CHAPTER III

Robin sat at the desk in her private room and looked at a key she held in her hand. She had just come upon it among some papers. She had put it into a narrow lacquered box when she arranged her belongings, after she left the house in which her mother continued to live. It was the key which gave entrance to the Gardens. Each householder possessed one. She alone knew why she rather timidly asked her mother's permission to keep this one.

"One of the first things I seem to remember is watching the gardeners planting flowers," Robin had said. "They had rows of tiny pots with geraniums and lobelia in them. I have been happy there. I should like to be able to go in sometimes and sit under the trees. If you do not mind--"

Feather did not mind. She herself was not in the least likely to be seized with a desire to sit under trees in an atmosphere heavy with nursemaids and children.

So Robin had been allowed to keep the key and until to-day she had not opened the lacquer box. Was it quite by accident that she had found it? She was not quite sure it was and she was asking herself questions, as she sat looking at it as it lay in her palm.

The face of the whole world had changed since the night when she had sat among banked flowers and palms and ferns, and heard the splashing of the fountain and the sound of the music and dancing, and Donal Muir's voice, all at the same time. That which had happened had made everybody and everything different; and, because she lived in this particular house and saw much of special people, she realised that the growing shudder in the life about her was only the first convulsive tremor of an earthquake. The Duchess began to have much more for her to do. She called on her to read special articles in the papers, and to make notes and find references. Many visitors came to the house to discuss, to plan, to prepare for work. A number of good-looking, dancing boys had begun to come in and out in uniform, and with eager faces and a businesslike military air which oddly transformed them. The recalcitrant George was more transformed than any of the rest. His eyes looked almost fierce in their anxious intensity, his voice had taken on a somewhat hard defiant ring. It could not be possible that he had ever done that silly thing by the fountain and that she had splashed him from head to foot. It was plain that there were young soldiers who were straining at leashes, who were restless at being held back by the bindings of red tape, and who every hour were hearing things--true or untrue--which filled them with blind fury. As days passed Robin heard some of these things--stories from Belgium--which caused her to stare straight before her, blanched with horror. It was not only the slaughter and helplessness which pictured itself before her--it was stories half hinted at about girls like herself--girls who were trapped and overpowered--carried into lonely or dark places where no one could hear

them. Sometimes George and the Duchess forgot her because she was so quiet--people often forgot everything but their excitement and wrath--and every one who came in to talk, because the house had become a centre of activities, was full of new panics or defiances or rumours of happenings or possibilities.

The maelstrom had caught Robin herself in its whirling. She realised that she had changed with the rest. She was no longer only a girl who was looked at as she passed along the street and who was beginning to be happy because she could earn her living. What was every girl in these days? How did any girl know what lay before her and those who protected the land she lived in? What could a girl do but try in some way to help--in any way to help the fight and the fighters. She used to lie awake and think of the Duchess' plans and concentrate her thought on the mastering of details. There was no hour too early or too late to find her ready to spring to attention. The Duchess had set her preparations for future possibilities in train before other women had quite begun to believe in their existence. Lady Lothwell had at first laughed quite gaily at certain long lists she found her mother occupied with--though this, it is true, was in early days.

But Robin, even while whirled by the maelstrom, could not cease thinking certain vague remote thoughts. The splashing of fountains among flowers, and the sound of music and dancing were far away--but there was an echo to which she listened unconsciously as Donal Muir did. Something she gave no name to. But as the, as yet unheard, guns sent forth vibrations

which reached far, there rose before her pictures of columns of marching men--hundreds, thousands, young, erect, steady and with clear eyes--marching on and on--to what--to what? Would every man go? Would there not be some who, for reasons, might not be obliged--or able--or ready--until perhaps the, as yet hoped for, sudden end of the awful thing had come? Surely there would be many who would be too young--or whose youth could not be spared because it stood for some power the nation needed in its future.

She had taken out and opened the lacquered box while thinking these things. She was thinking them as she looked at the key in her hand.

"It is not quiet anywhere now," she said to herself. "But there will be some corner under a tree in the Gardens where it will seem quiet if one sits quite still there. I will go and try."

There were very few nursemaids with their charges in the place when she reached it about an hour later.

The military element filling the streets engendered a spirit of caution with regard to nursemaids in the minds of their employers. Even those who were not young and good-looking were somewhat shepherded. The two or three quite elderly ones in the Gardens cast serious glances at the girl who walked past them to a curve in the path where large lilac bushes and rhododendrons made a sort of nook for a seat under a tree.

