

CHAPTER II

If some uncomplex minded and even moderately articulate man or woman, living in some small, ordinary respectable London house and going about his or her work in the customary way, had been prompted by chance upon June 29th, 1914, to begin to keep on that date a day-by-day diary of his or her ordinary life, the effects of huge historic events, as revealed by the every-day incidents to be noted in the streets, to be heard in his neighbours' houses as well as among his fellow workers, to be read in the penny or half-penny newspapers, would have resulted--if the record had been kept faithfully and without any self-conscious sense of audience--between 1914 and 1918 in the gradual compiling of a human document of immense historical value. Compared with it, the diaries of Defoe and Pepys would pale and be flavourless. But it must have been begun in June, 1914, and have been written with the casualness of that commonplace realism which is the most convincing realism of all. It is true that the expression of the uncomplex mind is infrequently articulate, but the record which would bring home the clearest truth would be the one unpremeditatedly depicting the effect produced upon the wholly unprepared and undramatic personality by the monstrous drama, as the Second Deluge rose for its apparent overwhelming, carrying upon its flood old civilisations broken from anchor and half submerged as they tossed on the rising and raging waves. Such a priceless treasure as this might have been the quite unliterary and unromantic diary of any--say, Mr. James Simpson of any house number in any respectable side

street in Regents Park, or St. Johns Wood or Hampstead. One can easily imagine him, sitting in his small, comfortable parlour and bending over his blotting-pad in unilluminated cheerful absorption after his day's work. It can also without any special intellectual effort be imagined that the record might have begun with some such seemingly unprophetic entry as follows:--

"June 29th, 1914. I made up my mind when I was at the office to-day that I would begin to keep a diary. I have thought several times that I would, and Harriet thinks it would be a good thing because we should have it to refer to when there was any little dispute about dates and things that have happened. To-night seemed a good time because there is something to begin the first entry with. Harriet and I spent part of the evening in reading the newspaper accounts of the assassination of the Austrian Archduke and his wife. There seems to be a good deal of excitement about it because he was the next heir to the Austrian throne. The assassination occurred in Bosnia at a place called Sarajevo. Crawshaw, whose desk is next to mine in the office, believes it will make a nice mess for the Bosnians and Servians because they have been rather troublesome about wanting to be united into one country instead of two, and called Greater Serbia. That seems a silly sort of reason for throwing bombs and killing people. But foreigners have a way of thinking bombs settle everything. Harriet brought out her old school geography and we looked up Sarajevo on the map of Austria-Hungary. It was hard to find because the print was small and it was spelt Saraievo--without any j in it. It was just on the line between Bosnia and Servia and the

geography said it was the chief city in Bosnia. Harriet said it was a queer thing how these places on maps never seemed like real places when you looked them up and just read their names and yet probably the people in them were as real to themselves as we were, and there were streets in them as real as Lupton Street where we were sitting, finding them on the map on the sitting-room table. I said that bombs were pretty real things and the sound of this one when it exploded seemed to have reached a long way to judge from the newspapers and the talk in London. Harriet said my putting it like that gave her a queer feeling--almost as if she had heard it and it had made her jump. Somehow it seemed something like it to me. At any rate we sat still a minute or two, thinking it over. Then Harriet got up and went into the kitchen and made some nice toasted cheese for our supper before we went to bed."

Men of the James Simpson type were among the many who daily passed Coombe House on their way to and from their office work. Some of them no doubt caught sight of Lord Coombe himself as he walked or drove through the entrance gates. Their knowledge of him was founded upon rumoured stories, repeated rather privately among themselves. He was a great swell and there weren't many shady things he hadn't done and didn't know the ins and outs of, but his remoteness from their own lives rendered these accepted legends scarcely prejudicial. The perfection of his clothes, and his unusual preservation of physical condition and good looks, also his habit of the so-called "week-end" continental journeys, were the points chiefly recalled by the incidental mention of his name.

