CHAPTER XIII

A SLICE OF HUMBLE PIE

"I am very much afraid, Mrs. Dr. dear," said Susan, who had been on a pilgrimage to the station with some choice bones for Dog Monday, "that something terrible has happened. Whiskers-on-the-moon came off the train from Charlottetown and he was looking pleased. I do not remember that I ever saw him with a smile on in public before. Of course he may have just been getting the better of somebody in a cattle deal but I have an awful presentiment that the Huns have broken through somewhere."

Perhaps Susan was unjust in connecting Mr. Pryor's smile with the sinking of the Lusitania, news of which circulated an hour later when the mail was distributed. But the Glen boys turned out that night in a body and broke all his windows in a fine frenzy of indignation over the Kaiser's doings.

"I do not say they did right and I do not say they did wrong," said Susan, when she heard of it. "But I will say that I wouldn't have minded throwing a few stones myself. One thing is certain--Whiskers-on-the-moon said in the post office the day the news came, in the presence of witnesses, that folks who could not stay home after they had been warned deserved no better fate. Norman Douglas is fairly foaming at the mouth over it all. 'If the devil doesn't get

those men who sunk the Lusitania then there is no use in there being a devil,' he was shouting in Carter's store last night. Norman Douglas always has believed that anybody who opposed him was on the side of the devil, but a man like that is bound to be right once in a while. Bruce Meredith is worrying over the babies who were drowned. And it seems he prayed for something very special last Friday night and didn't get it, and was feeling quite disgruntled over it. But when he heard about the Lusitania he told his mother that he understood now why God didn't answer his prayer--He was too busy attending to the souls of all the people who went down on the Lusitania. That child's brain is a hundred years older than his body, Mrs. Dr. dear. As for the Lusitania, it is an awful occurrence, whatever way you look at it. But Woodrow Wilson is going to write a note about it, so why worry? A pretty president!" and Susan banged her pots about wrathfully. President Wilson was rapidly becoming anathema in Susan's kitchen.

Mary Vance dropped in one evening to tell the Ingleside folks that she had withdrawn all opposition to Miller Douglas's enlisting.

"This Lusitania business was too much for me," said Mary brusquely. "When the Kaiser takes to drowning innocent babies it's high time somebody told him where he gets off at. This thing must be fought to a finish. It's been soaking into my mind slow but I'm on now. So I up and told Miller he could go as far as I was concerned. Old Kitty Alec won't be converted though. If every ship in the world was submarined and every baby drowned, Kitty wouldn't turn a hair. But I flatter myself

that it was me kept Miller back all along and not the fair Kitty. I may have deceived myself--but we shall see."

They did see. The next Sunday Miller Douglas walked into the Glen Church beside Mary Vance in khaki. And Mary was so proud of him that her white eyes fairly blazed. Joe Milgrave, back under the gallery, looked at Miller and Mary and then at Miranda Pryor, and sighed so heavily that every one within a radius of three pews heard him and knew what his trouble was. Walter Blythe did not sigh. But Rilla, scanning his face anxiously, saw a look that cut into her heart. It haunted her for the next week and made an undercurrent of soreness in her soul, which was externally being harrowed up by the near approach of the Red Cross concert and the worries connected therewith. The Reese cold had not developed into whooping-cough, so that tangle was straightened out. But other things were hanging in the balance; and on the very day before the concert came a regretful letter from Mrs. Channing saying that she could not come to sing. Her son, who was in Kingsport with his regiment, was seriously ill with pneumonia, and she must go to him at once.

The members of the concert committee looked at each other in blank dismay. What was to be done?

"This comes of depending on outside help," said Olive Kirk, disagreeably.

"We must do something," said Rilla, too desperate to care for Olive's manner. "We've advertised the concert everywhere--and crowds are coming--there's even a big party coming out from town--and we were short enough of music as it was. We must get some one to sing in Mrs. Channing's place."

"I don't know who you can get at this late date," said Olive. "Irene Howard could do it; but it is not likely she will after the way she was insulted by our society."

"How did our society insult her?" asked Rilla, in what she called her 'cold-pale tone.' Its coldness and pallor did not daunt Olive.

"You insulted her," she answered sharply. "Irene told me all about it--she was literally heart-broken. You told her never to speak to you again--and Irene told me she simply could not imagine what she had said or done to deserve such treatment. That was why she never came to our meetings again but joined in with the Lowbridge Red Cross. I do not blame her in the least, and I, for one, will not ask her to lower herself by helping us out of this scrape."

"You don't expect me to ask her?" giggled Amy MacAllister, the other member of the committee. "Irene and I haven't spoken for a hundred years. Irene is always getting 'insulted' by somebody. But she is a lovely singer, I'll admit that, and people would just as soon hear her as Mrs. Channing."

"It wouldn't do any good if you did ask her," said Olive significantly. "Soon after we began planning this concert, back in April, I met Irene in town one day and asked her if she wouldn't help us out. She said she'd love to but she really didn't see how she could when Rilla Blythe was running the programme, after the strange way Rilla had behaved to her. So there it is and here we are, and a nice failure our concert will be."

