

## CHAPTER IV

There was one facet of the great stone of War upon which many strange things were written. They were not the things most discussed or considered. They were results--not causes. But for the stress of mental, spiritual and physical tempest-of-being the colossal background of storm created, many of them might never have happened; but the consequences of their occurrence were to touch close, search deep, and reach far into the unknown picture of the World the great War might leave in fragments which could only be readjusted by centuries of time.

The interested habit of observation of, and reflection on, her kind which knew no indifferences, in the mind of the Duchess of Darte, awakened by stages to the existence of this facet and to the moment of the writings thereupon.

"It would seem almost as if Nature--Fate--had meant to give a new impulse to the race--to rouse human creatures to new moods, to thrust them into places where they see new things. Men and women are being dragged out of their self-absorbed corners and stirred up and shaken. Emotions are being roused in people who haven't known what a real emotion was. Middle-aged husbands and wives who had sunk into comfortable acceptance of each other and their boys and girls are being dragged out of bed, as it were, and wakened up and made to stand on their feet and face unbelievable possibilities. If you have boys old

enough to be soldiers and girls old enough to be victims--your life makes a sort of volte face and everyday, worldly comforts and successes or little failures drop out of your line of sight, and change their values. Mothers are beginning to clutch at their sons; and even self-centred fathers and selfish pretty sisters look at their male relatives with questioning, with a hint of respect or even awe in it. Perhaps the women feel it more than the men. Good-looking, light-minded, love-making George has assumed a new aspect to his mother and to Kathryn. They're secretly yearning over him. He has assumed a new aspect to me. I yearn over him myself. He has changed--he has suddenly grown up. Boys are doing it on every hand."

"The youngest youngster vibrates with the shock of cannon firing, even though the sound may not be near enough to be heard," answered Coombe. "We're all vibrating unconsciously. We are shuddering consciously at the things we hear and are mad to put a stop to, before they go further."

"Innocent little villages full of homes torn and trampled under foot and burned!" the Duchess almost cried out. "And worse things than that--worse things! And the whole monstrosity growing more huge and throwing out new and more awful tentacles every day."

"Every hour. No imagination has yet conceived what it may be."

"That is why the poor human things are clutching at each other, and finding values and attractions where they did not see them before."

Colonel Marion and his wife were here yesterday. He is a stout man over fifty and has a red face and prominent eyes. His wife has been so occupied with herself and her children that she had almost forgotten he existed. She looked at and listened to him as if she were a bride."

"I have seen changes of that sort myself," said Coombe. "He is more alive himself. He has begun to be of importance. And men like him have been killed already--though the young ones go first."

"The young ones know that, and they clutch the most frantically. That is what I am seeing in young eyes everywhere. Mere instinct makes it so--mere uncontrollable instinct which takes the form of a sort of desperateness at facing the thousand chances of death before they have lived. They don't know it isn't actual fear of bullets and shrapnel. Sometimes they're afraid it's fear and it makes them sick at themselves and determined to grin and hide it. But it isn't fear--it's furious Nature protesting."

"There are hasty bridals and good-bye marriages being made in all ranks," Coombe put in. "They are inevitable."

"God help the young things--those of them who never meet again--and perhaps, also, some of those who do. The nation ought to take care of the children. If there is a nation left, God knows they will be needed," the Duchess said. "One of my footmen who 'joined up' has revealed an unsuspected passion for a housemaid he used to quarrel with, and who

seemed to detest him. I have three women in my household who have soldier lovers in haste to marry them. I shall give them my blessing and take care of the wives when they are left behind. One can be served by old men and married women--and one can turn cottages into small orphanages if the worst happens."

There was a new vigour in her splendid old face and body.

"There is a reason now why I am the Dowager Duchess of Darte," she went on, "and why I have money and houses and lands. There is a reason why I have lived when it sometimes seemed as if my usefulness was over. There are uses for my money--for my places--for myself. Lately I have found myself saying, as Mordecai said to Esther, 'Who knowest whether thou art not come to the kingdom for such a time as this.' A change is taking place in me too. I can do more because there is so much more to do. I can even use my hands better. Look at them."

She held them out that he might see them--her beautiful old-ivory fingers, so long stiffened by rheumatism. She slowly opened and shut them.

"I can move them more--I have been exercising them and having them rubbed. I want to be able to knit and sew and wait on myself and perhaps on other people. Because I have been a rich, luxurious old woman it has not occurred to me that there were rheumatic old women who were forced to do things because they were poor--the things I never tried to do. I

have begun to try."

She let her hands fall on her lap and sat gazing up at him with a rather strange expression.

"Do you know what I have been doing?" she said. "I have been praying to God--for a sort of miracle. In their terror people are beginning to ask their Deity for things as they have never done it before. We are most of us like children waking in horror of the black night and shrieking for some one to come--some one--any one! Each creature cries out to his own Deity--the God his own need has made. Most of us are doing it in secret--half ashamed to let it be known. We are abject things. Mothers and fathers are doing it--young lovers and husbands and wives."

"What miracle are you asking for?"

