She was shaken as though with a storm of sobbing. No sound escaped her. She did a thing which was as amazing as it was beautiful. Raising his hand which she had been holding, she hugged it against her breast.

IX

During the night he nodded. Once when he wakened, he found her tucking the robe more closely about him. "Go to sleep. You're tired," she whispered, patting his shoulder.

A strange woman—strangely maternal and beautiful! She never seemed to think of herself. The women whom he had known had always demanded that men should do all the giving. Even Terry had been like that. His conception, of love had been of a continual bestowing with no hope of reciprocity. To be allowed to give throughout one's life to the woman beloved had seemed to him to be the maximum of married blessedness. He knew better now. Lady Dawn had given so generously that she had established a new standard; he would never again ask so little from any woman. He began to perceive that all his approaches to love had been self-abasing. In the true sense of the word he had never been in love. Dream-intoxicated, yes! But all that he had experienced had been desire. It was a new thought to him that a man must respect, even more than he desires, the woman whom he covets. [Pg 349]

His feeling for Lady Dawn was one of worship. When he wakened to find her watching over him, it seemed to him that the Mother of God sat beside him. When God's Mother is symbolized in a living woman, love is reborn into the world.

The last time he awoke, dawn was breaking. The moon had grown feeble. A chill was in the air. He sat up. "What! Still awake! I don't believe you've slept a wink all night."

"I haven't. I didn't want. I've been enjoying myself."

"You look tired."

He commenced to pile cushions behind her and tried to coax her to take some rest. "If you insist," she assented. "But I'd much rather not. I'm like a child at a party; I want to last out every moment."

"Then let's talk. We're nearing London. We sha'n't get much chance for being alone after we arrive. We don't know what we'll find. We may be whisked away in opposite directions. Before we're separated, I want to acknowledge what I owe you."

"It's cold," she shuddered, drawing closer to him. And then, "You owe me nothing."

He was tempted to place his arm about her, but the cowardice of past failure was strong upon him. He was afraid lest the ordinary gestures of affection would cheapen him in her eyes; he was still more afraid that they might mean to her that he valued her too lightly. He held himself in [Pg 350]

hand, staring straight before him and speaking quietly.

"I'm the only judge of what I owe you. I came to you broken. Life had made a fool of me. I'd fallen through placing my ideals too high. Everything was slipping. Every belief I'd ever had was open to doubt. Most of all I'd lost faith in the goodness of women. To explain my state of mind I have to tell you that the war had made me fanatical. Like millions of men who went out to die, I'd persuaded myself that I was fighting more than Germans—I was fighting to bring about the new heaven and the new earth. Our politicians promised us as much. You remember their phrases. 'A world safe for democracy! A land fit for heroes to live in.' When all the muck and the heartbreak were ended, we found that outwardly it was the same old world. Heaven was as far away as ever. There were no signs that any one wanted a new earth. Nations which had been comrades, began to wrangle. Soldiers came home to find their jobs held by slackers. The glorious promises had been a death-bed repentance; their insincerity was proved when the world recovered. But our worst disappointment was utterly personal—that despite the magnanimity we had shared and witnessed, we ourselves were no less selfish. For me all these disillusiones were epitomized in Terry. I'd fought for her. I'd carried her in my heart. If I'd died, my last thoughts would have been of her. I came back hungry and she disowned me. That she should have done that made humanity a Judas and God a mocker. I don't mean you to believe that I gave way at once to this wholesale injustice. At first I made an effort to struggle against it. I'd always held that great living was a matter of pressing forward, of wearing an air of triumph when you knew you were defeated, of believing, in spite of every proof to the contrary, that further up the road your kingdom waited for you."

