

CHAPTER XI

"There are more women than those in Belgium who are being swept over by the chariots of war and trampled on by marching feet," the Duchess of Darte said to a group of her women friends on a certain afternoon.

The group had met to work and some one had touched on a woeful little servant-maid drama which had painfully disclosed itself in her household. A small, plain kitchen maid had "walked out" in triumphant ecstasy with a soldier who, a few weeks after bidding her good-bye, had been killed in Belgium. She had been brought home to her employer's house by a policeman who had dragged her out of the Serpentine. An old story had become a modern one. In her childish ignorance and terror of her plight she had seen no other way, but she had not had courage to face more than very shallow water, with the result of finding herself merely sticking in the mud and wailing aloud.

"The policeman was a kind-hearted, sensible fellow," said the relator of the incident. "He had a family of his own and what he said was 'She looked such a poor little drowned rat of a thing I couldn't make up my mind to run her in, ma'am. This 'ere war's responsible for a lot more than what the newspapers tell about. Young chaps in uniform having to brace up and perhaps lying awake in the night thinking over what the evening papers said--and young women they've been sweet-heartin' with--they get wild, in a way, and cling to each other and feel

desperate--and he talks and she cries--and he may have his head blown off in a week's time. And who wonders that there's trouble.' Do you know he actually told me that there were a number of girls he was keeping a watch on. He said he'd begun to recognise a certain look in their eyes when they walked alone in the park. He said it was a 'stark, frightened look.' I didn't know what he meant, but it gave me a shudder."

"I think I know," said the Duchess. "Poor, wretched children! There ought to be a sort of moratorium in the matter of social laws. The old rules don't hold. We are facing new conditions. This is a thing for women to take in hand, practically, as they are taking in hand other work. It must be done absolutely without prejudice. There is no time to lecture or condemn or even deplore. There is only time to try to heal wounds and quiet maddening pain and save life."

Lady Lothwell took the subject up.

"In the country places and villages, where the new army is swarming to be billeted, the clergymen and their wives are greatly agitated. Even in times of peace one's vicar's wife tells one stories in shocked whispers of 'immorality'--though the rustic mind does not seem to regard it as particularly immoral. An illegal baby is generally accepted with simple resignation or merely a little fretful complaint even in quite decent cottages. It is called--rather prettily, I think--'a love child' and the nicer the grandparents are, the better they treat it. Mrs. Gracey, the wife of our rector at Mowbray Wells told me a few days ago that she and

her husband were quite in despair over the excited, almost lawless, holiday air of the village girls. There are so many young men about and uniforms have what she calls 'such a dreadful effect.' Giddy and unreliable young women are wandering about the lanes and fields with stranger sweethearts at all hours. Even girls who have been good Sunday-school scholars are becoming insubordinate. She did not in the least mean to be improperly humorous--in fact she was quite tragic when she said that the rector felt that he ought to marry, on the spot, every rambling couple he met. He had already performed the ceremony in a number of cases when he felt it was almost criminally rash and idiotic, or would have been in time of peace."

"That was what I meant by speaking of the women who were being swept over by the chariot of war," said the Duchess. "It involves issues the women who can think must hold in their minds and treat judicially. One cannot moralise and be shocked before an advancing tidal wave. It has always been part of the unreason and frenzy of times of war. When Death is near, Life fights hard for itself. It does not care who or what it strikes."

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The tidal wave swept on and the uninitiated who formed the mass of humanity in every country in the world, reading with feverish anxiety almost hourly newspaper extras every day, tried to hide a secret fear that no one knew what was really happening or could trust to the

absolute truth of any spoken or published statement. The exultant hope of to-day was dashed to-morrow. The despair of the morning was lightened by gleams of hope before night closed, and was darkened and lightened again and again. Great cities and towns aroused themselves from a half-somnolent belief in security. Village by village England awakened to what she faced in common with an amazed and half incredulous world. The amazement and incredulity were founded upon a certain mistaken belief in a world predominance of the laws of decency and civilisation. The statement of piety and morality that the world in question was a bad one, filled with crime, had somehow so far been accepted with a guileless reservation in the matter of a ruling majority whose lapses from virtue were at least not openly vaunted treachery, blows struck at any unprepared back presenting itself, merciless attacks on innocence and weakness, and savage gluttings of lust, of fury, with exultant pæans of self-glorification and praise of a justly applauding God. Before such novelty of onslaught the British mind had breathless moments of feeling itself stupid and incapably aghast. But after its first deep draughts of the cup of staggering the nation braced up a really muscular back and stood upon hard, stout legs and firm feet, immovable and fixed on solid British earth.

