

CHAPTER LII

POPPY, temporarily known to the world as Miss Poppy Smith, was enjoying herself thoroughly. She had arrived at one of the quieter seaside towns on the South Coast by excursion train, and a nice old man had shared his oranges and sandwiches with her on the way down. A nice porter had recommended a really good boarding-house at fifty shillings per week, "all in."

The room allotted to her was small and somewhat disfigured by cheap coloured prints from Christmas numbers and a photograph of the proprietress's late aunt. However, the sheets were clean and not too damp; the catering was good if the service were a little irregular, and she liked her fellow-boarders, so she was enjoying herself thoroughly.

There were two honeymoon couples, who were just "sweet," and some jolly girls from London offices, and young men from other London offices making timid advances to the jolly girls. Last, but not least, there was a quiet young man, Mr. Tom Russell, all by himself.

Mr. Tom Russell rather interested Poppy, although she did not quite know why. He was in the early thirties, she decided, and rather tall and much too silent. He never tried to "get off" with her like the other young men, nor did he seem to bother much about the jolly girls, to their inward indignation. Once or twice he had smiled rather pleasantly at Poppy.

One way and another, Poppy was enjoying herself, though at first rather casual in answering to the name of

"Miss Smith," which casualness she feared might betray her.

"It seems rather a guilty secret—something awful—to have an *alibi*, but I just couldn't come here as myself. Gran'pa is such a great man that no one would be natural with me," she had thought.

So "Miss Poppy Smith" bathed and paddled and went to see the pierrots and tried the automatic machines on the pier and in between thought somewhat of Mr. Tom Russell.

It was on the third day of her stay that he spoke to her. It was a splendid summer morning, calm and flooded with sunlight. Poppy had gone out to the rocks, and the little waves whispered so seductively that she had taken off her stockings and her small shoes and waded into the water like a happy child. Whilst she stood on the edge of the sea, with the warm golden sand oozing between her pink toes, Mr. Tom Russell came by and said that it was a lovely morning.

"Lovely," said Poppy, and then he spoke again and Poppy talked to him. Soon they were sitting side by side on the beach.

He seemed so sympathetic, Poppy thought. He had been in the War, and the War interested Poppy, as did people who had been in it, for during that time she had been a small child. He was so frank, and spoke of his struggles and disappointments. She rather gathered that he was none too well blessed with this world's goods, although he did not tell her so. Perhaps, she reflected, that was only her view-point; she, who had always had so much, might not have a normal view-point.

"They have a good picture on at the Pavilion to-night, Miss Smith. Have you seen it?"

"No," said Poppy, and added, quite untruthfully, "I love pictures." After which it came, quite naturally, that Mr. Russell was her escort, and then, in succeeding days,

they bathed together and took long walks in the evenings, and somehow Poppy felt much happier than she had ever done.

"I wish you would not call me 'Miss Smith'," she said soon. She was innocent of any deliberate intent to advance their relationship to a more intimate footing. She merely did not like to hear this nice man calling her by a name which was not her own. Immediately she had said it she blushed, realising the construction which he might place upon her request.

"I should like very much to call you 'Poppy'—if I may. I think it is a pretty name, and so uncommon. I have only heard of one other person with that name."

"Who is she?" asked Poppy.

"Why, a very fortunate little lady—the great-granddaughter of the Earl of Woden. I remember a paragraph about her in the *Tattler*."

"You—you think she is fortunate—Tom?"

He smiled and patted her hand. "Well, she will be Countess of Woden when the old man dies, and a millionairess."

"Perhaps she would rather be just an ordinary little girl?"

"And perhaps not. I wish I had had a great-grandfather like that. I don't even know who mine was, and what I do know of my grandfather—but never mind these genealogies."

"Have you a father or mother, Tom?"

"No." His face clouded. Poppy thought it because she had wakened an unhappy memory.

"I am sorry if I said anything to hurt."

"No, it was not that." For a moment he seemed on the point of making a confession, and then refrained. "Old Lord Woden is a pretty tough handful from all accounts," he added, changing the subject.

"I am sure he is not; he is a dear," protested Poppy, incautiously.

He looked at her. "Why, do you know him?"

"I—live quite near him," said Poppy, rather hesitatingly.

Tom nodded and gazed at her more closely. Poppy looked out at sea.

"I met old Woden's grandson in the Army; he was in the same battalion."

Poppy swung round. "You knew my daddy? Do tell me if you are the Tom who helped him when he was wounded? Oh, how wonderful to meet you?"

Tom Russell rose to his feet and looked down at dark-haired, barefooted Poppy on the sands.

"So you *are* the Poppy who will be Countess of Woden?"

She realised that she had betrayed her identity.

"Yes. Does—does that matter?"

He laughed rather bitterly. "I am afraid it does." In that moment she suddenly realised that he was in love with her and she with him.

"I did not know whom I was entertaining unawares."

"Tom, what does it matter? You saved my daddy; you are the same; I am sure of it."

"I did what I could to help a friend; whether I saved him or not—"

"And you were to come when you were on leave, and you never came."

"I saw in a paper that he had been killed in an air-raid why should I have called? Lord Woden might have thought—anything."

"He would never have thought that you would make capital of it," said Poppy with dignity, and her eyes were moist. "That is the wrong sort of pride, Tom; quite wrong, though I admire you for it. You must call and see him now. And—and I've enjoyed your company; I am only here as Miss Smith because—you know what people are. Don't let that make any difference to you?"

He smiled at her sadly. "It must, and I shall tell you why. I love you."

"I think I love you too."

"And I am poor, and you will be a countess and a millionairess. Our sorts do not marry."

"Tom—dear."

"And you are descended from an earl. My father—never married my mother."

She clasped her hands and her lips parted. As he strode up the beach she burst into a flood of tears.