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He felt the pressure of her friendly hand. "It does," she assured him. "That's what you've taught me. It's what you taught Maisie; it's almost as though you'd willed her husband to come back. You're a great believer. All great believers have been doubters. They give away so much of their faith that at times they have none left for themselves. You limp. Don't flinch; with me there's no need to be sensitive. When you entered my room for the first time, you made me think of another lame man. Do you remember how Jacob wrestled all night with an unknown assailant? When dawn was breaking his thigh was out of joint, but he refused to let his assailant go until he had asked his name. The stranger would not tell him—instead he blessed him. And then Jacob knew it was with God he had wrestled. When the sun rose and he went upon his way, he halted upon his thigh. You have the look that I think he must have had—the look of a man who has been maimed in trying to make God answer questions. It's that look and your very lameness that have given me back something that Lord Dawn took from me—something that he knew, when he sent you, you could give me back: my faith in men, without which a woman can have no happiness."

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The ghostly world streamed by, silent-footed and mist-muffled. It was the hour when children are born and weary people die—the hour of new beginnings and ancient endings, when life and death, like soldiers changing guard, salute at the cross-roads of the new day as friends.

At last he broke the silence. "I thought I had nothing to give you. I felt so empty. You seemed so strong and immovable, like a still tree in a forest that was storm-shaken. You made me feel that however the wind raged, beneath your branches there would be always rest. I never knew——" He paused as though he had forgotten what he had set out to say. "I never guessed that a woman could be so good."

"Nor I that there was so good a man."

They clasped hands so tightly that it hurt. The sun was rising as they entered London. Trees dripped gold and birds were chattering as they drove into Brompton Square. It was only when they had halted before the sleeping house, gay with flaming window-boxes, that she released his hand. With the severance of contact he awoke from his trance and remembered the errand that had brought them.

X

He had opened the door with his latch-key and had stood aside to allow her to pass into the hall, when suddenly he clutched her arm and drew her back. He signed to her to make no sound. Together they stood listening. The early morning stillness was broken by a door shutting smartly at the top of the house, a cheerful whistling and then the unmistakably firm step of a man descending.

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Tab's had no man in his employ, so what was a man doing in his house? There was no secretiveness about the stranger's movements; on the contrary, there was an airy boldness.

The sunlight danced and nickered on the wall as if it shared the excitement of their suspense. The footsteps drew nearer. They paused dramatically. The whistling ceased abruptly. Had the stranger taken warning? A match was struck. He was only lighting a cigarette. The footsteps came on again. At the final bend of the stairs the intruder came in sight. He halted, mirroring their surprise, and stood staring down at them with a bleak, hard look. He was the man whom they had least expected.

Tab's was the first to collect himself. He closed the front door behind him. "Good morning, General. You couldn't have been more prompt if we had telegraphed you that we were coming." When Braithwaite still stared, Tab's continued, "Allow me to introduce you to Lady Dawn and may I ask how long I have had you as my guest?"

Braithwaite drew a puff at his cigarette. His manner was as haughty as if he had been the owner of the house. "Since last night," he said. "I have to thank your Lordship for a bed. Mrs. Braithwaite—" A gleam of amusement shot into his eyes. "Mrs. Braithwaite had a sentiment for spending her first night beneath your roof. Seeing that you were away and that I was so newly wedded—he made an eloquent gesture—"I could scarcely deny her." Turning on his heel, he commenced to reascend. Across his shoulder he flung back, "Of course I apologize. We'll not trespass further. In a few minutes I'll have her dressed. In half an hour, at the outside, I'll remove her."

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"Don't be a fool." Tabs spoke sharply. "You make me wonder which of us is mad."

Braithwaite regarded him for a moment with an enigmatic smile. "I'm not. Yesterday I did the wisest thing of my life." With that he vanished.

Lady Dawn turned to Tabs gently. "If that's the way he feels, then he has. Terry's to be congratulated."

"But why on earth should she have wanted to spend her marriage-night in my house?" Tabs questioned. "My house of all inappropriate places! That's what I can't understand. And what could Ann have been doing to consent? You remember I told you there was a time when he was practically engaged to Ann."

They mounted the stairs till they came to the first landing. Entering the library, with its bright red lacquer, they sat down to await events. But Tabs did not sit long; he was too restless. Having flung wide the French windows which opened out on to the veranda, he kept going to the doorway to listen.

