

## CHAPTER VI

### SUSAN, RILLA, AND DOG MONDAY MAKE A RESOLUTION

The big living-room at Ingleside was snowed over with drifts of white cotton. Word had come from Red Cross headquarters that sheets and bandages would be required. Nan and Di and Rilla were hard at work. Mrs. Blythe and Susan were upstairs in the boys' room, engaged in a more personal task. With dry, anguished eyes they were packing up Jem's belongings. He must leave for Valcartier the next morning. They had been expecting the word but it was none the less dreadful when it came.

Rilla was basting the hem of a sheet for the first time in her life. When the word had come that Jem must go she had her cry out among the pines in Rainbow Valley and then she had gone to her mother.

"Mother, I want to do something. I'm only a girl--I can't do anything to win the war--but I must do something to help at home."

"The cotton has come up for the sheets," said Mrs. Blythe. "You can help Nan and Di make them up. And Rilla, don't you think you could organize a Junior Red Cross among the young girls? I think they would like it better and do better work by themselves than if mixed up with the older people."

"But, mother--I've never done anything like that."

"We will all have to do a great many things in the months ahead of us that we have never done before, Rilla."

"Well"--Rilla took the plunge--"I'll try, mother--if you'll tell me how to begin. I have been thinking it all over and I have decided that I must be as brave and heroic and unselfish as I can possibly be."

Mrs. Blythe did not smile at Rilla's italics. Perhaps she did not feel like smiling or perhaps she detected a real grain of serious purpose behind Rilla's romantic pose. So here was Rilla hemming sheets and organizing a Junior Red Cross in her thoughts as she hemmed; moreover, she was enjoying it--the organizing that is, not the hemming. It was interesting and Rilla discovered a certain aptitude in herself for it that surprised her. Who would be president? Not she. The older girls would not like that. Irene Howard? No, somehow Irene was not quite as popular as she deserved to be. Marjorie Drew? No, Marjorie hadn't enough backbone. She was too prone to agree with the last speaker. Betty Mead--calm, capable, tactful Betty--the very one! And Una Meredith for treasurer; and, if they were very insistent, they might make her, Rilla, secretary. As for the various committees, they must be chosen after the Juniors were organized, but Rilla knew just who should be put on which. They would meet around--and there must be no eats--Rilla knew she would have a pitched battle with Olive Kirk over that--and everything should be strictly business-like and constitutional. Her minute book should be covered in white with a Red

Cross on the cover--and wouldn't it be nice to have some kind of uniform which they could all wear at the concerts they would have to get up to raise money--something simple but smart?

"You have basted the top hem of that sheet on one side and the bottom hem on the other," said Di.

Rilla picked out her stitches and reflected that she hated sewing. Running the Junior Reds would be much more interesting.

Mrs. Blythe was saying upstairs, "Susan, do you remember that first day Jem lifted up his little arms to me and called me 'mo'er'--the very first word he ever tried to say?"

"You could not mention anything about that blessed baby that I do not and will not remember till my dying day," said Susan drearily.

"Susan, I keep thinking today of once when he cried for me in the night. He was just a few months old. Gilbert didn't want me to go to him--he said the child was well and warm and that it would be fostering bad habits in him. But I went--and took him up--I can feel that tight clinging of his little arms round my neck yet. Susan, if I hadn't gone that night, twenty-one years ago, and taken my baby up when he cried for me I couldn't face tomorrow morning."

"I do not know how we are going to face it anyhow, Mrs. Dr. dear. But

do not tell me that it will be the final farewell. He will be back on leave before he goes overseas, will he not?"

"We hope so but we are not very sure. I am making up my mind that he will not, so that there will be no disappointment to bear. Susan, I am determined that I will send my boy off tomorrow with a smile. He shall not carry away with him the remembrance of a weak mother who had not the courage to send when he had the courage to go. I hope none of us will cry."

"I am not going to cry, Mrs. Dr. dear, and that you may tie to, but whether I shall manage to smile or not will be as Providence ordains and as the pit of my stomach feels. Have you room there for this fruit-cake? And the shortbread? And the mince-pie? That blessed boy shall not starve, whether they have anything to eat in that Quebec place or not. Everything seems to be changing all at once, does it not? Even the old cat at the manse has passed away. He breathed his last at a quarter to ten last night and Bruce is quite heart-broken, they tell me."

