

CHAPTER X

THE TROUBLES OF RILLA

October passed out and the dreary days of November and December dragged by. The world shook with the thunder of contending armies; Antwerp fell--Turkey declared war--gallant little Serbia gathered herself together and struck a deadly blow at her oppressor; and in quiet, hill-girdled Glen St. Mary, thousands of miles away, hearts beat with hope and fear over the varying dispatches from day to day.

"A few months ago," said Miss Oliver, "we thought and talked in terms of Glen St. Mary. Now, we think and talk in terms of military tactics and diplomatic intrigue."

There was just one great event every day--the coming of the mail. Even Susan admitted that from the time the mail-courier's buggy rumbled over the little bridge between the station and the village until the papers were brought home and read, she could not work properly.

"I must take up my knitting then and knit hard till the papers come, Mrs. Dr. dear. Knitting is something you can do, even when your heart is going like a trip-hammer and the pit of your stomach feels all gone and your thoughts are catawampus. Then when I see the headlines, be they good or be they bad, I calm down and am able to go about my business again. It is an unfortunate thing that the mail comes in just

when our dinner rush is on, and I think the Government could arrange things better. But the drive on Calais has failed, as I felt perfectly sure it would, and the Kaiser will not eat his Christmas dinner in London this year. Do you know, Mrs. Dr. dear,"--Susan's voice lowered as a token that she was going to impart a very shocking piece of information,--"I have been told on good authority--or else you may be sure I would not be repeating it when it concerns a minster--that the Rev. Mr. Arnold goes to Charlottetown every week and takes a Turkish bath for his rheumatism. The idea of him doing that when we are at war with Turkey? One of his own deacons has always insisted that Mr. Arnold's theology was not sound and I am beginning to believe that there is some reason to fear it. Well, I must bestir myself this afternoon and get little Jem's Christmas cake packed up for him. He will enjoy it, if the blessed boy is not drowned in mud before that time."

Jem was in camp on Salisbury Plain and was writing gay, cheery letters home in spite of the mud. Walter was at Redmond and his letters to Rilla were anything but cheerful. She never opened one without a dread tugging at her heart that it would tell her he had enlisted. His unhappiness made her unhappy. She wanted to put her arm round him and comfort him, as she had done that day in Rainbow Valley. She hated everybody who was responsible for Walter's unhappiness.

"He will go yet," she murmured miserably to herself one afternoon, as she sat alone in Rainbow Valley, reading a letter from him, "he will go

yet--and if he does I just can't bear it."

Walter wrote that some one had sent him an envelope containing a white feather.

"I deserved it, Rilla. I felt that I ought to put it on and wear it--proclaiming myself to all Redmond the coward I know I am. The boys of my year are going--going. Every day two or three of them join up. Some days I almost make up my mind to do it--and then I see myself thrusting a bayonet through another man--some woman's husband or sweetheart or son--perhaps the father of little children--I see myself lying alone torn and mangled, burning with thirst on a cold, wet field, surrounded by dead and dying men--and I know I never can. I can't face even the thought of it. How could I face the reality? There are times when I wish I had never been born. Life has always seemed such a beautiful thing to me--and now it is a hideous thing. Rilla-my-Rilla, if it weren't for your letters--your dear, bright, merry, funny, comical, believing letters--I think I'd give up. And Una's! Una is really a little brick, isn't she? There's a wonderful fineness and firmness under all that shy, wistful girlishness of her. She hasn't your knack of writing laugh-provoking epistles, but there's something in her letters--I don't know what--that makes me feel at least while I'm reading them, that I could even go to the front. Not that she ever says a word about my going--or hints that I ought to go--she isn't that kind. It's just the spirit of them--the personality that is in them. Well, I can't go. You have a brother and Una has a friend who is a

coward."

"Oh, I wish Walter wouldn't write such things," sighed Rilla. "It hurts me. He isn't a coward--he isn't--he isn't!"

She looked wistfully about her--at the little woodland valley and the grey, lonely fallows beyond. How everything reminded her of Walter! The red leaves still clung to the wild sweet-briars that overhung a curve of the brook; their stems were gemmed with the pearls of the gentle rain that had fallen a little while before. Walter had once written a poem describing them. The wind was sighing and rustling among the frosted brown bracken ferns, then lessening sorrowfully away down the brook. Walter had said once that he loved the melancholy of the autumn wind on a November day. The old Tree Lovers still clasped each other in a faithful embrace, and the White Lady, now a great white-branched tree, stood out beautifully fine, against the grey velvet sky. Walter had named them long ago; and last November, when he had walked with her and Miss Oliver in the Valley, he had said, looking at the leafless Lady, with a young silver moon hanging over her, "A white birch is a beautiful Pagan maiden who has never lost the Eden secret of being naked and unashamed." Miss Oliver had said, "Put that into a poem, Walter," and he had done so, and read it to them the next day--just a short thing with goblin imagination in every line of it. Oh, how happy they had been then!

