

## CHAPTER VII

The days of gold which linked themselves one to another with strange dawns of pearl and exquisite awakenings, each a miracle, the gemmed night whose blue darkness seemed studded with myriads of new stars, the noons whose heats or rains were all warm scents of flowers and fragrant mists, wrought themselves into a chain of earthly beauty. The hour in which the links must break and the chain end was always a faint spectre veiled by kindly mists which seemed to rise hour by hour to soften and hide it.

But often in those days did it occur that the hurrying and changing visitors to the house in Eaton Square, glancing at Robin as she sat writing letters, or as she passed them in some hall or room, found themselves momentarily arrested in an almost startled fashion by the mere radiance of her.

"She is lovelier every time one turns one's head towards her," the Starling said--the Starling having become a vigorous worker and the Duchess giving welcome to any man, woman or child who could be counted on for honest help. "It almost frightens me to see her eyes when she looks up suddenly. It is like finding one's self too close to a star. A star in the sky is all very well--but a star only three feet away from one is a kind of shock. What has happened to the child?"

She said it to Gerald Vesey who between hours of military training was helping Harrowby to arrange a matinee for the benefit of the Red Cross. Harrowby had been rejected by the military authorities on account of defective sight and weak chest but had with a promptness unexpected by his friends merged himself into unprominent, useful hard work which frequently consisted of doing disagreeable small jobs men of his type generally shied away from.

"Something has happened to her," answered Vesey. "She has the flight of a skylark let out of a cage. Her moving is flight--not ordinary walking. I hope her work has kept her away from--well, from young gods and things."

"The streets are full of them," said Harrowby, "marching to defy death and springing to meet glory--marching not walking. Young Mars and Ajax and young Paris with Helen in his eyes. She might be some youngster's Helen! Why do you hope her work has kept her away?"

Vesey shook his Greek head with a tragic bitterness.

"Oh! I don't know," he groaned. "There's too much disaster piled high and staring in every one of their flushing rash young faces. On they go with their heads in the air and their hearts thumping, and hoping and refusing to believe in the devil and hell let loose--and the whole thing stares and gibbers at them."

But each day her eyes looked larger and more rapturously full of heavenly glowing, and her light movements were more like bird flight, and her swiftness and sweet readiness to serve delighted and touched people more, and they spoke oftener to and of her, and felt actually a thought uplifted from the darkness because she was like pure light's self.

Lord Coombe met her in the street one evening at twilight and he stopped to speak to her.

"I have just come from Dartmouth," he said to her. "The Duchess asked me to see you personally and make sure that you do not miss Dowie too much--that you are not lonely."

"I am very busy and am very well taken care of," was her answer. "The servants are very attentive and kind. I am not lonely at all, thank you. The Duchess is very good to me."

Donal evidently knew nothing of her reasons for disliking Lord Coombe. She could not have told him of them. He did not dislike his relative himself and in fact rather liked him in spite of the frigidity he sometimes felt. He, at any rate, admired his cold brilliance of mind. Robin could not therefore let herself detest the man and regard him as an enemy. But she did not like the still searching of the grey eyes which rested on her so steadily.

"The Duchess wished me to make sure that you did not work too enthusiastically. She desires you to take plenty of exercise and if you are tired to go into the country for a day or two of fresh air and rest. She recommends old Mrs. Bennett's cottage at Mersham Wood. The place is quite rustic though it is near enough to London to be convenient. You might come and go."

"She is too kind--too kind," said Robin. "Oh! how kind to think of me like that. I will write and thank her."

The sweet gratitude in her eyes and voice were touching. She could not speak steadily.

"I may tell her then that you are well taken care of and that you are happy," the grey eyes were a shade less cold but still searching and steady. "You look--happy."

"I never was so happy before. Please--please tell her that when you thank her for me," was Robin's quite yearning little appeal. She held out her hand to him for the first time in her life. "Thank you, Lord Coombe, for so kindly delivering her beautiful message."

His perfect manner did not record any recognition on his part of the fact that she had done an unexpected thing. But as he went on his way he was thinking of it.

"She is very happy for some reason," he thought. "Perhaps the rush and excitement of her new work exalts her. She has the ecstasied air of a lovely child on her birthday--with all her world filled with petting and birthday gifts."

The Duchess evidently extended her care to the extent of sending special messages to Mrs. James, the housekeeper, who began to exercise a motherly surveillance over Robin's health and diet and warmly to advocate long walks and country visits to the cottage at Mersham Wood.

"Her grace will be really pleased if you take a day or two while she's away. She's always been just that interested in those about her, Miss," Mrs. James argued. "She wouldn't like to come back and find you looking tired or pale. Not that there's much danger of that," quite beamingly. "For all your hard work, I must say you look--well, you look as I've never seen you. And you always had a colour like a new-picked rose."

The colour like a new-picked rose ran up to the rings of hair on the girl's forehead as if she were made a little shy.

"It is because her grace has been so good--and because every one is so kind to me," she said. "Kindness makes me happy."

She was so happy that she was never tired and was regarded as a young wonder in the matter of work and readiness and exactitude. Her accounts, her correspondence, her information were always in order. When she took

the prescribed walks and in some aloof path or corner met the strong, slim khaki-clad figure, they walked or stood or sat closely side by side and talked of many things--though most of all they dwelt on one. She could ask Donal questions and he could throw light on such things as young soldiers knew better than most people. She came into close touch--a shuddering touch sometimes it was--with needs and facts concerning marchings and trenches and attacks and was therefore able to visualise and to speak definitely of necessities not always understood.

"How did you find that out?" little black-clad Lady Kathryn asked her one day. "I wish I had known it before George went away."

"A soldier told me," was her answer. "Soldiers know things we don't."

"The world is made of soldiers now," said Kathryn. "And one is always talking to them. I shall begin to ask them questions about small things like that."

It was the same morning that as they stood alone together for a few minutes Kathryn suddenly put her hand upon Robin's shoulder.

"You never--never feel the least angry--when you remember about George--the night of the dance," she pleaded shakily. "Do you, Robin? You couldn't now! Could you?"

Tears rushed into Robin's eyes.

"Never--never!" she said. "I always remember him--oh, quite differently! He----" she hesitated a second and began again. "He did something--so wonderfully kind--before he went away--something for me. That is what I remember. And his nice voice--and his good eyes."

"Oh! he was good! He was!" exclaimed Kathryn in a sort of despairing impatience. "So many of them are! It's awful!" And she sat down in the nearest chair and cried hopelessly into her crushed handkerchief while Robin tried to soothe--not to comfort her. There was no comfort to offer. And behind the rose tinted mists her own spectre merely pretended to veil itself.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she lay in bed at night in her quiet room she often lay awake long and long for pure bliss. The world in which people were near--near--to one another and loved each other, the world Donal had always belonged to even when he was a little boy, she now knew and lived in. There was no loneliness in it. If there was pain or trouble some one who loved you was part of it and you, and so you could bear it. All the radiant mornings and heavenly nights, all the summer scents of flowers or hay or hedges in bloom, or new rain on the earth, were things felt just as that other one felt them and drew in their delights--exactly in the same way. Once in the night stillness of a sweet dark country lane she had stood in the circle of Donal's arm, her joyous, warm young breast against his

and they had heard together the singing of a nightingale in a thicket.

"Let us stand still," he had whispered close to her ear. "Let us not speak a word--not a word. Oh! little lovely love! Let us only listen--and be happy!"

Almost every day there were marvels like this. And when they were apart she could not forget them but walked like a spirit strayed on to earth and unknowing of its radiance. This was why people glanced at her curiously and were sometimes vaguely troubled.