"It's time that pussy went where good cats go. He must be at least fifteen years old. He has seemed so lonely since Aunt Martha died."

"I should not have lamented, Mrs. Dr. dear, if that Hyde-beast had died also. He has been Mr. Hyde most of the time since Jem came home in khaki, and that has a meaning I will maintain. I do not know what

Monday will do when Jem is gone. The creature just goes about with a human look in his eyes that takes all the good out of me when I see it. Ellen West used to be always railing at the Kaiser and we thought her crazy, but now I see that there was a method in her madness. This tray is packed, Mrs. Dr. dear, and I will go down and put in my best licks preparing supper. I wish I knew when I would cook another supper for Jem but such things are hidden from our eyes."

Jem Blythe and Jerry Meredith left next morning. It was a dull day, threatening rain, and the clouds lay in heavy grey rolls over the sky; but almost everybody in the Glen and Four Winds and Harbour Head and Upper Glen and over-harbour--except Whiskers-on-the-moon--was there to see them off. The Blythe family and the Meredith family were all smiling. Even Susan, as Providence did ordain, wore a smile, though the effect was somewhat more painful than tears would have been. Faith and Nan were very pale and very gallant. Rilla thought she would get on very well if something in her throat didn't choke her, and if her lips didn't take such spells of trembling. Dog Monday was there, too. Jem had tried to say good-bye to him at Ingleside but Monday implored so eloquently that Jem relented and let him go to the station. He kept close to Jem's legs and watched every movement of his beloved master.

"I can't bear that dog's eyes," said Mrs. Meredith.

"The beast has more sense than most humans," said Mary Vance. "Well, did we any of us ever think we'd live to see this day? I bawled all

night to think of Jem and Jerry going like this. I think they're plumb deranged. Miller got a maggot in his head about going but I soon talked him out of it--likewise his aunt said a few touching things. For once in our lives Kitty Alec and I agree. It's a miracle that isn't likely to happen again. There's Ken, Rilla."

Rilla knew Kenneth was there. She had been acutely conscious of it from the moment he had sprung from Leo West's buggy. Now he came up to her smiling.

"Doing the brave-smiling-sister-stunt, I see. What a crowd for the Glen to muster! Well, I'm off home in a few days myself."

A queer little wind of desolation that even Jem's going had not caused blew over Rilla's spirit.

"Why? You have another month of vacation."

"Yes--but I can't hang around Four Winds and enjoy myself when the world's on fire like this. It's me for little old Toronto where I'll find some way of helping in spite of this bally ankle. I'm not looking at Jem and Jerry--makes me too sick with envy. You girls are great--no crying, no grim endurance. The boys'll go off with a good taste in their mouths. I hope Persis and mother will be as game when my turn comes."

"Oh, Kenneth--the war will be over before your turn cometh."

There! She had lisped again. Another great moment of life spoiled! Well, it was her fate. And anyhow, nothing mattered. Kenneth was off already--he was talking to Ethel Reese, who was dressed, at seven in the morning, in the gown she had worn to the dance, and was crying. What on earth had Ethel to cry about? None of the Reeses were in khaki. Rilla wanted to cry, too--but she would not. What was that horrid old Mrs. Drew saying to mother, in that melancholy whine of hers? "I don't know how you can stand this, Mrs. Blythe. I couldn't if it was my pore boy." And mother--oh, mother could always be depended on! How her grey eyes flashed in her pale face. "It might have been worse, Mrs. Drew. I might have had to urge him to go." Mrs. Drew did not understand but Rilla did. She flung up her head. Her brother did not have to be urged to go.

Rilla found herself standing alone and listening to disconnected scraps of talk as people walked up and down past her.

"I told Mark to wait and see if they asked for a second lot of men. If they did I'd let him go--but they won't," said Mrs. Palmer Burr.

"I think I'll have it made with a crush girdle of velvet," said Bessie Clow.

"I'm frightened to look at my husband's face for fear I'll see in it

that he wants to go too," said a little over-harbour bride.

"I'm scared stiff," said whimsical Mrs. Jim Howard. "I'm scared Jim will enlist--and I'm scared he won't."