Well--Rilla scrambled to her feet--time was up. Jims would soon be

awake--his lunch had to be prepared--his little slips had to be ironed--there was a committee meeting of the Junior Reds that night--there was her new knitting bag to finish--it would be the handsomest bag in the Junior Society--handsomer even than Irene Howard's--she must get home and get to work. She was busy these days from morning till night. That little monkey of a Jims took so much time. But he was growing--he was certainly growing. And there were times when Rilla felt sure that it was not merely a pious hope but an absolute fact that he was getting decidedly better looking. Sometimes she felt quite proud of him; and sometimes she yearned to spank him. But she never kissed him or wanted to kiss him.

"The Germans captured Lodz today," said Miss Oliver, one December evening, when she, Mrs. Blythe, and Susan were busy sewing or knitting in the cosy living-room. "This war is at least extending my knowledge of geography. Schoolma'am though I am, three months ago I didn't know there was such a place in the world such as Lodz. Had I heard it mentioned I would have known nothing about it and cared as little. I know all about it now--its size, its standing, its military significance. Yesterday the news that the Germans have captured it in their second rush to Warsaw made my heart sink into my boots. I woke up in the night and worried over it. I don't wonder babies always cry when they wake up in the night. Everything presses on my soul then and no cloud has a silver lining."

"When I wake up in the night and cannot go to sleep again," remarked

Susan, who was knitting and reading at the same time, "I pass the moments by torturing the Kaiser to death. Last night I fried him in boiling oil and a great comfort it was to me, remembering those Belgian babies."

"If the Kaiser were here and had a pain in his shoulder you'd be the first to run for the liniment bottle to rub him down," laughed Miss Oliver.

"Would I?" cried outraged Susan. "Would I, Miss Oliver? I would rub him down with coal oil, Miss Oliver--and leave it to blister. That is what I would do and that you may tie to. A pain in his shoulder, indeed! He will have pains all over him before he is through with what he has started."

"We are told to love our enemies, Susan," said the doctor solemnly.

"Yes, our enemies, but not King George's enemies, doctor dear," retorted Susan crushingly. She was so well pleased with herself over this flattening out of the doctor completely that she even smiled as she polished her glasses. Susan had never given in to glasses before, but she had done so at last in order to be able to read the war news--and not a dispatch got by her. "Can you tell me, Miss Oliver, how to pronounce M-l-a-w-a and B-z-u-r-a and P-r-z-e-m-y-s-l?"

"That last is a conundrum which nobody seems to have solved yet, Susan.

And I can make only a guess at the others."

"These foreign names are far from being decent, in my opinion," said disgusted Susan.

"I dare say the Austrians and Russians would think Saskatchewan and Musquodoboit about as bad, Susan," said Miss Oliver. "The Serbians have done wonderfully of late. They have captured Belgrade."

"And sent the Austrian creatures packing across the Danube with a flea in their ear," said Susan with a relish, as she settled down to examine a map of Eastern Europe, prodding each locality with the knitting needle to brand it on her memory. "Cousin Sophia said awhile ago that Serbia was done for, but I told her there was still such a thing as an over-ruling Providence, doubt it who might. It says here that the slaughter was terrible. For all they were foreigners it is awful to think of so many men being killed, Mrs. Dr. dear--for they are scarce enough as it is."

Rilla was upstairs relieving her over-charged feelings by writing in her diary.

"Things have all 'gone catawampus,' as Susan says, with me this week. Part of it was my own fault and part of it wasn't, and I seem to be equally unhappy over both parts.

"I went to town the other day to buy a new winter hat. It was the first time nobody insisted on coming with me to help me select it, and I felt that mother had really given up thinking of me as a child. And I found the dearest hat--it was simply bewitching. It was a velvet hat, of the very shade of rich green that was made for me. It just goes with my hair and complexion beautifully, bringing out the red-brown shades and what Miss Oliver calls my 'creaminess' so well. Only once before in my life have I come across that precise shade of green. When I was twelve I had a little beaver hat of it, and all the girls in school were wild over it. Well, as soon as I saw this hat I felt that I simply must have it--and have it I did. The price was dreadful. I will not put it down here because I don't want my descendants to know I was guilty of paying so much for a hat, in war-time, too, when everybody is--or should be--trying to be economical.

