Two Novels

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CHAPTER V

BROKEN GLASS

“IT MUST last three years. Don’t tell people so, Nancy, or they will laugh at you. But once a gigantic outbreak of this kind is set in motion it cannot stop suddenly. I’m afraid to think, if we could have peace to-morrow, of the re-organization necessary before normal conditions could be resumed. It has thrust civilization back for fifty years and every month it goes on puts us back further.”

Her father took up his paper again. There was a sense of oppression about the damp air. Everyone was already saving coal. The empty fireplace looked mournful and the great doors seemed to shut the wrong things out of the room. Her mother was playing patience on the little inlaid table. Doreen, up for a month from Cornwall, was working beads into a belt.

It was late autumn. The air was chill and blue with hint of winter cold. The park was torn with heavy boots of volunteers learning to ride and drill in the Row. The English had taken to war with surprising
alacrity. They went about in uniforms, babbling uncouth words.

“People who make wars ought to go out first and be shot,” protested her mother vigourously. Doreen picked out a blue bead and matched it with a red.

Nancy just saw chaos; felt a bewildering uneasiness. She had no particular confidence that the Germans would not land. She had heard a little too much of the inside of things to be confident as the mob was confident. Modern warfare was not a decent matching of one sword against another. Europe might topple over and perish in a night.

They had been in the Isle of Wight that August. All the end of July watching and helpless. Could it come? Must it come? Going out into the dark night with a candle stump to read news of the first battle. Watching the shells fall about the bow of the ship that got in the next week and knowing nothing of events, had tried to sail past the mines.

There was something particularly degrading about war. The worst side of everybody leaped automatically to the surface. Patriotism was the easiest disguise that vice had ever had to wear. There was not even the decency of organized conscription but screaming hysterical compulsion—of the wrong people. Everyone knew that the Germans had prepared for war for years. Why had the other nations not made counter-preparations or insisted on disarmament a generation before?
“As long as human nature lasts warfare will go on,” her father said. But there must be some way out. It was like education. People were too lazy to develop independence in their children. Nations were too lazy to prevent the roots of war.

It was the grotesque optimism of people that killed. Their snarling refusal ever to face facts. “England is sure to win” was the unvarying answer to any query. With the line being forced back and vessels sunk every day. “England is always right,” a crowd screamed in London. “Germany can do no wrong,” another mob shouted in Berlin. One’s ancestors had refused responsibility; had allowed their inaction to plant war. A generation busy with other problems was flung from work into shrapnel, disease and bombs.

“It seems to me most unnecessary,” Nancy suggested.

“Unnecessary! If we had not landed troops in France at once we should have become a German province within five years. Germany would have swallowed Europe, country by country. And then turned her attention to America. How would you have liked to have been forced to work in a German factory? For no wages and bad food.”

“I should have hated it. Probably the only thing was for us to go to war. But it ought to have been foreseen and prevented. Not now, but years ago.”

“We had an idealistic government that cut down our artillery."
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“I know. But if we had a better system of education we might have had a wiser government.”

Useless to talk. There was no dispute about one fact. Civilization as her father said, had been put back fifty years if it had not been put back altogether.

Doreen held her belt up to the light, fixed a thread and emptied more beads out on the table. What a beastly sensation it must have been when the Greeks dashed into Troy. Knossos, like England, had been a sea power; Knossos had been burnt in a night. Guns took the purpose out of everything. Guns, arrows, stones. History repeated itself. Was there ever, in the re-iteration of events, progression?

Nancy could hear a footstep on the stairs. Who could be coming to call so late in the evening? The butler flung open the door with a peculiar stately dignity.

“Madam,” he announced in his low quiet voice, “the Zeppelins.”

Doreen sprang up and made a rush for her coat. Nancy followed her. “Bring my wrap too,” shouted her mother. Autumn moonlight shone through the window. They heard the front door open. Nancy paused a moment to snatch up pencil and paper.

“Hurry.” They dragged coats out of cupboards. Ran downstairs.

“I would not have missed this for worlds,” panted Doreen as they rushed into the street.