They could not see her when she sat down and laid her book beside her on the bench. She did not even open it, but sat and looked at the greenery of the shrubs before her. She was very still, and she looked as if she saw more than mere leaves and branches.

After a few minutes she got up slowly and went to a tall bush of lilac. She plucked several leaves and carried them back to her bench, somewhat as if she were a girl moving in a dream. Then, with a tiny shadow of a smile, she took a long pin from under the lapel of her coat and, leaning forward, began to prick out a pattern on the leaf she had laid on the wooden seat. She was in the midst of doing it--had indeed decorated two or three--when she found herself turning her head to listen to something. It was a quick, buoyant marching step--not a nursemaid's, not a gardener's, and it was coming towards her corner as if with intention--and she suddenly knew that she was listening as if the intention concerned herself. This was only because there are psychological moments, moods, conditions at once physical and mental when every incident in life assumes the significance of intention--because unconsciously or consciously one is waiting.

Here was a crisp tread somehow conveying a suggestion of familiar happy eagerness. The tall young soldier who appeared from behind the clump of shrubs and stood before her with a laughing salute had evidently come hurriedly. And the hurry and laughter extraordinarily brought back the Donal who had sprung upon her years ago from dramatic ambush. It was

Donal Muir who had come.

"I saw you from a friend's house across the street," he said. "I followed you."

He made no apology and it did not even cross her mind that apology was conventionally necessary. He sat down beside her and his effect--though it did not express itself physically--was that of one who was breathing quickly. The clear blueness of his gaze seemed to enfold and cover her. The wonderfulness of him was the surrounding atmosphere she had felt as a little child.

"The whole world is rocking to and fro," he said. "It has gone mad. We are all mad. There is no time to wait for anything."

"I know! I know!" she whispered, because her pretty breast was rising and falling, and she had scarcely breath left to speak with.

Even as he looked down at her, and she up at him, the colour and laughter died out of him. Some suddenly returning memory brought a black cloud into his eyes and made him pale. He caught hold of both her hands and pressed them quite hard against his bowed face. He did not kiss them but held them against his cheek.

"It is terrible," he said.

Without being told she knew what he meant.

"You have been hearing new horrible things?" she said. What she guessed was that they were the kind of things she had shuddered at, feeling her blood at once hot and cold. He lifted his face but did not release her hands.

"At my friend's house. A man had just come over from Holland," he shook himself as if to dismiss a nightmare. "I did not come here to say such things. The enormous luck of catching sight of you, by mere chance, through the window electrified me. I--I came because I was catapulted here." He tried to smile and managed it pretty well. "How could I stay when--there you were! Going into the same garden!" He looked round him at the greenness with memory awakening. "It's the same garden. The shrubs have grown much bigger and they have planted some new ones--but it is the same garden." His look came back to her. "You are the same Robin," he said softly.

"Yes," she answered, as she had always answered "yes" to him.

"You are the same little child," he added and he lifted her hands again, but this time he kissed them as gently as he had spoken. "God! I'm glad!" And that was said softly, too. He was not a man of thirty or forty--he was a boy of twenty and his whole being was vibrating with the earthquake of the world.

That he vaguely recognised this last truth revealed itself in his next words.

"It would have taken me six months to say this much to you--to get this far--before this thing began," he said. "I daren't have run after you in the street. I should have had to wait about and make calls and ask for invitations to places where I might see you. And when we met we should have been polite and have talked all round what we wanted to say. It would have been cheek to tell you--the second time we met--that your eyes looked at me just as they did when you were a little child. I should have had to be decently careful because you might have felt shy. You don't feel shy now, do you? No, you don't," in caressing conviction and appeal.

"No--no." There was the note of a little mating bird in the repeated word.

This time he spread one of her hands palm upward on his own larger one. He looked down at it tenderly and stroked it as he talked.

"It is because there is no time. Things pour in upon us. We don't know what is before us. We can only be sure of one thing--that it may be death or wounds. I don't know when they'll think me ready to be sent out--or when they'll be ready to send me and other fellows like me. But I shall be sent. I am sitting in a garden here with you. I'm a young chap and big and strong and I love life. It is my duty as a man to go

and kill other young chaps who love it as much as I do. And they must do their best to kill me, 'Gott strafe England,' they're saying in Germany--I understand it. Many a time it's in me to say, 'Gott strafe Germany.'"

