

CHAPTER V

And still youth marched away, and England seemed to swarm with soldiers and, at times, to hear and see nothing but marching music and marching feet, though life went on in houses, shops, warehouses and offices, and new and immense activities evolved as events demanded them. Many of the new activities were preparations for the comfort and care of soldiers who were going away, and for those who would come back and would need more care than the others. Women were doing astonishing work and revealing astonishing power and determination. The sexes mingled with a businesslike informality unknown in times of peace. Lovely girls went in and out of their homes, and from one quarter of London to another without question. They walked with a brisk step and wore the steady expression of creatures with work in view. Slim young war-widows were to be seen in black dresses and veiled small hats with bits of white crape inside their brims. Sometimes their little faces were awful to behold, but sometimes they wore a strained look of exaltation.

The Dowager Duchess of Darte was often absent from Eaton Square. She was

understood to be proving herself much stronger than her friends had supposed her to be. She proved it by doing an extraordinary amount of work. She did it in her house in Eaton Square--in other people's houses, in her various estates in the country, where she prepared her villagers and tenants for a future in which every farm house and cottage must be

as ready for practical service as her own castle or manor house. Dartmouth Norham was no longer a luxurious place of residence but a potential hospital for wounded soldiers; so was Barons Court and the beautiful old Dower House at Malworth.

Sometimes Robin was with her, but oftener she remained at Eaton Square and wrote letters and saw busy people and carried out lists of orders.

It was not every day or evening that she could easily find time to go out alone and make her way to the Square Gardens and in fact it was not often to the Gardens she went. There were so many dear places where trees grew and made quiet retreats--all the parks and heaths and green suburbs--and everywhere pairs walked or sat and talked, and were frankly so wholly absorbed in the throb of their own existences that they had no interest in, or curiosity concerning, any other human beings.

"Ought I to ask you to come and meet me--as if you were a little housemaid meeting her life-guard?" Donal had said feverishly the second time they met.

A sweet flush ran up to the roots of her hair and even showed itself on the bit of round throat where her dress was open.

"Yes, you ought," she answered. "There are no little housemaids and life-guardsmen now. It seems as if there were only--people."

The very sound of her voice thrilled him--everything about her thrilled him--the very stuff her plain frock was made of, the small hat she wore, her way of moving or quiet sitting down near him, but most of all the lift of her eyes to his--because there was no change in it and the eyes expressed what they had expressed when they had first looked at him. It was a thing which moved him to-day exactly as it had moved him when he was too young to explain its meaning and appeal. It was the lovely faith and yearning acceptance of him as a being whose perfection could not be questioned. There was in it no conscious beguiling flattery or appraisal--it was pure acceptance and sweet waiting for what he had to give. He sometimes found himself trembling with his sense of its simple unearthliness.

Few indeed were the people who at this time were wholly normal. The whole world seemed a great musical instrument, overstrung and giving out previously unknown harmonies and inharmonies. Amid the thunders of great crashing discords the individual note was almost unheard--but the individual note continued its vibrations.

The tone which expressed Donal Muir--in common with many others of his age and sex--was a novel and abnormal one. His being no longer sang the healthy human song of mere joy in life and living. A knowledge of cruelty and brutal force, of helplessness and despair, grew in him day by day. Causes for gay good cheer and laughter were swept away, leaving in their places black facts and needs to gaze at with hard eyes.

"Do you see how everything has stopped--how nothing can go on?" he said to Robin on their second meeting in the Gardens. "The things we used to fill our time and amuse ourselves with--dancing and tennis and polo and theatres and parties--how jolly and all right they were in their day, but how futile they seem just now. How could one even stand talk of them! There is only one thing."

The blue of his eyes grew dark.

"It is as if a gigantic wall were piling itself up between us and Life," he went on. "That is how I see it--a wall piling itself higher every hour. It's built of dead things and maimed and tortured ones. It's building itself of things you can't speak of. It stands between all the world and living--mere living. We can't go on till we've stormed it and beaten it down--or added our bodies to it. If it isn't beaten down it will rise to heaven itself and shut it out--and that will be the end of the world." He shook his head in sudden defiant bitterness. "If it can't be beaten down, better the world should come to an end."

