

CHAPTER XIV

THE VALLEY OF DECISION

Susan kept the flag flying at Ingleside all the next day, in honour of Italy's declaration of war.

"And not before it was time, Mrs. Dr. dear, considering the way things have begun to go on the Russian front. Say what you will, those Russians are kittle cattle, the grand duke Nicholas to the contrary notwithstanding. It is a fortunate thing for Italy that she has come in on the right side, but whether it is as fortunate for the Allies I will not predict until I know more about Italians than I do now. However, she will give that old reprobate of a Francis Joseph something to think about. A pretty Emperor indeed--with one foot in the grave and yet plotting wholesale murder"--and Susan thumped and kneaded her bread with as much vicious energy as she could have expended in punching Francis Joseph himself if he had been so unlucky as to fall into her clutches.

Walter had gone to town on the early train, and Nan offered to look after Jims for the day and so set Rilla free. Rilla was wildly busy all day, helping to decorate the Glen hall and seeing to a hundred last things. The evening was beautiful, in spite of the fact that Mr. Pryor was reported to have said that he "hoped it would rain pitch forks points down," and to have wantonly kicked Miranda's dog as he said it.

Rilla, rushing home from the hall, dressed hurriedly. Everything had gone surprisingly well at the last; Irene was even then downstairs practising her songs with Miss Oliver; Rilla was excited and happy, forgetful even of the Western front for the moment. It gave her a sense of achievement and victory to have brought her efforts of weeks to such a successful conclusion. She knew that there had not lacked people who thought and hinted that Rilla Blythe had not the tact or patience to engineer a concert programme. She had shown them! Little snatches of song bubbled up from her lips as she dressed. She thought she was looking very well. Excitement brought a faint, becoming pink into her round creamy cheeks, quite drowning out her few freckles, and her hair gleamed with red-brown lustre. Should she wear crab-apple blossoms in it, or her little fillet of pearls? After some agonised wavering she decided on the crab-apple blossoms and tucked the white waxen cluster behind her left ear. Now for a final look at her feet. Yes, both slippers were on. She gave the sleeping Jims a kiss--what a dear little warm, rosy, satin face he had--and hurried down the hill to the hall. Already it was filling--soon it was crowded. Her concert was going to be a brilliant success.

The first three numbers were successfully over. Rilla was in the little dressing-room behind the platform, looking out on the moonlit harbour and rehearsing her own recitations. She was alone, the rest of the performers being in the larger room on the other side. Suddenly she felt two soft bare arms slipping round her waist, then Irene Howard dropped a light kiss on her cheek.

"Rilla, you sweet thing, you're looking simply angelic to-night. You have spunk--I thought you would feel so badly over Walter's enlisting that you'd hardly be able to bear up at all, and here you are as cool as a cucumber. I wish I had half your nerve."

Rilla stood perfectly still. She felt no emotion whatever--she felt nothing. The world of feeling had just gone blank.

"Walter--enlisting"--she heard herself saying--then she heard Irene's affected little laugh.

"Why, didn't you know? I thought you did of course, or I wouldn't have mentioned it. I am always putting my foot in it, aren't I? Yes, that is what he went to town for to-day--he told me coming out on the train to-night, I was the first person he told. He isn't in khaki yet--they were out of uniforms--but he will be in a day or two. I always said Walter had as much pluck as anybody. I assure you I felt proud of him, Rilla, when he told me what he'd done. Oh, there's an end of Rick MacAllister's reading. I must fly. I promised I'd play for the next chorus--Alice Clow has such a headache."

She was gone--oh, thank God, she was gone! Rilla was alone again, staring out at the unchanged, dream-like beauty of moonlit Four Winds. Feeling was coming back to her--a pang of agony so acute as to be almost physical seemed to rend her apart.

"I cannot bear it," she said. And then came the awful thought that perhaps she could bear it and that there might be years of this hideous suffering before her.

She must get away--she must rush home--she must be alone. She could not go out there and play for drills and give readings and take part in dialogues now. It would spoil half the concert; but that did not matter--nothing mattered. Was this she, Rilla Blythe--this tortured thing, who had been quite happy a few minutes ago? Outside, a quartette was singing "We'll never let the old flag fall"--the music seemed to be coming from some remote distance. Why couldn't she cry, as she had cried when Jem told them he must go? If she could cry perhaps this horrible something that seemed to have seized on her very life might let go. But no tears came! Where were her scarf and coat? She must get away and hide herself like an animal hurt to the death.

Was it a coward's part to run away like this? The question came to her suddenly as if someone else had asked it. She thought of the shambles of the Flanders front--she thought of her brother and her playmate helping to hold those fire-swept trenches. What would they think of her if she shirked her little duty here--the humble duty of carrying the programme through for her Red Cross? But she couldn't stay--she couldn't--yet what was it mother had said when Jem went: "When our women fail in courage shall our men be fearless still?" But this--this was unbearable.