If James Simpson, on his way home to Lupton Street with his friend Crawshaw, chanced to see his lordship's car standing before his door a few days after the bomb throwing in Sarajevo, he might incidentally have referred to him somewhat in this wise:--

"As we passed by Coombe House the Marquis of Coombe came out and got into his car. There were smart leather valises and travelling things in it and a rug or so, as if he was going on some journey. He is a fine looking man for one that's lived the life he has and reached his age. I don't see how he's done it, myself. When I said to Crawshaw that it looked as if he was going away for the week end, Crawshaw said that perhaps he was taking Saturday to Monday off to run over to talk to the Kaiser and old Franz Josef about the Sarajevo business, and he might telephone to the Czar about it because he's intimate with them all, and the whole lot seem to be getting mixed up in the thing and writing letters and sending secret telegrams. It seems to be turning out, as Crawshaw said it would, into a nice mess for Servia. Austria is making it out that the assassination really was committed to stir up trouble, and says it wasn't done just by a crazy anarchist, but by a secret society working for its own ends. Crawshaw came in to supper and we talked it all over. Harriet gave us cold beef and pickled onions and beer, and we looked at the maps in the old geography again. We got quite interested in finding places. Bosnia and Servia (it's often spelled Serbia) are close up against Austria-Hungary, and Germany and Russia are close against the other side. They can get into each other's countries without much travelling. I heard to-day that Russia will have to help

Servia if she has a row with Austria. Crawshaw says that will give Germany the chance she's been waiting for and that she will try to get through Belgium to England. He says she hates England. Harriet began to look pale as she studied the map and saw how little Belgium was and that the Channel was so narrow. She said she felt as if England had been silly to let herself get so slack and she almost wished she hadn't looked at the geography. She said she couldn't help thinking how awful it would be to see the German army marching up Regent Street and camping in Hyde Park, and who in goodness' name knew what they might do to people if they hated England so? She actually looked as if she would have cried if Crawshaw and I hadn't chaffed her and made her laugh by telling her we would join the army; and Crawshaw began to shoulder arms with the poker and I got my new umbrella."

In this domesticated and almost comfortable fashion did the greatest tragedy the human race has known since the beginning of the world gradually prepare its first scenes and reveal glimpses of itself, as the curtain of Time was, during that June, slowly raised by the hand of Fate.

This is not what is known as a "war story." It is not even a story of the War, but a relation of incidents occurring amidst and resulting from the strenuousness of a period to which "the War" was a background so colossal that it dwarfed all events, except in the minds of those for whom such events personally shook and darkened or brightened the world.

Nothing can dwarf personal anguish at its moment of highest power; to the last agony and despairing terror of the heart-wrung the cataclysm of earthquake, tornado, shipwreck is but the awesome back drop of the scene.

Also--incidentally--the story is one of the transitions in, and convulsive changes of, points of view produced by the convulsion itself which flung into new perspective the whole surface of the earth and the races existing upon it.

The Head of the House of Coombe had, as he said, been born at once too early and too late to admit of any fixed establishment of tastes and ideals. His existence had been passed in the transition from one era to another--the Early Victorian, under whose disappearing influences he had spent his youth; the Late Victorian and Edwardian, in whose more rapidly changing atmosphere he had ripened to maturity. He had, during this transition, seen from afar the slow rising of the tidal wave of the Second Deluge; and in the summer days of 1914 he heard the first low roaring of its torrential swell, and visualised all that the overwhelming power of its bursting flood might sweep before it and bury forever beneath its weight.

