

## CHAPTER XII

The effect of something like unreality produced in the mind of the mature and experienced by a girl creature, can only be equaled by the intensity of the sense of realness in the girl herself. That centre of the world in which each human being exists is in her case more poignantly a centre than any other. She passes smiling or serious, a thing of untried eyes and fair unmarked smoothness of texture, and onlookers who have lived longer than she know that the unmarked untriedness is a sign that so far "nothing" has happened in her life and in most cases believe that "nothing" is happening. They are quite sure they know--long after the thing has ceased to be true. The surface of her is so soft and fair, and its lack of any suggestion of abysses or chasms seems to make them incredible things. But the centre of the world contains all things and when one is at the beginning of life and sees them for the first time they assume strange proportions. It enters a room, it talks lightly or sweetly, it whirls about in an airy dance, this pretty untested thing; and, among those for whom the belief in the reality of strange proportions has modified itself through long experience, only those of the thinking habit realise that at any moment the testing--the marking with deep scores may begin or has perhaps begun already. At eighteen or twenty a fluctuation of flower-petal tint which may mean an imperfect night can signify no really important cause. What could eighteen or twenty have found to think about in night watches? But in its centre of the world as it stands on the stage with the curtain

rolling up, those who have lived longer--so very long--are only the dim audience sitting in the shadowy auditorium looking on at passionately real life with which they have really nothing whatever to do, because what they have seen is past and what they have learned has lost its importance and meaning with the changing of the years. The lying awake and tossing on pillows--if lying awake there is--has its cause in real joys--or griefs--not in things atrophied by time. So it seems on the stage, in the first act. If the curtain goes down on anguish and despair it seems equally the pitiless truth that it can never rise again; the play is ended; the lights go out forever; the theatre crumbles to dust; the world comes to an end. But the dim audience sitting in the shadow do not generally know this.

To those who came in and out of the house in Eaton Square the figure sitting at the desk writing letters or taking orders from the Duchess was that of the unconsidered and unreal girl. Among the changing groups of women with intensely absorbed and often strained faces the kind-hearted observing ones were given to noticing Robin and speaking to her almost affectionately because she was so attractive an object as well as so industriously faithful to her work. Girls who were Jacqueminot-rose flushed and who looked up to answer people with eyes like an antelope's were not customarily capable of concentrating their attention entirely upon brief letters of request and lists of necessaries for hospitals and comfort kits. This type was admitted to be frequently found readier for service in the preparation of entertainments "for the benefit of"--more especially when such benefits

took the form of dancing. But the Duchess' little Miss Lawless came and went on errands, wasting no time. She never forgot things or was slack in any way. Her antelope eyes expressed a kind of yearning eagerness to do all she could without a moment's delay.

"She works as if it were a personal thing with her," Lady Lothwell once said thoughtfully. "I have seen girls wear that look when they are war brides or have lovers or brothers at the front."

But she remained to the world generally only a rather specially lovely specimen of the somewhat unreal young being with whom great agonies and terrors had but little to do.

On a day when the Duchess had a cold and was obliged to remain in her room Robin was with her, writing and making notes of instruction at her bedside. In the afternoon a cold and watery sun making its way through the window threw a chill light on her as she drew near with some papers in her hand. It was the revealing of this light which made the Duchess look at her curiously.

"You are not quite as blooming as you were, my child," she said. "About two months ago you were particularly blooming. Lady Lothwell and Lord Coombe and several other people noticed it. You have not been taking your walks as regularly as you did. Let me look at you." She took her hand and drew her nearer. "No. This will not do."

Robin stood very still.

"How could any one be blooming!" broke from her.

"You are thinking about things in the night again," said the Duchess.

"Yes," said Robin. "Every night. Sometimes all night."

The Duchess watched her anxiously.

"It's so--lonely!" There was a hint of hysteric breakdown in the exclamation. "How can I--bear it!" She turned and went back to her writing table and there she sat down and hid her face, trembling in an extraordinary way.

"You are as unhappy as that?" said the Duchess. "And you are lonely?"

"All the world is lonely," Robin cried--not weeping, only shaking.

"Everything is left to itself to suffer. God has gone away."

The Duchess trembled a little herself. She too had hideously felt something like the same thing at times of late. But this soft shaking thing--! There shot into her mind like a bolt a sudden thought. Was this something less inevitable--something more personal? She wondered what would be best to say.

"Even older people lose their nerve sometimes," she decided on at last.

"When you said that work was the greatest help you were right. Work--and as much sleep as one can get, and walking and fresh air. And we must help each other--old and young. I want you to help me, child. I need you."

Robin stood up and steadied herself somehow. She took up a letter in a hand not yet quite still.

"Please need me," she said. "Please let me do everything--anything--and never stop. If I never stop in the day time perhaps I shall sleep better at night."

As there came surging in day by day bitter and cruel waves of war news--stories of slaughter by land and sea, of massacre in simple places, of savagery wrought on wounded men and prisoners in a hydrophobia of hate let loose, it was ill lying awake in the dark remembering loved beings surrounded by the worst of all the world has ever known. Robin was afraid to look at the newspapers which her very duties themselves obliged her to familiarise herself with, and she could not close her ears. With battleship raids on harmless coast towns, planned merely to the end of the wanton killing of such unconsidered trifles of humanity as little children and women and men at their every-day work, the circle of horror seemed to draw itself in closely.