He glanced at his wrist-watch. "Barely six o'clock! Upon my word, I don't relish the idea of her being disturbed. Braithwaite's such a hot-head. For all I care, they can stop here as long as they like. I'll take a holiday so as not to embarrass them." He faced Lady Dawn with troubled frankness. "The question is: *are* they married? I've been trying to figure things out. They simply can't be unless he met her with a special license in Gloucester. And even then, I can't see how — But if they're not married, surely he would never have had the audacity to bring her to my house. It would be too preposterous—to the house of a man to whom she was engaged, where she would be waited on by a woman with whom he was once in love."

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At that moment Ann entered, pretty and sleepy-eyed, with Braithwaite following close behind. Tabs commenced speaking at once, in order that he might put them at their ease as regards his intentions.

"We're not here to blame any one. You, General, evidently think that I'm hostile. I'm not. As far as you're concerned, Ann, whatever you've done is right. Of course I'm a little taken aback to find that my house was chosen for the honeymoon. But if you'd like to have the use of it for a week or so and Ann doesn't object, I'll clear out and leave you to yourselves. You'll make me really happy if you'll accept the offer; it'll be a proof of friendliness. You're wondering why we surprised you so early. It wasn't to prevent you from marrying. It was because Lady Dawn was responsible for Terry and we felt that a runaway match, with the marriage announced after the event, might damage not only her but you, General, as well. I read yesterday in the papers of what you're doing and I want to say just this to you. You're the better man. You deserved to win. Last time we met you refused to shake my hand. I hope you'll take it now. You can afford to be magnanimous to a rival, now that you're Terry's husband."

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Tabs stood with his hand held out. Braithwaite made no motion to accept it; and yet his expression was generous. "I can't shake your hand as Terry's husband, Lord Taborley. I'm not married to her."

Lady Dawn sprang to her feet and came between the two tall men. "Not married to her! But you intend to marry her? You told us you were married."

Braithwaite was still smiling. "I am." To their amazement he slipped his arm about Ann and kissed her sleepy, tender mouth. "Terry is safe with your Ladyship's sister. We took her there when she arrived last night."

He turned to Tabs. "You said that I was the better man. I'm not. It was your sense of duty that always urged me. I have to thank your Lordship for the greatest happiness that can befall any man. You made me see it as my greatest happiness, when I was in danger of becoming a cad. There was one thing you said to me that sank into my mind. 'You'll never succeed, however great your courage, unless you start with your honor solvent.' You saved my honor. I didn't like your methods. But I thank you with all my heart now. If it hadn't been for you, neither Ann nor I would have come safely to our journey's end. I think we'd both like to shake your hand."

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XI

It was two hours later. They were finishing their breakfast in the open, on the balcony of the Hyde Park Hotel. From where they sat they could watch a lawn-mower traveling slowly back and forth, patterning the sward with alternate stripes of different colored greenness. They could smell the acrid juices of newly cut grass. Beyond the islands of flowers and vivid candelabra of trees, they could see the wild fowl of the Serpentine rise and drift like phantoms across the sultry stretch of blueness. Wheels of a water-cart grumbled sleepily against the gravel. Moving through

the sunlit shadows of the Row, riders were returning from their early morning gallop.

They were still together—just the two of them. They were romantically self-conscious of the domestic appearance which their twoness caused. Only married couples or very ardent lovers rise, while the lazy world is sleeping, to keep each other company at breakfast. They had not had the heart to disturb the General and Ann in their temporary possession of the little nest-like house.

Lady Dawn was speaking. "So you've done it again."

"What have I done?"

"What you did for Maisie. How did you put it last night? You've led them to their kingdom."

He smiled. "I seem to have a faculty for doing that. I do for others what I can't do for myself."

Still not looking at him, she said: "Perhaps you don't find your own kingdom because you're too much in love with the search. You don't want to bring your journey to an end. There are people like that."