He made seemingly casual crossings of the Channel and journeys which were made up of the surmounting of obstacles, and when he returned, brought with him a knowledge of things which it would have been unwise to reveal carelessly to the general public. The mind of the general

public had its parallel, at the moment, in the temperature of a patient in the early stages of, as yet, undiagnosed typhoid or any other fever. Restless excitement and spasmodic heats and discomforts prompted and ruled it. Its tendency was to nervous discontent and suspicious fearfulness of approaching, vaguely formulated, evils. These risings of temperature were to be seen in the very streets and shops. People were talking--talking--talking. Ordinary people, common people, all kinds of classes. The majority of them did not know what they were talking about; most of them talked either uneducated, frightened or blustering nonsense, but everybody talked more or less. Enormous numbers of newspapers were bought and flourished about, or pored over anxiously. Numbers of young Germans were silently disappearing from their places in shops, factories and warehouses. That was how Germany showed her readiness for any military happening. Her army was already trained and could be called from any country and walk in life. A mysterious unheard command called it and it was obliged to obey. The entire male population of England had not been trained from birth to regard itself as an immense military machine, ready at any moment for action. The James Simpson type of Englishman indulged in much discussion of the pros and cons of enforced military training of youth. Germany's well known contempt of the size and power of the British Army took on an aspect which filled the James Simpsons with rage. They had not previously thought of themselves as martial, because middle-class England was satisfied with her belief in her strength and entire safety. Of course she was safe. She always had been. Britannia Rules the Waves and the James Simpsons were sure that incidentally she ruled everything else.

But as there stole up behind the mature Simpsons the haunting realization that, if England was "drawn in" to a war, it would be the young Simpsons who must gird their loins and go forth to meet Goliath in his armour, with only the sling and stone of untrained youth and valour as their weapon, there were many who began to feel that even inconvenient drilling and discipline might have been good things.

"There is something quite thrilling in going about now," said Feather to Coombe, after coming in from a shopping round, made in her new electric brougham. "One doesn't know what it is, but it's in the air. You see it in people's faces. Actually shop girls give one the impression of just having stopped whispering together when you go into a place and ask for something. A girl who was trying on some gloves for me--she was a thin girl with prominent watery eyes--had such a frightened look, that I said to her, just to see what she would say--'I wonder what would happen to the shops if England got into war?' She turned quite white and answered, 'Oh, Madam, I can't bear to think of it. My favourite brother's a soldier. He's such a nice big fellow and we're so fond of him. And he's always talking about it. He says Germany's not going to let England keep out. We're so frightened--mother and me.' She almost dropped a big tear on my glove. It would be quite exciting if England did go in."

"It would," Coombe answered.

"London would be crowded with officers. All sorts of things would have to be given for them--balls and things."

"Cannon balls among other things," said Coombe.

"But we should have nothing to do with the cannon balls, thank goodness," exhilaration sweeping her past unpleasant aspects. "One would be sorry for the Tommies, of course, if the worst came to the worst. But I must say army and navy men are more interesting than most civilians. It's the constant change in their lives, and their having to meet so many kinds of people."

"In actual war, men who are not merely 'Tommies' actually take part," Coombe suggested. "I was looking at a ball-room full of them the night after the news came from Sarajevo. Fine, well-set-up youngsters dancing with pretty girls. I could not help asking myself what would have happened to them before the German army crossed the Channel--if they were not able to prevent the crossing. And what would happen to the girls after its crossing, when it poured over London and the rest of England in the unbridled rage of drunken victory."

He so spoke because beneath his outward coldness he himself felt a secret rage against this lightness which, as he saw things, had its parallel in another order of trivial unawareness in more important places and larger brains. Feather started and drew somewhat nearer to him.

"How hideous! What do you mean! Where was the party?" she asked.

"It was a small dance given by the Duchess, very kindly, for Robin," he answered.

"For Robin!" with open eyes whose incredulity held irritation. "The old Duchess giving parties to her 'useful companion' girl! What nonsense! Who was there?" sharply.

"The young fellows who would be first called on if there was war. And the girls who are their relatives. Halwyn was there--and young Dormer and Layton--they are all in the army. The cannon balls would be for them as well as for the Tommies of their regiments. They are spirited lads who wouldn't slink behind. They'd face things."