He drew in his breath sharply, as if to pull himself together, and was still a moment. The next he turned upon her his wonderful boy's smile. Suddenly there was trusting appeal in it.

"You don't mind my holding your hand and talking like this, do you? Your eyes are as soft as--I've seen fawns cropping among the primroses with eyes that looked like them. But yours understand. You don't mind my doing this?" he kissed her palm. "Because there is no time."

Her free hand caught at his sleeve.

"No," she said. "You're going--you're going!"

"Yes," he answered. "And you wouldn't hold me back."

"No! No! No! No!" she cried four times, "Belgium! Belgium! Oh! Belgium!" And she hid her eyes on his sleeve.

"That's it--Belgium! There has been war before, but this promises from the outset to be something else. And they're coming on in their millions. We have no millions--we have not even guns and uniforms

enough, but we've got to stop them, if we do it with our bare hands and with walls of our dead bodies. That was how Belgium held them back. Can England wait?"

"You can't wait!" cried Robin. "No man can wait."

How he glowed as he looked at her!

"There. That shows how you understand. See! That's what draws me. That's why, when I saw you through the window, I had to follow you. It wasn't only your lovely eyes and your curtains of eyelashes and because you are a sort of rose. It is you--you! Whatsoever you said, I should know the meaning of, and what I say you will always understand. It's as if we answered each other. That's why I never forgot you. It's why I waked up so when I saw you at the Duchess'." He tried to laugh, but did not quite succeed. "Do you know I have never had a moment's real rest since that night--because I haven't seen you."

"I--" faltered Robin, "have wondered and wondered--where you were."

All the forces of nature drew him a little nearer to her--though the gardener who clumped past them dully at the moment only saw a particularly good-looking young soldier, apparently engaged in agreeable conversation with a pretty girl who was not a nursemaid.

"Did you come here because of that?" he asked with frank anxiety. "Do

you come here often and was it just chance? Or did you come because you were wondering?"

"I didn't exactly know--at first. But I know now. I have not been here since I went to live in Eaton Square," she gave back to him. Oh! how good and beautiful his asking eyes were! It was as he drew even a little nearer that he saw for the first time the pricked lilac leaves lying on the bench beside her.

"Did you do those?" he said suddenly quite low. "Did you?"

"Yes," as low and quite sweetly unashamed. "You taught me--when we played together."

The quick emotion in his flushing face could scarcely be described.

"How lovely--how lovely you are!" he exclaimed, almost under his breath. "I--I don't know how to say what I feel--about your remembering. You little--little thing!" This last because he somehow strangely saw her five years old again.

It was a boy's unspoiled, first love making--the charming outburst of young passion untrained by familiar use to phrases. It was like the rising of a Spring freshet and had the same irresistible power.

"May I have them? Will you give them to me with your own little hand?"

The happy glow of her smiling, as she picked them up and laid them, one by one, on his open extended palm, was as the glow of the smiling of young Eve. The dimples playing round her mouth and the quiver of her lashes, as she lifted them to laugh into his eyes, were an actual peril.

"Must I give you the pin too?" she said.

"Yes--everything," he answered in a sort of helpless joy. "I would carry the wooden bench away with me if I could. But they would stop me at the gate." They were obliged to treat something a little lightly because everything seemed tensely tremulous.

"Here is the pin," she said, taking it from under the lapel of her coat. "It is quite a long one." She looked at it a moment and then ended in a whisper. "I must have known why I was coming here--because, you see, I brought the pin." And her eyelashes lifted themselves and made their circling shadows again.

"Then I must have the pin. And it will be a talisman. I shall have a little flat case made for the leaves and the sacred pin shall hold it together. When I go into battle it will keep me safe. Bullets and bayonets will glance aside." He said it, as he laid the treasure away in his purse, and he did not see her face as he spoke of bullets and bayonets.

"I am a Highlander," he said next and for the moment he looked as if he saw things far away. "In the Highlands we believe more than most people do. Perhaps that's why I feel as if we two are not quite like other people,--as if we had been something--I don't know what--to each other from the beginning of time--since the 'morning stars first sang together.' I don't know exactly what that means, or how stars sing--but I like the sound of it. It seems to mean something I mean though I don't know how to say it." He was not in the least portentous or solemn, but he was the most strongly feeling and real creature she had ever heard speaking to her and he swept her along with him, as if he had indeed been the Spring freshet and she a leaf. "I believe," here he began to speak slowly as if he were thinking it out, "that there was something--that meant something--in the way we two were happy together and could not bear to be parted--years ago when we were nothing but children. Do you know that, little chap as I was, I never stopped thinking of you day and night when we were not playing together. I couldn't!"