Zeppelin raids leaving fragments of bodies on pavements and broken

things under fallen walls, were not so near as the women who dragged themselves back to their work with death in their faces written large--the death of husband or son or lover. These brought realities close indeed.

"I don't know how he died," one of them said to the Duchess. "I don't know how long it took him to die. I don't want to be told. I am glad he is dead. Yes, I am glad. I wish the other two were dead too. I'm not splendid and heroic. I thought I was at first, but I couldn't keep it up--after I heard about Mrs. Foster's boy. If I believed there was anything to thank, I should say 'Thank God I have no more sons.'"

That night Robin lay in the dark thinking of the dream. Had there been a dream--or had it only been like the other things one dreamed about? Sometimes an eerie fearfulness beset her vaguely. If there were letters each day! But letters belonged to a time when rivers of blood did not run through the world. She sat up in bed and clasped her hands round her knees gazing into the blackness which seemed to enclose and shut her in. It had been true! She could see the wood and the foxglove spires piercing the ferns. She could hear the ferns rustle and the little bird sounds and stirrings. And oh! she could hear Donal whispering. "Can you hear my heart beat?"

He had said it over and over again. His heart seemed to be so big and to beat so strongly. She had thought it was because he was so big and marvellous himself. It had been rapture to lay her cheek and ear against

his breast and listen. Everything had been so still. They had been so still--so still themselves for pure joy in their close, close nearness. Yes, the dream had been true. But here she sat in the dark and Donal--where was Donal? Where millions of men were marching, marching--only to kill each other--thinking of nothing but killing. Donal too. He must kill. If he were a brave soldier he must only think of killing and not be afraid because at any moment he might be killed too. She clutched her knees and shuddered, feeling her forehead grow damp. Donal killing a man--perhaps a boy like himself--a boy who might have a dream of his own! How would his blue eyes look while he was killing a man? Oh! No! No! No! Not Donal!

With her forehead still damp and her hands damp also she found herself getting out of bed and walking up and down in the dark. She was wringing her hands and sobbing. She must not think of things like these. She must shut them out of her mind and think only of the dream. It had been true--it had! And then the strange thought came to her that out of all the world only he and she had known of their dreaming. And if he never came back--! (Oh! please, God, let him come back!) no one need ever know. It was their own, own dream and how could she bear to speak of it to any one and why should she? He had said he wanted to have this one thing of his very own before his life ended--if it was going to end. If it ended it would be his sacred secret and hers forever. She might live to be an old woman with white hair and no one would ever guess that since the morning stars sang together they two had belonged to each other.

Night after night she lay awake with thoughts like these. Through the waiting days she began to find an anguished comfort in the feeling that she was keeping their secret for him and that no one need ever know. More than once she went on quietly with her writing when people stood near her and spoke of him and his regiment, which every one was interested in because he was so handsome and so young and new to the leading of men. There were rumours that he must have been plunged into fierce fighting though definite news did not come through without delay.

"Boys like that," she heard. "They ought to be kept at home. All the greatest names will be extinct. And they are the splendid, silly ones who expose themselves most. Young Lord Elphinstowe a week ago--the last of his line! Scarcely a fragment of him to put together." There were women who had a hysterical desire to talk about such things and make gruesome pictures even of slightly founded stories. But when she heard them she did not even lift her eyes from her work.

One marked feature of their meetings--though they themselves had not marked it--had been that they had never talked of the future. It had been as though there were no future. To live perfectly through the few hours--even for the one hour or half hour they could snatch--was all that they could plan and hope for. Could they meet to-morrow in this place or that? When they met were they quite safe and blissfully alone? The spectre had always been waiting and they had always been trying to forget it. Each meeting had seemed so brief and crowded and breathlessly



sweet.

Only a boy and a girl could have so lost sight of all but their hour and perhaps also only this boy and girl, because their hour had struck at a time when all futures seemed to hold only chances that at any moment might come to an end.

"Do you hear my heart beat? There is no time--no time!" these two things had been the beginning, the middle and the end.

Sometimes Robin went and sat in the Gardens and one day in coming out she met her mother whom she had not seen for months. Feather had been exultingly gay and fashionably patriotic and she was walking round the corner to a meeting to be held at her club. The khaki colouring of her coat and brief skirt and cap added to their military air with pipings and cords and a small upright feather of scarlet. She wore a badge and a jewelled pin or so. She was about to pass Robin unrecognised but took a second glance at her and stopped.

"I didn't know you," she exclaimed. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing--thank you," Robin answered pausing.

"Something is! You are losing your looks. Is your mistress working you to death?"

"The Duchess is very kind indeed. She is most careful that I don't do too much. I like my work more every day."

Feather took her in with a sharp scrutinising. She seemed to look her over from her hat to her shoes before she broke into her queer little critical laugh.

"Well, I can't congratulate her on the result. You are thin. You've lost your colour and your mouth is beginning to drag at the corners." And she nodded and marched away, the high heels of her beautiful small brown boots striking the pavement with a military click.

As she had dressed in the morning Robin had wondered if she was mistaken in thinking that the awful nights had made her look different.

If there had been letters to read--even a few lines such as are all a soldier may write--to read over and over again, to hide in her breast all day, to kiss and cry over and lay her cheek upon at night. Such a small letter would have been such a huge comfort and would have made the dream seem less far away. But everybody waited for letters--and waited and waited. And sometimes they went astray or were lost forever and people were left waiting.