

THE SHUTTLE OF DESTINY

By Leslie Gordon Barnard

Illustrated by T. V. McCARTHY



WITH THE final note of the hauntingly familiar aria from "Butterfly" came a thunder of applause, under cover of which Carey Slessor made his exit, seeking the seclusion of the club house verandah. He experienced the same sense of having been sung to personally as he had felt the last time he heard it—under very different circumstances; yet he fancied that his tardy entrance and unobtrusive seat in the corner could hardly have brought him to the singer's notice.

Summer moonlight poured through the interstices in the natural lattice work of Virginia creeper and occasional Dutchman's Pipe, spilling in whitish pools and driving into more shaded corners the few couples who forgot the concert programme indoors and the coolness of the night, and indeed, everything but their own immediate and perhaps future concerns.

Carey leaned over the verandah railing and tried to tell himself that he was sorry now he had listened to Jerry's persuasive Hibernian tongue and promised to come out from the city to-night. His eyes wandered to the Chinese lanterns that swung gently in the soft breeze that came off the water—they looked faded and out of place. Down beyond the rambling series of boathouses the river gleamed—a broad, silver streak. He smiled a little whimsically at the tricks that memory and imagination played, juggling these things so cleverly in his mind. It seemed so strange that to-night, of all nights, he should have to face this thing again, when he thought he had effectually burned his bridges. . . . Laughter came floating through the doorway, the rippling laughter of the ladies, the resonant rumble of the men. Jerry would be digging into his inexhaustible treasure-house of wit again. Good old Jerry—what tenderness shone from his eyes even while his tongue proclaimed one a many-adjectived fool!

He barely heard the soft footfall behind him, but was not surprised to hear his name called.

"Carey!"

As he turned to meet her, Carey felt that the girl must surely note the pallor of his face and other betrayals of his feeling. In a moment, though, he was calm; years of self-discipline came to his aid.

"Connie—of all people! I've been staring at you in rude unbelief for the last half-hour or more, trying to convince myself that the young lady sitting so composedly up there with the rest of the 'talent' was not a product of a fevered imagination, but real flesh and blood."

"Perhaps," she said, with a note of laughter in her voice that set his memory into feverishly retrospective activity again, "you'd like to shake hands and dispel your doubts, young man. I saw you stealing out and knew you at once—even in your civvies, so I was bold enough to follow. There—you needn't stand holding my hand all night; besides it's bright moonlight here."

He led her to a chair then, back in the shadow, placing another beside it for himself.

"Sit down and I'll fetch you a wrap," he told her, and for all his attempted restraint he could not keep the eagerness out of his voice. "There's so much to tell, isn't there, since we said good-bye at Euston that morning. Wait—I'll only be a jiffy!"

In a moment of returning sanity he told himself he was more kinds of a fool than Jerry had dubbed him, but the glow in his heart was not to be so easily quenched.

"It's surely coming to me," he argued aloud, as he made his way through the passage. "To-morrow can

take care of itself—to-night at least is my own."

"Beg pardon, sir," Old Tonkins was leaning towards him, hand cupped to ear. "You wish for something, sir?"

"I do," returned Carey, whimsically, "but I'm afraid, Tonkins, it's beyond your power to give it." And passed on, wrap in hand, to seek Constance Maitland.

Twenty yards or so beyond them the gleaming stretch of river pursued its steady, slow-moving way towards the bridge that spanned it half-a mile down stream. Skirting the shore on this side a strip of sandy-coloured roadway, silvered in the moonlight, ran its slightly winding course, fringed by tall trees. Upon the wooded rise on the farther bank a grey stone building thrust its square-built chimneys well above the treetops.

THEY HAD been sitting for a moment or two, impressed by the quiet beauty of the night, when Constance touched his arm.

"Carey—doesn't it remind you—?"

