

CHAPTER XI

DARK AND BRIGHT

At Christmas the college boys and girls came home and for a little while Ingleside was gay again. But all were not there--for the first time one was missing from the circle round the Christmas table. Jem, of the steady lips and fearless eyes, was far away, and Rilla felt that the sight of his vacant chair was more than she could endure. Susan had taken a stubborn freak and insisted on setting out Jem's place for him as usual, with the twisted little napkin ring he had always had since a boy, and the odd, high Green Gables goblet that Aunt Marilla had once given him and from which he always insisted on drinking.

"That blessed boy shall have his place, Mrs. Dr. dear," said Susan firmly, "and do not you feel over it, for you may be sure he is here in spirit and next Christmas he will be here in the body. Wait you till the Big Push comes in the spring and the war will be over in a jiffy."

They tried to think so, but a shadow stalked in the background of their determined merrymaking. Walter, too, was quiet and dull, all through the holidays. He showed Rilla a cruel, anonymous letter he had received at Redmond--a letter far more conspicuous for malice than for patriotic indignation.

"Nevertheless, all it says is true, Rilla."

Rilla had caught it from him and thrown it into the fire.

"There isn't one word of truth in it," she declared hotly. "Walter, you've got morbid--as Miss Oliver says she gets when she broods too long over one thing."

"I can't get away from it at Redmond, Rilla. The whole college is aflame over the war. A perfectly fit fellow, of military age, who doesn't join up is looked upon as a shirker and treated accordingly. Dr. Milne, the English professor, who has always made a special pet of me, has two sons in khaki; and I can feel the change in his manner towards me."

"It's not fair--you're not fit."

"Physically I am. Sound as a bell. The unfitness is in the soul and it's a taint and a disgrace. There, don't cry, Rilla. I'm not going if that's what you're afraid of. The Piper's music rings in my ears day and night--but I cannot follow."

"You would break mother's heart and mine if you did," sobbed Rilla.

"Oh, Walter, one is enough for any family."

The holidays were an unhappy time for her. Still, having Nan and Di and Walter and Shirley home helped in the enduring of things. A letter and

book came for her from Kenneth Ford, too; some sentences in the letter made her cheeks burn and her heart beat--until the last paragraph, which sent an icy chill over everything.

"My ankle is about as good as new. I'll be fit to join up in a couple of months more, Rilla-my-Rilla. It will be some feeling to get into khaki all right. Little Ken will be able to look the whole world in the face then and owe not any man. It's been rotten lately, since I've been able to walk without limping. People who don't know look at me as much as to say 'Slacker!' Well, they won't have the chance to look it much longer."

"I hate this war," said Rilla bitterly, as she gazed out into the maple grove that was a chill glory of pink and gold in the winter sunset.

"Nineteen-fourteen has gone," said Dr. Blythe on New Year's Day. "Its sun, which rose fairly, has set in blood. What will nineteen-fifteen bring?"

"Victory!" said Susan, for once laconic.

"Do you really believe we'll win the war, Susan?" said Miss Oliver drearily. She had come over from Lowbridge to spend the day and see Walter and the girls before they went back to Redmond. She was in a rather blue and cynical mood and inclined to look on the dark side.

"'Believe' we'll win the war!" exclaimed Susan. "No, Miss Oliver, dear, I do not believe--I know. That does not worry me. What does worry me is the trouble and expense of it all. But then you cannot make omelets without breaking eggs, so we must just trust in God and make big guns."

"Sometimes I think the big guns are better to trust in than God," said Miss Oliver defiantly.

"No, no, dear, you do not. The Germans had the big guns at the Marne, had they not? But Providence settled them. Do not ever forget that. Just hold on to that when you feel inclined to doubt. Clutch hold of the sides of your chair and sit tight and keep saying, 'Big guns are good but the Almighty is better, and He is on our side, no matter what the Kaiser says about it.' I would have gone crazy many a day lately, Miss Oliver, dear, if I had not sat tight and repeated that to myself. My cousin Sophia is, like you, somewhat inclined to despond. 'Oh, dear me, what will we do if the Germans ever get here,' she wailed to me yesterday. 'Bury them,' said I, just as off-hand as that. 'There is plenty of room for the graves.' Cousin Sophia said that I was flippant but I was not flippant, Miss Oliver, dear, only calm and confident in the British navy and our Canadian boys. I am like old Mr. William Pollock of the Harbour Head. He is very old and has been ill for a long time, and one night last week he was so low that his daughter-in-law whispered to some one that she thought he was dead. 'Darn it, I ain't,' he called right out--only, Miss Oliver, dear, he did not use so mild a word as 'darn'--'darn it, I ain't, and I don't mean to die until the

Kaiser is well licked.' Now, that, Miss Oliver, dear," concluded Susan, "is the kind of spirit I admire."