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"I'm not one of them.—I wish you'd look at me, Lady Dawn. Do you know what I covet most in all the world? Rest and certainty. I don't mean a lazy kind of rest, but the rest of a mind at peace with itself—the certainty we all had while the war was on, when we were adventuring for the advantage of other people. I've done nothing lately that wasn't for myself. I want some one to live for, so that I can forget myself. I've been thinking—"

The waiter presented the bill. Tabs scarcely knew whether to curse or bless. He had been approaching the danger-mark; nevertheless, he wasn't at all sure that he was grateful for the interruption. His heart cried out to him to risk humiliation by one last act of daring. Experience warned him that it is the sins of precaution—the follies left uncommitted—that are most regretted by men of seventy.

She rose as he was gathering up his change. The purpose that had brought them to London was ended. There was no further reason for their being together. If they were to prolong their companionship, a new excuse must be invented. He saw by the tentative manner in which she waited, that she also had realized that. He became perturbed lest she might dismiss him. Speaking hurriedly to forestall her, he said, "I suppose we had better make sure of Terry by hunting her up at Mulberry Tree Court."

She barely nodded. Perhaps she thought, now that Braithwaite had been eliminated as a rival, that this making sure of Terry betokened a rekindling of the old infatuation. A constraint grew up between them. It was not until they were standing on the top of the hotel steps, waiting for her car, that he ventured to correct the wrong impression. "Funny about Terry! If it hadn't been for her, we might never have been friends. The first day of my home-coming she drew my attention to you; it was too late—you had passed. You were driving with the Queen in the Park. I remember what Terry said. She called you Di and spoke of you as the most beautiful woman in England."

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She gave no sign that she had heard. As though she were unescorted, she passed before him down the steps. But the moment they were seated in the car, she turned to him. She looked her full age. Her face was pale with more than weariness. He noticed the threads of gray in her hair. Ever since he had seen Ann in her flushed shy exaltation, he had felt more keenly the pathos of Lady Dawn. It was a pathos that found an echo in his heart—the pathos of approaching separation. What purpose did it serve her to be beautiful, if she had no man of her own to admire her?

"You were on the verge of telling me something, when the waiter interrupted," she prompted. "It began like a confession. You'd been speaking about living for other people and your need of rest. Then, you said you'd been thinking—"

"It was about how one could make a man's job out of living," he answered quickly. "It's all wrong that one should feel decent only when he's attempting to get slaughtered. It takes neither brains nor perseverance to be dead. Any one can—"

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"But it was about finding rest that you were speaking."

"Yes, but I've burdened you with too many of my troubles." He hesitated, wondering whether he dare tell her what had happened to his heart. "I've done nothing for you. I've only borrowed from your strength. You're the most restful woman, the most calm—" Then he dodged. "But since you ask me of what I was thinking, it was of how I might escape to the old hardships. I thought I'd call at the Passport Office and get in touch with the Royal Geographical Society, and commence arrangements to explore—"

"Then I sha'n't be seeing you again?" She asked it in a tone of dreariness, bordering on terror. Her hands trembled in her lap. She stared straight before her.

"But you will." He forced a cheerfulness into his voice which he was far from feeling. "These things take time. It may be weeks—"

"But you'll go away. I know it."

"I suppose I shall. Sooner or later I shall return. In the meanwhile we can write."

She paid no attention to his consolation. Her face was gray as granite. Her hands kept folding and unfolding. There was something symbolic in their emptiness. "You won't come back. It's the end. You weren't sent, after all."

How or why he said it, he never could tell. The words were utterly unpremeditated. He spoke them, ordinarily and unemotionally, as though throwing out a casual suggestion. "We could get married, if that would make you happier."

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"It's what I'd like."

His heart missed a beat. He dared not credit his senses. He glanced down at her, prepared to find that she was mocking. The most beautiful woman in England! There was no mistake; she had actually asked him.