Robin put out her hand and caught his sleeve.

"It will be beaten down," she cried. "You--you--and others like you--"

"It will be," he said. "And it's because, when men read the day's news, almost every single one of them feels something leaping up in him that

seems strong enough to batter it to earth single-handed."

But he gently put out his own hand and took in it the slim gloved one and looked down at it, as if it were something quite apart and wonderful--rather as if hands were rare and he had not often seen one before.

There was much sound of heavy traffic on the streets. The lumbering of army motor trucks and vans, the hurry of ever-passing feet and vehicles, changed the familiar old-time London roar, which had been as that of low and distant thunder, into the louder rumbling of a storm which had drawn nearer and was spending its fury within the city's streets themselves. Just at this moment there arose the sound of some gigantic loaded thing, passing with unearthly noises, and high above it pierced the shrilling of fifes.

Robin glanced about the empty garden.

"The noise seems to shut us in. How deserted the Gardens look. I feel as if we were in another world. We are shut in--and shut out," she whispered.

He whispered also. He still looked down at the slim gloved hand as if it had some important connection with the moment.

"We have so few minutes together," he said. "And I have thought of so

many things I must say to you. I cannot stop thinking about you. I think of you even when I am obliged to think of something else at the same time. I am in a sort of tumult every moment I am away from you." He stopped suddenly and looked up. "I am speaking as if I had been with you a score of times. I haven't, you know. I have only seen you once since the dance. But it is as if we had met every day--and it's true--I am in a sort of tumult. I think thousands of new things and I feel as if I must tell you of them all."

"I--think too," said Robin. Oh! the dark dew of her imploring eyes! Oh! the beat of the little pulse he could actually see in her soft bare throat. He did not even ask himself what the eyes implored for. They had always looked like that--as if they were asking to be allowed to be happy and to love all kind things on earth.

"One of the new things I cannot help thinking about--it's a queer thing and I must tell you about it. It's not like me and yet it's the strongest feeling I ever had. Since the War has changed everything and everybody, all one's feelings have grown stronger. I never was furious before--and I've been furious. I've felt savage. I've raged. And the thing I'm thinking of is like a kind of obsession. It's this--" he caught her hands again and held her face to face with him. "I--I want to have you to myself," he exclaimed.

She did not try to move. She only gazed at him.

"Nobody else has me--at all," she answered. "No one wants me."

The colour ran up under his fine skin.

"What I mean is a little different. Perhaps you mayn't understand it. I want this--our being together in this way--our understanding and talking--to be something that belongs to us and to no one else. It's too sudden and wonderful for any one but ourselves to understand. Nobody else could understand it. Perhaps we don't ourselves--quite! But I know what it does to me. I can't bear the thought of other people spoiling the beauty of it by talking it over and looking on." He actually got up and began to walk about. "Oh, I ought to have something of my own--before it's all over--I ought! I want this miracle of a thing--for my own."

He stopped and stood before her.

"My mother is the most beloved creature in the world. I have always told her everything. She has always cared. I don't know why I have not told her about--this--but I haven't and I don't want to--now. That is part of the strange thing. I do not want to tell her--even the belovedest woman that ever lived. I want it for myself. Will you let me have it--will you help me to keep it?"

"Like a secret?" said Robin in her soft note.

"No, not a secret. A sort of sacred, heavenly unbelievable thing we own together."

"I understand," was Robin's answer. "It does not seem strange to me. I have thought something like that too--almost exactly like."

It did not once occur to them to express, even to themselves, in any common mental form the fact that they were "in love" with each other. The tide which swept them with it had risen ages before and bore them on its swelling waves as though they were leaves.

"No one but ourselves will know that we meet," she went on further. "I may come and go as I like in these hurried busy hours. Even Lady Kathryn is as free as if she were a shop girl. It is as you said before--there is no time to be curious and ask questions. And even Dowie has been obliged to go to her cousin's widow whose husband has just been killed."

Shaken, thrilled, exalted, Donal sat down again and talked to her. Together they made their plans for meeting, as they had done when Andrews had slackened her guard. There was no guard to keep watch on them now. And the tide rose hour by hour.