"For power to do things I have not done for years. I want to walk--to stand--to work. If under the stress of necessity I begin to do all three, my doctors will say that mental exaltation and will power have caused the change. It may be true, but mental exaltation and will power are things of the soul not of the body. Anguish is actually forcing me into a sort of practical belief. I am trying to 'have faith even as a grain of mustard seed' so that I may say unto my mountain, 'Remove hence to yonder place and it shall be removed.'"

"The things which I do, ye shall do also and even greater things than

these shall ye do.'" Coombe repeated the words deliberately. "I heard an earnest middle-aged dissenter preach a sermon on that text a few days ago."

"What?"--his old friend leaned forward. "Are you going to hear sermons?"

"I am one of the children, I suppose. Though I do not shriek aloud, probably something shrieks within me. I was passing a small chapel and heard a singular voice. I don't know exactly why I went into the place, but when I sat down inside I felt the tension of the atmosphere at once. Every one looked anxious or terrified. There were pale faces and stony or wild eyes. It did not seem to be an ordinary service and voices kept breaking out with spasmodic appeals, 'Almighty God, look down on us!' 'Oh, Christ, have mercy!' 'Oh, God, save us!' One woman in black was rocking backwards and forwards and sobbing over and over again, 'Oh, Jesus! Jesus! Oh, Lord Jesus!'"

"Part of her body and soul was lying done to death in some field--or by some roadside," said the Duchess. "She could not pray--she could only cry out. I can hear her, 'Oh, Lord Jesus!'"

Later came the morning when the changed George came to say good-bye. He was wonderfully good-looking in his khaki and seemed taller and more square of jaw. He made a few of the usual young jokes which were intended to make things cheerful and to treat affectionate fears

lightly, but his good-natured blue eye held a certain deadly quiet in its depths.

His mother and Kathryn were with him, and it was while they were absorbed in anxious talk with the Duchess that he walked over to where Robin sat and stood before her.

"Will you come into the library and let me say something to you? I don't want to go away without saying it," he put it to her.

The library was the adjoining room and Robin rose and went with him without any comment or question. Already the time had come when formalities had dropped away and people did not ask for trivial explanations. The pace of events had become too rapid.

"There are a lot of chances when a man goes out--that he won't come back," he said, still standing after she had taken a place in the window-seat he guided her to. "There are not as many as one's friends can't help thinking--but there are enough to make him feel he'd like to leave things straight when he goes. What I want you to let me say is, that the minute I had made a fool of myself the night of the dance, I knew what an ass I had been and I was ready to grovel."

Robin's lifted face was quite gentle. Suddenly she was thinking self-reproachingly, "Oh, poor boy--poor boy!"

"I flew into a temper and would not let you," she answered him. "It was temper--but there were things you didn't know. It was not your fault that you didn't." The square, good-natured face flushed with relief, and George's voice became even slightly unsteady.

"That's kind of you," he said, "it's kind and I'm jolly grateful. Things mean a lot just now--with all one's people in such a state and trying so pluckily to hide it. I just wanted to make sure that you knew that I knew that the thing only happened because I was a silly idiot and for no other reason. You will believe me, won't you, and won't remember it if you ever remember me?"

"I shall remember you--and it is as if--that had never happened at all."

She put out, as she got up, such a kind hand that he grasped it almost joyously.

"You have made it awfully easy for me. Thank you, Miss Lawless." He hesitated a second and then dropped his voice. "I wonder if I dare--I wonder if it would be cheek--and impudence if I said something else?"

"Scarcely anything seems cheek or impudence now," Robin answered with simple sadness. "Nothing ordinary seems to matter because everything is of so much importance."

"I feel as if what I wanted to say was one of the things that are



important. I don't know what--older people--or safe ones--would think about it, but--" He broke off and began again. "To us young ones who are facing-- It's the only big thing that's left us--in our bit of the present. We can only be sure of to-day--"

"Yes--yes," Robin cried out low. "Only to-day--just to-day." She even panted a little and George, looking into her eyes, knew that he might say anything, because for a reason she was one of the girls who in this hour could understand.

"Perhaps you don't know where our house is," he said quite quickly. "It is one of those in the Square--facing the Gardens. I might have played with you there when I was a little chap--but I don't think I did."

"Nobody did but Donal," she said, quickly also. How did she know that he was going to say something to her about Donal?

"I gave him the key to the Gardens that day," he hurried on. "I was at the window with him when he saw you. I understood in a minute when I saw his face and he'd said half a dozen words to me. I gave him my key. He has got it now." He actually snatched at both her hands and gripped them. It was a grip and his eyes burned through a sort of sudden moisture. "We can't stay here and talk. But I couldn't not say it! Oh, I say, be good to him! You would, if he had only a day to live because some damned German bullet had struck him. You're life--you're

youngness--you're to-day! Don't say 'No' to anything he asks of you--for God's sake, don't."

"I'd give him my heart in his two hands," gasped Robin. "I couldn't give him my soul because it was always his."

"God take care of the pair of you--and be good to the rest of us," whispered George, wringing her hands hard and dropping them.

That was how he went away.

A few weeks later he was lying, a mangled object, in a field in Flanders. One of thousands--living, laughing, good as honest bread is good; the possible passer-on of life and force and new thinking for new generations--one of hundreds of thousands--one of millions before the end came--nice, healthy, normal-minded George, son and heir of a house of decent nobles.