"Neither could I stop thinking," said Robin. "I had dreams about seeing your eyes looking at me. They were blue like clear water in summer. They were always laughing. I always wanted them to look at me! They--they are the same eyes now," in a little rush of words.

Their blueness was on hers--in the very deeps of their uplifted liquidity.

"God! I'm glad!" his voice was on a hushed note.

There has never been a limner through all the ages who has pictured--at such a moment--two pairs of eyes reaching, melting into, lost in each other in their human search for the longing soul drawing together human things. Hand and brush and colour cannot touch That which Is and Must Be--in its yearning search for the spirit which is its life on earth.
Yet a boy and girl were yearning towards it as they sat in mere mortal form on a bench in a London square. And neither of them knew more than that they wondered at and adored the beauty in each other's eyes.

"I didn't know what a little chap I was," he said next. "I'd had a splendid life for a youngster and I was big for my age and ramping with health and strength and happiness. You seemed almost a baby to me, but--it was the way you looked at me, I think--I wanted to talk to you, and please you and make you laugh. You had a red little mouth with deep dimples that came and went near the corners. I liked to see them twinkle."

"You told me," she laughed, remembering. "You put the point of your finger in them. But you didn't hurt me," in quick lovely reassuring.
"You were not a rough little boy."

"I wouldn't have hurt you for worlds. I didn't even know I was cheeky. The dimples were so deep that it seemed quite natural to poke at them--like a sort of game."

"We laughed and laughed. It was a sort of game. I sat quite still and let you make little darts at them," Robin assisted him. "We laughed like small crazy things. We almost had child hysterics."

The dimples showed themselves now and he held himself in leash.

"You did everything I wanted you to do," he said, "and I suppose that made me feel bigger and bigger."

"I thought you were big. And I had never seen anything so wonderful before. You knew everything in the world and I knew nothing. Don't you remember," with hesitation--as if she were almost reluctant to recall the memory of a shadow into the brightness of the moment--"I told you that I had nothing--and nobody?"

All rushed back to him in a warm flow.

"That was it," he said. "When you said that I felt as if some one had insulted and wronged something of my own. I remember I felt hot and furious. I wanted to give you things and fight for you. I--caught you in my arms and squeezed you."

"Yes," Robin answered.

"It was because of--that time when the morning stars first sang

together," he answered smiling, but still as real as before. "It wasn't a stranger child I wanted to take care of. It was some one I had--belonged to--long--long and long. I'm a Highlander and I know it's true. And there's another thing I know," with a sudden change almost to boyish fierceness, "you are one of the things I'm going to face cannon and bayonets for. If there were nothing else and no one else in England, I should stand on the shore and fight until I dropped dead and the whole Hun mass surged over me before they should reach you."

"Yes," whispered Robin, "I know."

They both realised that the time had come when they must part, and when he lifted again the hand nearest to him, it was with the gesture of one who had reached the moment of farewell.

"It's our garden," he said. "It's the same garden. Just because there is no time--may I see you here again? I can't go away without knowing that."

"I will come," she answered, "whenever the Duchess does not need me. You see I belong to nobody but myself."

"I belong to people," he said, "but I belong to myself too." He paused a second or so and a strange half puzzled expression settled in his eyes. "It's only fair that a man who's looking the end of things straight in the face should have something for himself--to himself. If it's only a

heavenly hour now and then. Before things stop. There's such a lot of life--and such a lot to live for--forever if one could. And a smash--or a crash--or a thrust--and it's over! Sometimes I can hardly get hold of it."

He shook his head as he rose and stood upright, drawing his splendid young body erect.

"It's only fair," he said. "A chap's so strong and--and ready for living. Everything's surging through one's mind and body. One can't go out without having something--of one's own. You'll come, won't you--just because there's no time? I--I want to keep looking into your eyes."

"I want you to look into them," said Robin. "I'll come."

He stood still a moment looking at her just as she wanted him to look. Then after a few more words he bent low and kissed her hands and then stood straight again and saluted and went away.