"When I got home and tried on the hat again in my room I was assailed by qualms. Of course, it was very becoming; but somehow it seemed too elaborate and fussy for church going and our quiet little doings in the Glen--too conspicuous, in short. It hadn't seemed so at the milliner's but here in my little white room it did. And that dreadful price tag! And the starving Belgians! When mother saw the hat and the tag she just looked at me. Mother is some expert at looking. Father says she looked him into love with her years ago in Avonlea school and I can well believe it--though I have heard a weird tale of her banging him over the head with a slate at the very beginning of their acquaintance. Mother was a limb when she was a little girl, I understand, and even up

to the time when Jem went away she was full of ginger. But let me return to my mutton--that is to say, my new green velvet hat.

"Do you think, Rilla,' mother said quietly--far too quietly--'that it was right to spend so much for a hat, especially when the need of the world is so great?'

"I paid for it out of my own allowance, mother,' I exclaimed.

"That is not the point. Your allowance is based on the principle of a reasonable amount for each thing you need. If you pay too much for one thing you must cut off somewhere else and that is not satisfactory. But if you think you did right, Rilla, I have no more to say. I leave it to your conscience.'

"I wish mother would not leave things to my conscience! And anyway, what was I to do? I couldn't take that hat back--I had worn it to a concert in town--I had to keep it! I was so uncomfortable that I flew into a temper--a cold, calm, deadly temper.

"Mother,' I said haughtily, 'I am sorry you disapprove of my hat--'

"Not of the hat exactly,' said mother, 'though I consider it in doubtful taste for so young a girl--but of the price you paid for it.'

"Being interrupted didn't improve my temper, so I went on, colder and

calmer and deadlier than ever, just as if mother had not spoken.

"--but I have to keep it now. However, I promise you that I will not get another hat for three years or for the duration of the war, if it lasts longer than that. Even you'--oh, the sarcasm I put into the 'you'--'cannot say that what I paid was too much when spread over at least three years.'

"You will be very tired of that hat before three years, Rilla,' said mother, with a provoking grin, which, being interpreted, meant that I wouldn't stick it out.

"Tired or not, I will wear it that long,' I said: and then I marched upstairs and cried to think that I had been sarcastic to mother.

"I hate that hat already. But three years or the duration of the war, I said, and three years or the duration of the war it shall be. I vowed and I shall keep my vow, cost what it will.

"That is one of the 'catawampus' things. The other is that I have quarrelled with Irene Howard--or she quarrelled with me--or, no, we both quarrelled.

"The Junior Red Cross met here yesterday. The hour of meeting was half-past two but Irene came at half-past one, because she got the chance of a drive down from the Upper Glen. Irene hasn't been a bit

nice to me since the fuss about the eats; and besides I feel sure she resents not being president. But I have been determined that things should go smoothly, so I have never taken any notice, and when she came yesterday she seemed so nice and sweet again that I hoped she had got over her huffiness and we could be the chums we used to be.

"But as soon as we sat down Irene began to rub me the wrong way. I saw her cast a look at my new knitting-bag. All the girls have always said Irene was jealous-minded and I would never believe them before. But now I feel that perhaps she is.

"The first thing she did was to pounce on Jims--Irene pretends to adore babies--pick him out of his cradle and kiss him all over his face. Now, Irene knows perfectly well that I don't like to have Jims kissed like that. It is not hygienic. After she had worried him till he began to fuss, she looked at me and gave quite a nasty little laugh but she said, oh, so sweetly,

"'Why, Rilla, darling, you look as if you thought I was poisoning the baby.'

"'Oh, no, I don't, Irene,' I said--every bit as sweetly, 'but you know Morgan says that the only place a baby should be kissed is on its forehead, for fear of germs, and that is my rule with Jims.'

"'Dear me, am I so full of germs?' said Irene plaintively. I knew she

was making fun of me and I began to boil inside--but outside no sign of a simmer. I was determined I would not scrap with Irene.

"Then she began to bounce Jims. Now, Morgan says bouncing is almost the worst thing that can be done to a baby. I never allow Jims to be bounced. But Irene bounced him and that exasperating child liked it. He smiled--for the very first time. He is four months old and he has never smiled once before. Not even mother or Susan have been able to coax that thing to smile, try as they would. And here he was smiling because Irene Howard bounced him! Talk of gratitude!