Incompetent raw troops gathered from fields, shops and desks, half trained, half clad, half armed, according to pessimistic report, fared forth across the narrow Channel and did strangely competent things--this being man's way when in dire moments needs must be. Riff-raff exalted itself and also died competently enough. The apparently aimless male

offspring of the so-called useless rich and great died competently enough with the rest. The Roll of Honour raked fore and aft. The youngsters who had tangoed best and had shone in cabarets were swept away as grass by scythes.

"Will any one be left?" white Robin shuddered, clinging to Donal in the wood at night. "Every day there are new ones. Almost every one who has gone! Kathryn says that no one--no one will ever come back!"

"Hush--sh! Hush--sh!" whispered Donal. "Hush--sh! little lovely love!" And his arms closed so tightly around her that she could for a few moments scarcely breathe.

The Duchess had much work for her to do and was glad to see that the girl looked well and untired. When she was at home in Eaton Square her grace was even more strict about the walks and country holidays than she had been when she was away.

"Health and strength were never so much needed," she said. "We must keep our bodies in readiness for any test or strain."

This notwithstanding, there was at last a morning when Robin looked as though she had not slept well. It was so unusual a thing that the Duchess spoke of it.

"I hope you have not been sitting up late at your work?" she said.

"No. Thank you," Robin answered. "I went to bed last night at ten o'clock."

The Duchess looked at her seriously. Never before had she seen her with eyes whose misted heaviness suggested tears. Was it possible that there seemed something at once strained and quivering about her mouth--as if she were making an effort to force the muscles to hold it still.

"I hope you would tell me if you had a headache. You must, you know, my dear."

Robin's slight movement nearer to her had the air of being almost involuntary--as if it were impelled by an uncontrollable yearning to be a little near something--some one. The strained and quivering look was even more noticeable and her lifted eyes singularly expressed something she was trying to hold back.

"Thank you--indeed!" she said. "But it isn't headache. It is--things I could not help thinking about in the night."

The Duchess took her hand and patted it with firm gentleness.

"You mustn't, my dear. You must try hard not to do it. We shall be of no use if we let our minds go. We must try to force ourselves into a sort of deafness and blindness in certain directions. I am trying--with

all my might."

"I know I must," Robin answered not too steadily. "I must--more than most people. I'm not brave and strong. I'm weak and cowardly--cowardly." Her breath caught itself and she went on quickly, "Work helps more than anything else. I want to work all the time. Please may I begin the letters now?"

She was bending over her desk when Lord Coombe came in earlier than was his custom. The perfection of his dress, his smooth creaselessness and quiet harmony of color and line seemed actually to add to the aged look of his face. His fine rigidity was worn and sallowed. After his greeting phrases he stood for a space quite silent while the Duchess watched him as if waiting.

"He has gone?" she said presently. She spoke in quite a low voice, but it reached Robin's desk.

"Yes. At dawn. The suddenness and secrecy of these goings add to the poignancy of them. I saw him but he did not see me. I found out the hour and made an effort. He is not my boy, but I wanted to look at him. It was perhaps for the last time. Good God! What a crime!"

He spoke low himself and rather quickly and with a new tone in his voice--as if he had been wrenched and was in pain.

"I am not in a heroic mood. I was only sick and furious when I watched them go by. They were a handsome, clean-built lot. But he stood out--the finest among them. His mere beauty and strength brought hideous thoughts into one's mind--thoughts of German deviltries born of hell."

Robin was looking at her hand which had stopped writing. She could not keep it still. She must get up and go to her own rooms. Would her knees shake under her like that when she tried to stand on her feet? The low talking went on and she scarcely heard what was said. She and Donal had always known this was coming; they had known it even the first day they had talked together in the Garden. The knowledge had been the spectre always waiting hidden at some turn in the path ahead. That was why they had been so frightened and desperate and hurried. They had clung together and shut their eyes and caught at the few hours--the few heavenly hours. He had said it would come suddenly. But she had not thought it would be as sudden as this. Last night a soldier had brought a few wild, passionate blotted lines to her. Yes, they had been blotted and blistered. She pushed her chair back and began to rise from it.

There had been a few seconds of dead silence. Lord Coombe had been standing thinking and biting his lip. "He is gone!" he said. "Gone!"

They did not notice Robin as she left the room. Outside the door she stood in the hall and looked up the staircase piteously. It looked so long and steep that she felt it was like a path up a mountain. But she moved towards the bottom step and began to climb stair by stair--stair

by stair--dragging at the rail of the balustrade.

When she reached her room she went in and shut the door. She fell down upon the floor and sat there. Long ago his mother had taken him away from her. Now the War had taken him. The spectre stood straight in the path before her.

"It was such a short time," she said, shaking. "And he is gone. And the fairy wood is there still--and the ferns!--All the nights--always!"

And what happened next was not a thing to be written about--though at the time the same thing was perhaps at that very hour happening in houses all over England.