"It's what I should like, too." He spoke conventionally. Nothing in his tone betrayed his emotion. "It's what I've been dreaming from the moment that we met— When would be convenient?"

"As soon as possible."

"Would a week from to-day suit?"

She nodded, "Or sooner."

Beneath the robe his hand sought hers. He did not trust himself to look at her. She was his, all of her and forever. It was marvelous. The secret clasp of her hand was sufficient for the present. He was still doubtful of his fortune and unnerved by his temerity. He felt aloof and disembodied—an uninvolved spectator. And this was love, the journey's end—this smiling stillness, which was so different from anything he had imagined!

They entered Mulberry Tree Court and drew up before the house with the marigold-tinted curtains. It was while they were waiting for the door to be opened that he broke the silence. Smiling down at her with a guilty, glad expression he asked, "We're engaged now, I suppose?"

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She returned his smile less certainly. "I'm ashamed. But you won't go——"

He laughed at the folly of her question. "Go, when I've got you, the woman whom I wanted!"

"Then you won't go exploring? You won't exchange me for hardships?"

"Di, dearest, I've done with searching."

The door was opening. She pulled herself together. Porter stood before them, neatly laundered, with the old suspicious meekness in her glance.

"Good morning, Porter. We've come to see Miss Beddow. We've been told that she's staying with my sister."

"She is, your Ladyship. But none of them are down. She arrived so late and unexpected."

They followed her across the hall into the sun-filled drawing-room, with its fragrant flowers, tall windows, rockery-garden and little oval pond, with the toy boat floating on its surface. The moment the door had closed, he had her in his arms. Now that he was sure of her possession, he held her desperately as if he feared that he were going to lose her. "Closer," she whispered. "Closer." It flashed through his memory that the last time he was in that room, he had been the spectator of just such a union and had fled from it because he was excluded.

She stirred against him, lifting up her face.

"This time you're really crying," he whispered. Stooping he pressed her lips. "They always told me you never——"

Freeing her arms, she clasped him tightly about the neck. He could feel the weight of her body, dragging his face lower. She kissed him passionately, stopping his breath, as though she would breathe into him her very soul. "Oh, my dearest—my very dear! How cruel you were! You made me ask you. I thought I'd never get you."

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The door was opening. Terry was watching them. The first they knew of her presence was when she spoke.

"You came to see me."

They broke apart like shameful children and stood regarding her, their hands just touching. She seemed their elder.

"I suppose you have the right to jeer at me," she continued slowly. "I'm left out. I was too cold. I'm too late. I didn't want what was offered at the time it was offered. What I didn't want once, I can't have now. And, perhaps, I still don't want it. Tabs used to speak of kingdoms. I never knew what he meant. You've all found yours—Maisie, Braithwaite, both of you and even Ann. Everybody, except me." She laughed to prevent her tears from falling. "I suppose Tabs would tell me that mine's still round the corner. You would, wouldn't you, Tabs?"

Her need, which had been theirs, penetrated their happiness. They felt again the old wild pang of neglected loneliness. Sargent's painting above the mantelpiece, looking down on them, reminded Lady Dawn of her own forgotten tragedy. It was unendurable that their gladness should bring

"Little Terry, you're not left out. You're ours more than ever. We've not robbed you. We couldn't. Of you alone it's true that everything lies before you. All the time you've had your kingdom, though you didn't know it. You still have it—the Kingdom of Youth, for which we older people were all searching."

In the silence that followed there stole to them through the summer sunshine, above the mutter of London, the music of a distant barrel-organ. In the mind of Tabs a picture formed; it was of children dancing along a golden pavement on that first spring morning of his disillusion. The tune which the barrel-organ played was the same. His brain sang words to the music:

"Après la guerre
There'll be a good time everywhere."

And it was no longer an optimism—it was fulfilled promise.

Surely, beyond the bounds of space, Lord Dawn also listened and was happy. For Tabs, as long as life lasted, it would be the marching-song of the kingdom round the corner.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE KINGDOM ROUND THE CORNER: A
NOVEL ***

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