People thronged from every door, in evening dresses
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under hastily caught up wraps, in aprons, in working overalls. Heads craned into the air. Maids scurried up the basement steps. And the road stretched into a lark-spur distance, quiet, too quiet, as if nothing had happened or could ever happen.

“I don’t see anything at all,” her mother complained, “are you sure, Brown, that it was not one of our own balloons?”

The butler had reappeared with a case of field glasses. “No, Madam. I saw it myself. A long silver sausage in the sky. It must have passed before you came downstairs.” He took the glasses from their case and waited hopefully. Doreen ran up the street towards the park. Nancy thrust her notebook back in her pocket.

The postman dropped the letters in the box as if an air raid were an everyday occurrence. People in thick coats came out with cameras under their arms.

“This is very imprudent” her father suggested, going however further into the middle of the street, “if any shells are fired we might get scratched with shrapnel.”

It was very silent. Everyone watched. There was not a motor car nor the sound of any wheels to break the clear November night. It seemed as if a city had stopped breathing, were collected into an intensity of watching, into a petrified forest of heads.

In the blue air something like a shooting star flashed and fell from the sky.
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People tautened. Looked at each other. “The guns.” Out by the park a shrill rumble snarled into the night. London itself was swept into the war.

“How jealous they will be at home that I was in the Raid.” Doreen looked eagerly over the rail up the street. They had boarded the omnibus long before it turned into the Strand and had got seats well in front on the top.

“I’m awfully glad you were with us. Wonder if we shall see much of the damage though. I should think by this time it will have been cleared away.”

“It can’t be. Look at the crowd. There must be thousands out. It was a good idea to get the bus the other side of the square. We should have seen nothing on foot.”

Very slowly the driver worked his way between the mobs surging over road and pavement. Most of the traffic had been turned off the other way. The seats behind them were filled with people eager to see what had happened the previous night. The air was a thunder of excitement.

The walls were dingy grey. They were so close to them when the bus stopped that they could see the soot grained surface. It was not silver. Not that lovely silver of far roofs on an April evening. The dark clothes of the crowd were unbroken by any colours, white faces pressed forward shouting shrill phrases from side to side of the road.
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They were proud. They had not been afraid. They also, the onlookers, had waited and joked and watched as boys might linger about a smoke of gorse some dry summer evening on the hills.

Thunder, thunder of excitement. A sparkle of light flashed from an open space. There were ropes drawn, a barrier. Darts of light, broken glass, littered the scratched pavement.

Doreen and Nancy stood on the seat together. Everyone was standing. The omnibus hardly moved. They looked out over a black sea. Over chips of glass spread like tinsel. Damp air poured through the broken windows into offices. Smoke still came from a building up the road. Firemen were at work. Police were holding the crowd back.

Probably it was immoral of them to yield to the excitement. To stand on top of the bus and stare over battered windows and smashed stone. But it was history. Actual touch of an event that had happened, that was done with, but that would be written out in history books when all the wars and quarrelling were at an end. It was wrong to let themselves toss on the wave of this excitement but it was better than sitting in a room reading—of how civilization and all that one believed in had been put back for more years than one was likely to live.

Faint winter sunlight flashed on the heap of glass swept into the gutter, tinsel, debris of a fête that even the wind had no use for. The smoke got into their eyes.
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Someone made a joke about the “sausages.” Someone asked when they would come again. Others looked with quiet eyes into bare rooms that here and there had a single cracked pane left. Men were nailing up wooden frames, dusting splinters out of ledges.

It was unreal. It was pre-historic. But in the age of dinosaur and pterodactyl there had been bright tree ferns and clean water. This broken glass—it made everything wrong, into a book one did not like the taste of, into a game that was stupid. And one had no control. It was going on. Rolling on. Dragging everything, everyone, with it. The whole intellectual world was reduced to a chaos of splintered panes. The physical world was battered into dust. War helped nothing. But having started it rolled on. Nothing checked it; nothing brought it to a close.

“Wonder what will happen before the end.”

“Funny to think they will read this up at Downwood in another fifty years.”

The bus turned into an unfamiliar street. Glass behind one. In front a world they did not know.