"I admire it but I can't emulate it," sighed Gertrude. "Before this, I have always been able to escape from the hard things of life for a little while by going into dreamland, and coming back like a giant refreshed. But I can't escape from this."

"Nor I," said Mrs. Blythe. "I hate going to bed now. All my life I've liked going to bed, to have a gay, mad, splendid half-hour of imagining things before sleeping. Now I imagine them still. But such different things."

"I am rather glad when the time comes to go to bed," said Miss Oliver. "I like the darkness because I can be myself in it--I needn't smile or talk bravely. But sometimes my imagination gets out of hand, too, and I see what you do--terrible things--terrible years to come."

"I am very thankful that I never had any imagination to speak of," said Susan. "I have been spared that. I see by this paper that the Crown Prince is killed again. Do you suppose there is any hope of his staying dead this time? And I also see that Woodrow Wilson is going to write another note. I wonder," concluded Susan, with the bitter irony she had of late begun to use when referring to the poor President, "if that man's schoolmaster is alive."

In January Jims was five months old and Rilla celebrated the anniversary by shortening him.

"He weighs fourteen pounds," she announced jubilantly. "Just exactly what he should weigh at five months, according to Morgan."

There was no longer any doubt in anybody's mind that Jims was getting positively pretty. His little cheeks were round and firm and faintly pink, his eyes were big and bright, his tiny paws had dimples at the root of every finger. He had even begun to grow hair, much to Rilla's unspoken relief. There was a pale golden fuzz all over his head that was distinctly visible in some lights. He was a good infant, generally sleeping and digesting as Morgan decreed. Occasionally he smiled but he had never laughed, in spite of all efforts to make him. This worried Rilla also, because Morgan said that babies usually laughed aloud from the third to the fifth month. Jims was five months and had no notion of laughing. Why hadn't he? Wasn't he normal?

One night Rilla came home late from a recruiting meeting at the Glen where she had been giving patriotic recitations. Rilla had never been willing to recite in public before. She was afraid of her tendency to lisp, which had a habit of reviving if she were doing anything that made her nervous. When she had first been asked to recite at the Upper Glen meeting she had refused. Then she began to worry over her refusal. Was it cowardly? What would Jem think if he knew? After two days of worry Rilla phoned to the president of the Patriotic Society that she

would recite. She did, and lisped several times, and lay awake most of the night in an agony of wounded vanity. Then two nights after she recited again at Harbour Head. She had been at Lowbridge and over-harbour since then and had become resigned to an occasional lisp. Nobody except herself seemed to mind it. And she was so earnest and appealing and shining-eyed! More than one recruit joined up because Rilla's eyes seemed to look right at him when she passionately demanded how could men die better than fighting for the ashes of their fathers and the temples of their gods, or assured her audience with thrilling intensity that one crowded hour of glorious life was worth an age without a name. Even stolid Miller Douglas was so fired one night that it took Mary Vance a good hour to talk him back to sense. Mary Vance said bitterly that if Rilla Blythe felt as bad as she had pretended to feel over Jem's going to the front she wouldn't be urging other girls' brothers and friends to go.

On this particular night Rilla was tired and cold and very thankful to creep into her warm nest and cuddle down between her blankets, though as usual with a sorrowful wonder how Jem and Jerry were faring. She was just getting warm and drowsy when Jims suddenly began to cry--and kept on crying.

Rilla curled herself up in her bed and determined she would let him cry. She had Morgan behind her for justification. Jims was warm, physically comfortable--his cry wasn't the cry of pain--and had his little tummy as full as was good for him. Under such circumstances it

would be simply spoiling him to fuss over him, and she wasn't going to do it. He could cry until he got good and tired and ready to go to sleep again.

Then Rilla's imagination began to torment her. Suppose, she thought, I was a tiny, helpless creature only five months old, with my father somewhere in France and my poor little mother, who had been so worried about me, in the graveyard. Suppose I was lying in a basket in a big, black room, without one speck of light, and nobody within miles of me, for all I could see or know. Suppose there wasn't a human being anywhere who loved me--for a father who had never seen me couldn't love me very much, especially when he had never written a word to or about me. Wouldn't I cry, too? Wouldn't I feel just so lonely and forsaken and frightened that I'd have to cry?