"I admit that smile made a big difference in him. Two of the dearest dimples came out in his cheeks and his big brown eyes seemed full of laughter. The way Irene raved over those dimples was silly, I consider. You would have supposed she thought she had really brought them into existence. But I sewed steadily and did not enthuse, and soon Irene got tired of bouncing Jims and put him back in his cradle. He did not like that after being played with, and he began to cry and was fussy the rest of the afternoon, whereas if Irene had only left him alone he would not have been a bit of trouble.

"Irene looked at him and said, 'Does he often cry like that?' as if she had never heard a baby crying before.

"I explained patiently that children have to cry so many minutes per day in order to expand their lungs. Morgan says so.

"If Jims didn't cry at all I'd have to make him cry for at least twenty minutes,' I said.

"Oh, indeed!' said Irene, laughing as if she didn't believe me.

'Morgan on the Care of Infants' was upstairs or I would soon have convinced her. Then she said Jims didn't have much hair--she had never seen a four months' old baby so bald.

"Of course, I knew Jims hadn't much hair--yet; but Irene said it in a tone that seemed to imply it was my fault that he hadn't any hair. I said I had seen dozens of babies every bit as bald as Jims, and Irene said, Oh very well, she hadn't meant to offend me--when I wasn't offended.

"It went on like that the rest of the hour--Irene kept giving me little digs all the time. The girls have always said she was revengeful like that if she were peeved about anything; but I never believed it before; I used to think Irene just perfect, and it hurt me dreadfully to find she could stoop to this. But I corked up my feelings and sewed away for dear life on a Belgian child's nightgown.

"Then Irene told me the meanest, most contemptible thing that someone had said about Walter. I won't write it down--I can't. Of course, she said it made her furious to hear it and all that--but there was no need for her to tell me such a thing even if she did hear it. She simply did

it to hurt me.

"I just exploded. 'How dare you come here and repeat such a thing about my brother, Irene Howard?' I exclaimed. 'I shall never forgive you--never. Your brother hasn't enlisted--hasn't any idea of enlisting.'

"'Why Rilla, dear, I didn't say it,' said Irene. 'I told you it was Mrs. George Burr. And I told her--'

"'I don't want to hear what you told her. Don't you ever speak to me again, Irene Howard.'

"Oh course, I shouldn't have said that. But it just seemed to say itself. Then the other girls all came in a bunch and I had to calm down and act the hostess' part as well as I could. Irene paired off with Olive Kirk all the rest of the afternoon and went away without so much as a look. So I suppose she means to take me at my word and I don't care, for I do not want to be friends with a girl who could repeat such a falsehood about Walter. But I feel unhappy over it for all that.

We've always been such good chums and until lately Irene was lovely to me; and now another illusion has been stripped from my eyes and I feel as if there wasn't such a thing as real true friendship in the world.

"Father got old Joe Mead to build a kennel for Dog Monday in the corner of the shipping-shed today. We thought perhaps Monday would come home when the cold weather came but he wouldn't. No earthly influence can

coax Monday away from that shed even for a few minutes. There he stays and meets every train. So we had to do something to make him comfortable. Joe built the kennel so that Monday could lie in it and still see the platform, so we hope he will occupy it.

"Monday has become quite famous. A reporter of the Enterprise came out from town and photographed him and wrote up the whole story of his faithful vigil. It was published in the Enterprise and copied all over Canada. But that doesn't matter to poor little Monday, Jem has gone away--Monday doesn't know where or why--but he will wait until he comes back. Somehow it comforts me: it's foolish, I suppose, but it gives me a feeling that Jem will come back or else Monday wouldn't keep on waiting for him.

"Jims is snoring beside me in his cradle. It is just a cold that makes him snore--not adenoids. Irene had a cold yesterday and I know she gave it to him, kissing him. He is not quite such a nuisance as he was; he has got some backbone and can sit up quite nicely, and he loves his bath now and splashes unsmilingly in the water instead of twisting and shrieking. Oh, shall I ever forget those first two months! I don't know how I lived through them. But here I am and here is Jims and we both are going to 'carry on.' I tickled him a little bit tonight when I undressed him--I wouldn't bounce him but Morgan doesn't mention tickling--just to see if he would smile for me as well as Irene. And he did--and out popped the dimples. What a pity his mother couldn't have seen them!

"I finished my sixth pair of socks today. With the first three I got Susan to set the heel for me. Then I thought that was a bit of shirking, so I learned to do it myself. I hate it--but I have done so many things I hate since 4th of August that one more or less doesn't matter. I just think of Jem joking about the mud on Salisbury Plain and I go at them."