"The war will be over by Christmas," said Joe Vickers.

"Let them European nations fight it out between them," said Abner Reese.

"When he was a boy I gave him many a good trouncing," shouted Norman Douglas, who seemed to be referring to some one high in military circles in Charlottetown. "Yes, sir, I walloped him well, big gun as he is now."

"The existence of the British Empire is at stake," said the Methodist minister.

"There's certainly something about uniforms," sighed Irene Howard.

"It's a commercial war when all is said and done and not worth one drop of good Canadian blood," said a stranger from the shore hotel.

"The Blythe family are taking it easy," said Kate Drew.

"Them young fools are just going for adventure," growled Nathan Crawford.

"I have absolute confidence in Kitchener," said the over-harbour doctor.

In these ten minutes Rilla passed through a dizzying succession of anger, laughter, contempt, depression and inspiration. Oh, people were--funny! How little they understood. "Taking it easy," indeed--when even Susan hadn't slept a wink all night! Kate Drew always was a minx.

Rilla felt as if she were in some fantastic nightmare. Were these the people who, three weeks ago, were talking of crops and prices and local gossip?

There--the train was coming--mother was holding Jem's hand--Dog Monday was licking it--everybody was saying good-bye--the train was in! Jem kissed Faith before everybody--old Mrs. Drew whooped hysterically--the men, led by Kenneth, cheered--Rilla felt Jem seize her hand--"Good-bye, Spider"--somebody kissed her cheek--she believed it was Jerry but never was sure--they were off--the train was pulling out--Jem and Jerry were waving to everybody--everybody was waving back--mother and Nan were smiling still, but as if they had just forgotten to take the smile off--Monday was howling dismally and being forcibly restrained by the Methodist minister from tearing after the train--Susan was waving her best bonnet and hurraing like a man--had she gone crazy?--the train rounded a curve. They had gone.

Rilla came to herself with a gasp. There was a sudden quiet. Nothing to

do now but to go home--and wait. The doctor and Mrs. Blythe walked off together--so did Nan and Faith--so did John Meredith and Rosemary. Walter and Una and Shirley and Di and Carl and Rilla went in a group. Susan had put her bonnet back on her head, hindside foremost, and stalked grimly off alone. Nobody missed Dog Monday at first. When they did Shirley went back for him. He found Dog Monday curled up in one of the shipping-sheds near the station and tried to coax him home. Dog Monday would not move. He wagged his tail to show he had no hard feelings but no blandishments availed to budge him.

"Guess Monday has made up his mind to wait there till Jem comes back," said Shirley, trying to laugh as he rejoined the rest. This was exactly what Dog Monday had done. His dear master had gone--he, Monday, had been deliberately and of malice aforethought prevented from going with him by a demon disguised in the garb of a Methodist minister. Wherefore, he, Monday, would wait there until the smoking, snorting monster, which had carried his hero off, carried him back.

Ay, wait there, little faithful dog with the soft, wistful, puzzled eyes. But it will be many a long bitter day before your boyish comrade comes back to you.

The doctor was away on a case that night and Susan stalked into Mrs. Blythe's room on her way to bed to see if her adored Mrs. Dr. dear were "comfortable and composed." She paused solemnly at the foot of the bed and solemnly declared,

"Mrs. Dr. dear, I have made up my mind to be a heroine."

"Mrs. Dr. dear" found herself violently inclined to laugh--which was manifestly unfair, since she had not laughed when Rilla had announced a similar heroic determination. To be sure, Rilla was a slim, white-robed thing, with a flower-like face and starry young eyes aglow with feeling; whereas Susan was arrayed in a grey flannel nightgown of strait simplicity, and had a strip of red woollen worsted tied around her grey hair as a charm against neuralgia. But that should not make any vital difference. Was it not the spirit that counted? Yet Mrs. Blythe was hard put to it not to laugh.

"I am not," proceeded Susan firmly, "going to lament or whine or question the wisdom of the Almighty any more as I have been doing lately. Whining and shirking and blaming Providence do not get us anywhere. We have just got to grapple with whatever we have to do whether it is weeding the onion patch, or running the Government. I shall grapple. Those blessed boys have gone to war; and we women, Mrs. Dr. dear, must tarry by the stuff and keep a stiff upper lip."