Rilla hopped out. She picked Jims out of his basket and took him into her own bed. His hands were cold, poor mite. But he had promptly ceased to cry. And then, as she held him close to her in the darkness, suddenly Jims laughed--a real, gurgly, chuckly, delighted, delightful laugh.

"Oh, you dear little thing!" exclaimed Rilla. "Are you so pleased at finding you're not all alone, lost in a huge, big, black room?" Then she knew she wanted to kiss him and she did. She kissed his silky, scented little head, she kissed his chubby little cheek, she kissed his little cold hands. She wanted to squeeze him--to cuddle him, just as

she used to squeeze and cuddle her kittens. Something delightful and yearning and brooding seemed to have taken possession of her. She had never felt like this before.

In a few minutes Jims was sound asleep; and, as Rilla listened to his soft, regular breathing and felt the little body warm and contented against her, she realized that--at last--she loved her war-baby.

"He has got to be--such--a--darling," she thought drowsily, as she drifted off to slumberland herself.

In February Jem and Jerry and Robert Grant were in the trenches and a little more tension and dread was added to the Ingleside life. In March "Yiprez," as Susan called it, had come to have a bitter significance. The daily list of casualties had begun to appear in the papers and no one at Ingleside ever answered the telephone without a horrible cold shivering--for it might be the station-master phoning up to say a telegram had come from overseas. No one at Ingleside ever got up in the morning without a sudden piercing wonder over what the day might bring.

"And I used to welcome the mornings so," thought Rilla.

Yet the round of life and duty went steadily on and every week or so one of the Glen lads who had just the other day been a rollicking schoolboy went into khaki.

"It is bitter cold out tonight, Mrs. Dr. dear," said Susan, coming in out of the clear starlit crispness of the Canadian winter twilight. "I wonder if the boys in the trenches are warm."

"How everything comes back to this war," cried Gertrude Oliver. "We can't get away from it--not even when we talk of the weather. I never go out these dark cold nights myself without thinking of the men in the trenches--not only our men but everybody's men. I would feel the same if there were nobody I knew at the front. When I snuggle down in my comfortable bed I am ashamed of being comfortable. It seems as if it were wicked of me to be so when many are not."

"I saw Mrs. Meredith down at the store," said Susan, "and she tells me that they are really troubled over Bruce, he takes things so much to heart. He has cried himself to sleep for a week, over the starving Belgians. 'Oh, mother,' he will say to her, so beseeching-like, 'surely the babies are never hungry--oh, not the babies, mother! Just say the babies are not hungry, mother.' And she cannot say it because it would not be true, and she is at her wits' end. They try to keep such things from him but he finds them out and then they cannot comfort him. It breaks my heart to read about them myself, Mrs. Dr. dear, and I cannot console myself with the thought that the tales are not true. When I read a novel that makes me want to weep I just say severely to myself, 'Now, Susan Baker, you know that is all a pack of lies.' But we must carry on. Jack Crawford says he is going to the war because he is tired of farming. I hope he will find it a pleasant change. And Mrs. Richard

Elliott over-harbour is worrying herself sick because she used to be always scolding her husband about smoking up the parlour curtains. Now that he has enlisted she wishes she had never said a word to him. You know Josiah Cooper and William Daley, Mrs. Dr. dear. They used to be fast friends but they quarrelled twenty years ago and have never spoken since. Well, the other day Josiah went to William and said right out, 'Let us be friends. 'Tain't any time to be holding grudges.' William was real glad and held out his hand, and they sat down for a good talk. And in less than half an hour they had quarrelled again, over how the war ought to be fought, Josiah holding that the Dardanelles expedition was rank folly and William maintaining that it was the one sensible thing the Allies had done. And now they are madder at each other than ever and William says Josiah is as bad a pro-German as Whiskers-on-the-Moon. Whiskers-on-the-moon vows he is no pro-German but calls himself a pacifist, whatever that may be. It is nothing proper or Whiskers would not be it and that you may tie to. He says that the big British victory at New Chapelle cost more than it was worth and he has forbid Joe Milgrave to come near the house because Joe ran up his father's flag when the news came. Have you noticed, Mrs. Dr. dear, that the Czar has changed that Prish name to Premysl, which proves that the man had good sense, Russian though he is? Joe Vickers told me in the store that he saw a very queer looking thing in the sky tonight over Lowbridge way. Do you suppose it could have been a Zeppelin, Mrs. Dr. dear?"