"That's funny," he intercepted, "I've been thinking the same thing all evening—at least since I came out here after you sang. Don't know that it ever struck me just that way before. That old building over there might be the monastery on the hill: do you recall the time we climbed up to it, Connie, and the venerable Father showed us around and explained how some of the sacred relics were buried during the occupation?"

"And the row of poplars there, Carey—isn't it almost identical? That was where I nearly fell in trying to get that photograph and you lectured me like a . . . father. And the bridge down below—you can almost imagine the screen of dried branches still clinging to it. Only those old boathouses shouldn't be down there, and while your club house is very nice, Carey, it's not quite the *chateau*, is it?"

Carey smiled, but it was one of those mechanical smiles, for his mind was far away. In imagination he was back again in the lovely valley of the Meuse, with its swift-running stream flowing between

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—THE EDITORS.

characteristically tree-lined shores, and its slopes rising so precipitously in spots that the overhanging rock seemed to threaten the passers-by on the winding roadway beneath, and its smiling old-world hamlets at every turn bringing a sense of age-long peace except where, every now and then, the devastating hand of the enemy had brought the scourge of illegitimate warfare, leaving scars the memory of which still sent the hot blood coursing through his veins.

"You remember our visit to poor wasted Dinant?" he asked her.

"I was just thinking of it. How many hundred steps did we climb that day to the top of the citadel? I still have the photograph I took of you seated astride one of the ancient cannon up there. And the little wayside graveyard where the martyred children lie."

He was silent, thinking, as he

looked into her eyes now, of the eloquent moisture that came to them then as she read the inscriptions that told, more vividly than any guide-book could, of the tragic twenty-third of August, 1914. It had been one of those moments of silent understanding that help to weave two lives into a common fabric.

"Carey—do you remember the jolting old ambulance the Colonel spirited up by some mysterious influence to take us there? Poor old Colonel—how madly jealous he was of all you younger men—particularly you, Carey! I don't know why he took to me instead of the other girls in the party."

Carey smiled, thinking of the quintette of voluntary entertainers who had come to help while

away the tedium of the weeks of waiting after the armistice and before homeward movements were more than vague rumours, to which one clung with pathetic optimism for want of better. They had come out under the auspices of the Y.M.C.A., and with Namur as a centre, entertained acceptably under circumstances that would have disconcerted many—in convents, school buildings, stores in a state of temporary abandonment, rude huts—impromptu places of amusement strung around in a sixty-kilometer circle. Artists all, yet at the same time it had taken just one to win the hearts of every officer and man—little Constance Maitland, perhaps because she came from Canada and knew some of the places and folk they did "back home." Carey had personally haunted her that week and been at the bottom of the arrangements for a little entertainment and dance given by the officers quartered in the old *chateau* up the famous Meuse.

"The 'Little Canadian,' as the boys called her," said Carey, half to himself, "was popular because she sang the songs that carried us back home—and still more popular because she was . . . just herself."

"Carey! When did you learn to talk like that? A compliment so prettily phrased sounds strange from you."

He flushed a bit at that.

"Well, it's true anyway, Connie. There are some people in the world who just naturally fit into the scheme of things wherever they go, and quite unconsciously, I fancy, spur folks on to do their best. It's a God-given power—you've got it, Connie. I—I felt it the first night I met you, and it's meant a lot to me since. I don't often talk like this, but I've wanted to tell you and never did. I wanted to tell you that morning you came to see me off at Euston, but—"

He stopped abruptly; this was skating on thin ice.

Perhaps because he saw the inquiry trembling on her lips he switched the conversation to other things. He did not care to admit he was too cowardly to write, too little sure of himself. All these days and months he had brought himself to think of her in the light of a pleasant memory, to be treasured as one does things for past associations, all the more cherished because the future can hold none of them.

Now they went again in imagination to the places they had visited together during those wonderful two months when he had been quartered in London before his sailing was

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"You're afraid to kiss me good-bye, Carey," she challenged