Rilla went home and shut herself up in her room, her soul in a turmoil. She would not humiliate herself by apologizing to Irene Howard! Irene had been as much in the wrong as she had been; and she had told such mean, distorted versions of their quarrel everywhere, posing as a puzzled, injured martyr. Rilla could never bring herself to tell her side of it. The fact that a slur at Walter was mixed up in it tied her tongue. So most people believed that Irene had been badly used, except a few girls who had never liked her and sided with Rilla. And yet--the concert over which she had worked so hard was going to be a failure. Mrs. Channing's four solos were the feature of the whole programme.

"Miss Oliver, what do you think about it?" she asked in desperation.

"I think Irene is the one who should apologize," said Miss Oliver. "But unfortunately my opinion will not fill the blanks in your programme."

"If I went and apologized meekly to Irene she would sing, I am sure,"

sighed Rilla. "She really loves to sing in public. But I know she'll be nasty about it--I feel I'd rather do anything than go. I suppose I should go--if Jem and Jerry can face the Huns surely I can face Irene Howard, and swallow my pride to ask a favour of her for the good of the Belgians. Just at present I feel that I cannot do it but for all that I have a presentiment that after supper you'll see me meekly trotting through Rainbow Valley on my way to the Upper Glen Road."

Rilla's presentiment proved correct. After supper she dressed herself carefully in her blue, beaded crepe--for vanity is harder to quell than pride and Irene always saw any flaw or shortcoming in another girl's appearance. Besides, as Rilla had told her mother one day when she was nine years old, "It is easier to behave nicely when you have your good clothes on."

Rilla did her hair very becomingly and donned a long raincoat for fear of a shower. But all the while her thoughts were concerned with the coming distasteful interview, and she kept rehearsing mentally her part in it. She wished it were over--she wished she had never tried to get up a Belgian Relief concert--she wished she had not quarreled with Irene. After all, disdainful silence would have been much more effective in meeting the slur upon Walter. It was foolish and childish to fly out as she had done--well, she would be wiser in the future, but meanwhile a large and very unpalatable slice of humble pie had to be eaten, and Rilla Blythe was no fonder of that wholesome article of diet than the rest of us.

By sunset she was at the door of the Howard house--a pretentious abode, with white scroll-work round the eaves and an eruption of bay-windows on all its sides. Mrs. Howard, a plump, voluble dame, met Rilla gushingly and left her in the parlour while she went to call Irene. Rilla threw off her rain-coat and looked at herself critically in the mirror over the mantel. Hair, hat, and dress were satisfactory--nothing there for Miss Irene to make fun of. Rilla remembered how clever and amusing she used to think Irene's biting little comments about other girls. Well, it had come home to her now.

Presently, Irene skimmed down, elegantly gowned, with her pale, straw-coloured hair done in the latest and most extreme fashion, and an over-luscious atmosphere of perfume enveloping her.

"Why how do you do, Miss Blythe?" she said sweetly. "This is a very unexpected pleasure."

Rilla had risen to take Irene's chilly finger-tips and now, as she sat down again, she saw something that temporarily stunned her. Irene saw it too, as she sat down, and a little amused, impertinent smile appeared on her lips and hovered there during the rest of the interview.

On one of Rilla's feet was a smart little steel-buckled shoe and a filmy blue silk stocking. The other was clad in a stout and rather shabby boot and black lisle!

Poor Rilla! She had changed, or begun to change her boots and stockings after she had put on her dress. This was the result of doing one thing with your hands and another with your brain. Oh, what a ridiculous position to be in--and before Irene Howard of all people--Irene, who was staring at Rilla's feet as if she had never seen feet before! And once she had thought Irene's manner perfection! Everything that Rilla had prepared to say vanished from her memory. Vainly trying to tuck her unlucky foot under her chair, she blurted out a blunt statement.

"I have come to athk a favour of you, Irene."

There--lisping! Oh, she had been prepared for humiliation but not to this extent! Really, there were limits!

"Yes?" said Irene in a cool, questioning tone, lifting her shallowly-set, insolent eyes to Rilla's crimson face for a moment and then dropping them again as if she could not tear them from their fascinated gaze at the shabby boot and the gallant shoe.

Rilla gathered herself together. She would not lisp--she would be calm and composed.

"Mrs. Channing cannot come because her son is ill in Kingsport, and I have come on behalf of the committee to ask you if you will be so kind as to sing for us in her place." Rilla enunciated every word so

precisely and carefully that she seemed to be reciting a lesson.

"It's something of a fiddler's invitation, isn't it?" said Irene, with one of her disagreeable smiles.

"Olive Kirk asked you to help when we first thought of the concert and you refused," said Rilla.

"Why, I could hardly help--then--could I?" asked Irene plaintively. "After you ordered me never to speak to you again? It would have been very awkward for us both, don't you think?"

Now for the humble pie.

"I want to apologize to you for saying that, Irene." said Rilla steadily. "I should not have said it and I have been very sorry ever since. Will you forgive me?"

"And sing at your concert?" said Irene sweetly and insultingly.