"I do not think it very likely, Susan."

"Well, I would feel easier about it if Whiskers-on-the-moon were not living in the Glen. They say he was seen going through strange manoeuvres with a lantern in his back yard one night lately. Some people think he was signalling."

"To whom--or what?"

"Ah, that is the mystery, Mrs. Dr. dear. In my opinion the Government would do well to keep an eye on that man if it does not want us to be all murdered in our beds some night. Now I shall just look over the papers a minute before going to write a letter to little Jem. Two things I never did, Mrs. Dr. dear, were write letters and read politics. Yet here I am doing both regular and I find there is something in politics after all. Whatever Woodrow Wilson means I cannot fathom but I am hoping I will puzzle it out yet."

Susan, in her pursuit of Wilson and politics, presently came upon something that disturbed her and exclaimed in a tone of bitter disappointment,

"That devilish Kaiser has only a boil after all."

"Don't swear, Susan," said Dr. Blythe, pulling a long face.

"'Devilish' is not swearing, doctor, dear. I have always understood that swearing was taking the name of the Almighty in vain?"

"Well, it isn't--ahem--refined," said the doctor, winking at Miss Oliver.

"No, doctor, dear, the devil and the Kaiser--if so be that they are really two different people--are not refined. And you cannot refer to them in a refined way. So I abide by what I said, although you may notice that I am careful not to use such expressions when young Rilla is about. And I maintain that the papers have no right to say that the Kaiser has pneumonia and raise people's hopes, and then come out and say he has nothing but a boil. A boil, indeed! I wish he was covered with them."

Susan stalked out to the kitchen and settled down to write to Jem; deeming him in need of some home comfort from certain passages in his letter that day.

"We're in an old wine cellar tonight, dad," he wrote, "in water to our knees. Rats everywhere--no fire--a drizzling rain coming down--rather dismal. But it might be worse. I got Susan's box today and everything was in tip-top order and we had a feast. Jerry is up the line somewhere and he says the rations are rather worse than Aunt Martha's ditto used to be. But here they're not bad--only monotonous. Tell Susan I'd give a year's pay for a good batch of her monkey-faces; but don't let that

inspire her to send any for they wouldn't keep.

"We have been under fire since the last week in February. One boy--he was a Nova Scotian--was killed right beside me yesterday. A shell burst near us and when the mess cleared away he was lying dead--not mangled at all--he just looked a little startled. It was the first time I'd been close to anything like that and it was a nasty sensation, but one soon gets used to horrors here. We're in an absolutely different world. The only things that are the same are the stars--and they are never in their right places, somehow.

"Tell mother not to worry--I'm all right--fit as a fiddle--and glad I came. There's something across from us here that has got to be wiped out of the world, that's all--an emanation of evil that would otherwise poison life for ever. It's got to be done, dad, however long it takes, and whatever it costs, and you tell the Glen people this for me. They don't realize yet what it is has broken loose--I didn't when I first joined up. I thought it was fun. Well, it isn't! But I'm in the right place all right--make no mistake about that. When I saw what had been done here to homes and gardens and people--well, dad, I seemed to see a gang of Huns marching through Rainbow Valley and the Glen, and the garden at Ingleside. There were gardens over here--beautiful gardens with the beauty of centuries--and what are they now? Mangled, desecrated things! We are fighting to make those dear old places where we had played as children, safe for other boys and girls--fighting for the preservation and safety of all sweet, wholesome things.

"Whenever any of you go to the station be sure to give Dog Monday a double pat for me. Fancy the faithful little beggar waiting there for me like that! Honestly, dad, on some of these dark cold nights in the trenches, it heartens and braces me up no end to think that thousands of miles away at the old Glen station there is a small spotted dog sharing my vigil.

"Tell Rilla I'm glad her war-baby is turning out so well, and tell Susan that I'm fighting a good fight against both Huns and cooties."

"Mrs. Dr. dear," whispered Susan solemnly, "what are cooties?"

Mrs. Blythe whispered back and then said in reply to Susan's horrified ejaculations, "It's always like that in the trenches, Susan."

Susan shook her head and went away in grim silence to re-open a parcel she had sewed up for Jem and slip in a fine tooth comb.