

CHAPTER LIII

WHEN Poppy dried her tears and went back to the boarding-house, Mr. Tom Russell had left for London. In her heart was a great conflict. All that revolted her in illegitimacy warred with her love. For now she knew that unreasoning, instinctively she loved this man, and would give her rank and all her wealth to be his wife.

Still between them was the shadow of the bar sinister.

"The sins of the father shall *not* be visited on the children." Coming to that resolution, she would have gone to him, but could not find him. As far as London she traced him, but the rooms in Finsbury Park which had been his residence were no longer in his occupation, and he had left no new address.

Yet in her inmost heart she was troubled. Could she marry him—knowing what he had told her?

It was for her great-grandfather's sake she tried to trace him, she told herself. That he might meet the man who had saved her father's life.

"Never mind, Poppy," he said, stroking her short, dark hair, "we shall get an agency to make inquiries." John noticed that she was rather pale beneath the sunburn and that her eyes were tired, and a little of the truth came to him, for he was wise, and not knowing the ways of women, was cautious.

Soon it was 1926, a year with gathering storm-clouds on the industrial horizon. The coal subsidy, would end in May.

Much frothy rhetoric from the Labour benches. The Best Club in Europe, like other clubs, had suffered in its membership from the war. For the first time for many, many years, we had in post-war Britain a definitely anti-patriotic Opposition, willing to lend a ready ear to any calumny and a ready hand to any iniquity directed at its native country. An Opposition seeking to reap where it had not sown, to bribe the idle with the fruits of the industrious.

Then came May 1st. The T.U.C., burning with a desire to advertise its power to the Government and the world, decided on a General Strike. It was a new toy and had not hitherto been tried in Britain. Of course, its use would make the T.U.C. look very important. So honourable agreements were dishonourably torn up. It was not expected that any odium or reprobation would be incurred by *that*; for this was Organised Labour acting, and the ordinary standards of morality were considered, quite naturally, not to apply.

Poppy was driving a lorry. It was towards the end of the first week of the strike, when tubes and trains were beginning to go a little better. The community, to the great indignation of the T.U.C., was looking after and defending itself without the T.U.C.'s permission. Parliamentary Labour having, as subsequently appeared, made up its mind that the strike was wrong, supported it wholeheartedly until it began to fail.

Poppy and her lorry and thousands more carried on. It was the old spirit of 1914 once again. Then it was "All Together Against the Germans." Now it was "All Together against the Unions."

Poppy and the lorry trundled along the Bayswater Road. It was night and she felt rather tired. Soon the lorry would be "parked" in Hyde Park and she at liberty to go to the house in Prince's Gate until early the following morning.

She stopped and bought one of the one-leaf "bulletins" which did duty for newspapers in that time.

"There is no immediate prospect of a collapse of the strike. There can be only one basis of negotiation—unconditional withdrawal of strike notices."

"The unions will emerge with their powers and privileges seriously curtailed."

"The total number of volunteers enrolled in the Home Counties and London amounts to 75,000."

"Gilt Edged Stocks were without alteration, War Loan being 99½."

"Cricket.—Yorks, 176 and 185 for 9. Cambridge University, 176."

Poppy put the "bulletin" in her pocket. . . . Suddenly there was a loud crash as a stone struck the lorry.

Someone shouted "blackleg" and a threat to "do her in."

It was a rather dark part of the Bayswater Road. She clambered hastily into the driving-seat, but as she did so a rough-looking man seized hold of her. She felt hot breath on her neck and smelt an odour of beer.

"Blackleg! We'll teach yer."

He was hauling her back to the pavement, despite her struggles, when there was an interruption. A tall "special" came running out of the darkness, with a truncheon in his hand and struck hard—once.

"I hope you are not hurt," he said, in a voice which seemed familiar. "I think this fellow will not bother you

again." He looked down at the prostrate form. "I believe official instructions are to strike when necessary on the shoulder, but I like to make sure."

Poppy almost dragged him into the light of her head-lamps.

"Tom! Don't you know me? My dearest, dearest Tom."