"If you mean," said Rilla miserably, "that I would not be apologizing to you if it were not for the concert perhaps that is true. But it is also true that I have felt ever since it happened that I should not have said what I did and that I have been sorry for it all winter. That is all I can say. If you feel you can't forgive me I suppose there is nothing more to be said."

"Oh, Rilla dear, don't snap me up like that," pleaded Irene. "Of course I'll forgive you--though I did feel awfully about it--how awfully I hope you'll never know. I cried for weeks over it. And I hadn't said or done a thing!"

Rilla choked back a retort. After all, there was no use in arguing with Irene, and the Belgians were starving.

"Don't you think you can help us with the concert," she forced herself to say. Oh, if only Irene would stop looking at that boot! Rilla could just hear her giving Olive Kirk an account of it.

"I don't see how I really can at the last moment like this," protested Irene. "There isn't time to learn anything new."

"Oh, you have lots of lovely songs that nobody in the Glen ever heard before," said Rilla, who knew Irene had been going to town all winter for lessons and that this was only a pretext. "They will all be new down there."

"But I have no accompanist," protested Irene.

"Una Meredith can accompany you," said Rilla.

"Oh, I couldn't ask her," sighed Irene. "We haven't spoken since last

fall. She was so hateful to me the time of our Sunday-school concert that I simply had to give her up."

Dear, dear, was Irene at feud with everybody? As for Una Meredith being hateful to anybody, the idea was so farcical that Rilla had much ado to keep from laughing in Irene's very face.

"Miss Oliver is a beautiful pianist and can play any accompaniment at sight," said Rilla desperately. "She will play for you and you could run over your songs easily tomorrow evening at Ingleside before the concert."

"But I haven't anything to wear. My new evening-dress isn't home from Charlottetown yet, and I simply cannot wear my old one at such a big affair. It is too shabby and old-fashioned."

"Our concert," said Rilla slowly, "is in aid of Belgian children who are starving to death. Don't you think you could wear a shabby dress once for their sake, Irene?"

"Oh, don't you think those accounts we get of the conditions of the Belgians are very much exaggerated?" said Irene. "I'm sure they can't be actually starving you know, in the twentieth century. The newspapers always colour things so highly."

Rilla concluded that she had humiliated herself enough. There was such

a thing as self-respect. No more coaxing, concert or no concert. She got up, boot and all.

"I am sorry you can't help us, Irene, but since you cannot we must do the best we can."

Now this did not suit Irene at all. She desired exceedingly to sing at that concert, and all her hesitations were merely by way of enhancing the boon of her final consent. Besides, she really wanted to be friends with Rilla again. Rilla's whole-hearted, ungrudging adoration had been very sweet incense to her. And Ingleside was a very charming house to visit, especially when a handsome college student like Walter was home. She stopped looking at Rilla's feet.

"Rilla, darling, don't be so abrupt. I really want to help you, if I can manage it. Just sit down and let's talk it over."

"I'm sorry, but I can't. I have to be home soon--Jims has to be settled for the night, you know."

"Oh, yes--the baby you are bringing up by the book. It's perfectly sweet of you to do it when you hate children so. How cross you were just because I kissed him! But we'll forget all that and be chums again, won't we? Now, about the concert--I dare say I can run into town on the morning train after my dress, and out again on the afternoon one in plenty of time for the concert, if you'll ask Miss Oliver to play

for me. I couldn't--she's so dreadfully haughty and supercilious that she simply paralyses poor little me."

Rilla did not waste time or breath defending Miss Oliver. She coolly thanked Irene, who had suddenly become very amiable and gushing, and got away. She was very thankful the interview was over. But she knew now that she and Irene could never be the friends they had been. Friendly, yes--but friends, no. Nor did she wish it. All winter she had felt under her other and more serious worries, a little feeling of regret for her lost chum. Now it was suddenly gone. Irene was not as Mrs. Elliott would say, of the race that knew Joseph. Rilla did not say or think that she had outgrown Irene. Had the thought occurred to her she would have considered it absurd when she was not yet seventeen and Irene was twenty. But it was the truth. Irene was just what she had been a year ago--just what she would always be. Rilla Blythe's nature in that year had changed and matured and deepened. She found herself seeing through Irene with a disconcerting clearness--discerning under all her superficial sweetness, her pettiness, her vindictiveness, her insincerity, her essential cheapness. Irene had lost for ever her faithful worshipper.

But not until Rilla had traversed the Upper Glen Road and found herself in the moon-dappled solitude of Rainbow Valley did she fully recover her composure of spirit. Then she stopped under a tall wild plum that was ghostly white and fair in its misty spring bloom and laughed.

"There is only one thing of importance just now--and that is that the Allies win the war," she said aloud. "Therefore, it follows without dispute that the fact that I went to see Irene Howard with odd shoes and stockings on is of no importance whatever. Nevertheless, I, Bertha Marilla Blythe, swear solemnly with the moon as witness"--Rilla lifted her hand dramatically to the said moon--"that I will never leave my room again without looking carefully at both my feet."