

CHAPTER VI

Aunts and cousins and more or less able relatives were largely drawn on in these days of stress and need, and Dowie was an efficient person. The cousin whose husband had been killed in Belgium, leaving a young widow and two children scarcely younger and more helpless than herself, had no relation nearer than Dowie, and had sent forth to the good woman a frantic wail for help in her desolation. The two children were, of course, on the point of being added to by an almost immediately impending third, and the mother, being penniless and prostrated, had remembered the comfortable creature with her solid bank account of savings and her good sense and good manners and knowledge of a world larger than the one into which she had been born.

"You're settled here, my lamb," Dowie had said to Robin. "It's more like your own home than the other place was. You're well and safe and busy. I must go to poor Henrietta in Manchester. That's my bit of work, it seems, and thank God I'm able to do it. She was a fine girl in a fine shop, poor Henrietta, and she's not got any backbone and her children are delicate--and another coming. Well, well! I do thank God that you don't need your old Dowie as you did at first."

Thus she went away and in her own pleasant rooms in the big house, now so full of new activities, Robin was as unwatched as if she had been a young gull flying in and out of its nest in a tall cliff rising out of

the beating sea.

Her early fever of anxiety never to lose sight of the fact that she was a paid servitor had been gradually assuaged by the delicate adroitness of the Duchess and by the aid of soothing time. While no duty or service was forgotten or neglected, she realised that life was passed in an agreeable freedom which was a happy thing. Certain hours and days were absolutely her own to do what she chose with. She had never asked for such privileges, but the Duchess with an almost imperceptible adjustment had arranged that they should be hers. Sometimes she had taken Dowie away on little holidays to the sea side, often she spent hours in picture galleries or great libraries or museums. In attendance on the Duchess she had learned to know all the wonders and picturesqueness of her London and its environments, and often with Dowie as her companion she wandered about curious and delightful places and, pleased as a child, looked in at her kind at work or play.

While nations shuddered and gasped, cannon belched forth, thunder and flaming, battleships crashed together and sudden death was almost as unintermitting as the ticking of the clock, among the thousands of pairing souls and bodies drawn together in a new world where for the time being all sound was stilled but the throb of pulsing hearts, there moved with the spellbound throno one boy and girl whose dream of being was a thing of entrancement.

Every few days they met in some wonderfully chosen and always quiet

spot. Donal knew and loved the half unknown remote corners of the older London too. There were dim gardens behind old law courts, bits of mellow old enclosures and squares seemingly forgotten by the world, there were the immensities of the great parks where embowered paths and corners were at certain hours as unexplored as the wilderness. When the Duchess was away or a day of holiday came, there were, more than once, a few hours on the river where, with boat drawn up under enshrouding trees, green light and lapping water, sunshine and silence, rare swans sailing serenely near as if to guard them made the background to the thrill of heavenly young wonder and joy.

It was always the same. Each pair of eyes found in the beauty of the other the same wonder and, through that which the being of each expressed, each was shaken by the same inward thrill. Sometimes they simply sat and gazed at each other like happy amazed children scarcely able to translate their own delight. Their very aloofness from the world--its unawareness of their story's existence made for the perfection of all they felt.

"It could not be like this if any one but ourselves even knew," Donal said. "It is as if we had been changed into spirits and human beings could not see us."

There was seldom much leisure in their meetings. Sometimes they had only a few minutes in which to exchange a word or so, to cling to each other's hands. But even in these brief meetings the words that were said

were food for new life and dreams when they were apart. And the tide rose.

But it did not overflow until one early morning when they met in a gorse-filled hollow at Hampstead, each looking at the other pale and stricken. In Robin's wide eyes was helpless horror and Donal knew too well what she was going to say.

"Lord Halwyn is killed!" she gasped out. "And four of his friends! We all danced the tango together--and that new kicking step!" She began to sob piteously. Somehow it was the sudden memory of the almost comic kicking step which overwhelmed her with the most gruesome sense of awfulness--as if the world had come to an end.

"It was new--and they laughed so! They are killed!" she cried beating her little hands. He had just heard the same news. Five of them! And he had heard details she had been spared.

He was as pale as she. He stood before her quivering, hot and cold. Until this hour they had been living only through the early growing wonder of their dream; they had only talked together and exquisitely yearned and thrilled at the marvel of every simple word or hand-touch or glance, and every meeting had been a new delight. But now suddenly the being of each shook and called to the other in wild need of the nearer nearness which is comfort and help. It was early--early morning--the heath spread about them wide and empty, and at that very instant a

skylark sprang from its hidden nest in the earth and circled upward to heaven singing as to God.

"They will take you!" she wailed. "You--you!" And did not know that she held out her arms.

But he knew--with a great shock of incredible rapture and tempestuous answering. He caught her softness to his thudding young chest and kissed her sobbing mouth, her eyes, her hair, her little pulsing throat.

"Oh, little love," he himself almost sobbed the words. "Oh, little lovely love!"

She melted into his arms like a weeping child. It was as if she had always rested there and it was mere Nature that he should hold and comfort her. But he had never heard or dreamed of the possibility of such anguish as was in her sobbing.

"They will take you!" she said. "And--you danced too. And I must not hold you back! And I must stay here and wait and wait--and wait--until some day--! Donal! Donal!"

He sat down with her amongst the gorse and held her on his knee as if she had been six years old. She did not attempt to move but crouched there and clung to him with both hands. She remembered only one thing--that he must go! And there were cannons--and shells singing and

screaming! And boys like George in awful heaps. No laughing face as it had once looked--all marred and strange and piteously lonely as they lay.

It took him a long time to calm her terror and woe. When at last he had so far quieted her that her sobs came only at intervals she seemed to awaken to sudden childish awkwardness. She sat up and shyly moved. "I didn't mean--I didn't know--!" she quavered. "I am--I am sitting on your knee like a baby!" But he could not let her go.

"It is because I love you so," he answered in his compelling boy voice, holding her gently. "Don't move--don't move! There is no time to think and wait--or care for anything--if we love each other. We do love each other, don't we?" He put his cheek against hers and pressed it there. "Oh, say we do," he begged. "There is no time. And listen to the skylark singing!"

The butterfly-wing flutter of her lashes against his cheek as she pressed the softness of her own closer, and the quick exquisite indrawing of her tender, half-sobbing childish breath were unspeakably lovely answering things--though he heard her whisper.

"Yes, Donal! Donal!" And again, "Donal! Donal!"

And he held her closer and kissed her very gently again. And they sat and whispered that they loved each other and had always loved each other

and would love each other forever and forever and forever. Poor enrapt children! It has been said before, but they said it again and yet again. And the circling skylark seemed to sing at the very gates of God's heaven.

So the tide rose to its high flowing.