Feather had already forgotten her moment's shock in another thought.

"And they were invited to meet Robin! Did they dance with her? Did she dance much? Or did she sit and stare and say nothing? What did she wear?"

"She looked like a very young white rose. She danced continually. There was always a little mob about her when the music stopped. I do not think she sat at all, and it was the young men who stared. The only dance she missed--Kathryn told her grandmother--was the one she sat out in the conservatory with Donal Muir."

At this Feather's high, thin little laugh broke forth.

"He turned up there? Donal Muir!" She struck her hands lightly together.

"It's too good to be true!"

"Why is it too good to be true?" he inquired without enthusiasm.

"Oh, don't you see? After all his mother's airs and graces and running away with him when they were a pair of babies--as if Robin had the plague. I was the plague--and so were you. And here the old Duchess throws them headlong at each other--in all their full bloom--into each other's arms. I did not do it. You didn't. It was the stuffiest old female grandee in London, who wouldn't let me sweep her front door-steps for her--because I'm an impropriety."

She asked a dozen questions, was quite humorous over the picture she drew of Mrs. Muir's consternation at the peril her one ewe lamb had been led into by her highly revered friend.

"A frightfully good-looking, spoiled boy like that always plunges headlong into any adventure that attracts him. Women have always made love to him and Robin will make great eyes, and blush and look at him from under her lashes as if she were going to cry with joy--like Alice in the Ben Bolt song. She'll 'weep with delight when he gives her a smile and tremble with fear at his frown.' His mother can't stop it, however furious she may be. Nothing can stop that sort of thing when it

once begins."

"If England declares war Donal Muir will have more serious things to do than pursue adventures," was Coombe's comment. He looked serious himself

as he said the words, because they brought before him the bodily strength and beauty of the lad. He seemed suddenly to see him again as he had looked when he was dancing. And almost at the same moment he saw

other scenes than ball-rooms and heard sounds other than those drawn forth by musicians screened with palms. He liked the boy. He was not his son, but he liked him. If he had been his son, he thought--! He had been through the monster munition works at Essen several times and he had heard technical talks of inventions, the sole reason for whose presence in the world was that they had the power to blow human beings into unrecognisable, ensanguined shreds and to tear off limbs and catapult them into the air. He had heard these powers talked of with a sense of natural pride in achievement, in fact with honest and cheerful self gratulation.

He had known Count Zeppelin well and heard his interesting explanation of what would happen to a thickly populated city on to which bombs were dropped.

But Feather's view was lighter and included only such things as she found entertaining.

"If there's a war the heirs of great families won't be snatched at first," she quite rattled on. "There'll be a sort of economising in that sort of thing. Besides he's very young and he isn't in the Army. He'd have to go through some sort of training. Oh, he'll have time! And there'll be so much emotion and excitement and talk about parting forever and 'This may be the last time we ever meet' sort of thing that every boy will have adventure--and not only boys. When I warned Robin, the night before she went away, I did not count on war or I could have said more--"

"What did you warn her of?"

"Of making mistakes about the men who would make love to her. I warned her against imagining she was as safe as she would be if she were a daughter of the house she lived in. I knew what I was talking about."

"Did she?" was Coombe's concise question.

"Of course she did--though of course she pretended not to. Girls always pretend. But I did my duty as a parent. And I told her that if she got herself into any mess she mustn't come to me."

Lord Coombe regarded her in silence for a moment or so. It was one of the looks which always made her furious in her small way.

"Good morning," he said and turned his back and walked out of the room.

Almost immediately after he had descended the stairs she heard the front door close after him.

It was the kind of thing which made her feel her utter helplessness against him and which enraged all the little cat in her being. She actually ground her small teeth.

"I was quite right," she said. "It's her affair to take care of herself. Would he want her to come to him in any silly fix? I should like to see her try it."