Still, she stopped half-way to the door and went back to the window. Irene was singing now; her beautiful voice--the only real thing about her--soared clear and sweet through the building. Rilla knew that the girls' Fairy Drill came next. Could she go out there and play for it? Her head was aching now--her throat was burning. Oh, why had Irene told her just then, when telling could do no good? Irene had been very cruel. Rilla remembered now that more than once that day she had caught her mother looking at her with an odd expression. She had been too busy to wonder what it meant. She understood now. Mother had known why Walter went to town but wouldn't tell her until the concert was over. What spirit and endurance mother had!

"I must stay here and see things through," said Rilla, clasping her cold hands together.

The rest of the evening always seemed like a fevered dream to her. Her body was crowded by people but her soul was alone in a torture-chamber of its own. Yet she played steadily for the drills and gave her readings without faltering. She even put on a grotesque old Irish woman's costume and acted the part in the dialogue which Miranda Pryor had not taken. But she did not give her "brogue" the inimitable twist she had given it in the practices, and her readings lacked their usual fire and appeal. As she stood before the audience she saw one face only--that of the handsome, dark-haired lad sitting beside her mother--and she saw that same face in the trenches--saw it lying cold

and dead under the stars--saw it pining in prison--saw the light of its eyes blotted out--saw a hundred horrible things as she stood there on the beflagged platform of the Glen hall with her own face whiter than the milky crab-blossoms in her hair. Between her numbers she walked restlessly up and down the little dressing-room. Would the concert never end!

It ended at last. Olive Kirk rushed up and told her exultantly that they had made a hundred dollars. "That's good," Rilla said mechanically. Then she was away from them all--oh, thank God, she was away from them all--Walter was waiting for her at the door. He put his arm through hers silently and they went together down the moonlit road. The frogs were singing in the marshes, the dim, ensilvered fields of home lay all around them. The spring night was lovely and appealing. Rilla felt that its beauty was an insult to her pain. She would hate moonlight for ever.

"You know?" said Walter.

"Yes. Irene told me," answered Rilla chokingly.

"We didn't want you to know till the evening was over. I knew when you came out for the drill that you had heard. Little sister, I had to do it. I couldn't live any longer on such terms with myself as I have been since the Lusitania was sunk. When I pictured those dead women and children floating about in that pitiless, ice-cold water--well, at

first I just felt a sort of nausea with life. I wanted to get out of the world where such a thing could happen--shake its accursed dust from my feet for ever. Then I knew I had to go."

"There are--plenty--without you."

"That isn't the point, Rilla-my-Rilla. I'm going for my own sake--to save my soul alive. It will shrink to something small and mean and lifeless if I don't go. That would be worse than blindness or mutilation or any of the things I've feared."

"You may--be--killed," Rilla hated herself for saying it--she knew it was a weak and cowardly thing to say--but she had rather gone to pieces after the tension of the evening.

"Comes he slow or comes he fast
It is but death who comes at last."

quoted Walter. "It's not death I fear--I told you that long ago. One can pay too high a price for mere life, little sister. There's so much hideousness in this war--I've got to go and help wipe it out of the world. I'm going to fight for the beauty of life, Rilla-my-Rilla--that is my duty. There may be a higher duty, perhaps--but that is mine. I owe life and Canada that, and I've got to pay it. Rilla, tonight for the first time since Jem left I've got back my self-respect. I could write poetry," Walter laughed. "I've never been able to write a line

since last August. Tonight I'm full of it. Little sister, be brave--you were so plucky when Jem went."

"This--is--different," Rilla had to stop after every word to fight down a wild outburst of sobs. "I loved--Jem--of course--but--when--he went--away--we thought--the war--would soon--be over--and you are--everything to me, Walter."

"You must be brave to help me, Rilla-my-Rilla. I'm exalted tonight--drunk with the excitement of victory over myself--but there will be other times when it won't be like this--I'll need your help then."

"When--do--you--go?" She must know the worst at once.

"Not for a week--then we go to Kingsport for training. I suppose we'll go overseas about the middle of July--we don't know."

One week--only one week more with Walter! The eyes of youth did not see how she was to go on living.

When they turned in at the Ingleside gate Walter stopped in the shadows of the old pines and drew Rilla close to him.

"Rilla-my-Rilla, there were girls as sweet and pure as you in Belgium and Flanders. You--even you--know what their fate was. We must make it

impossible for such things to happen again while the world lasts.

You'll help me, won't you?"

"I'll try, Walter," she said. "Oh, I will try."

As she clung to him with her face pressed against his shoulder she knew that it had to be. She accepted the fact then and there. He must go--her beautiful Walter with his beautiful soul and dreams and ideals. And she had known all along that it would come sooner or later. She had seen it coming to her--coming--coming--as one sees the shadow of a cloud drawing near over a sunny field, swiftly and inescapably. Amid all her pain she was conscious of an odd feeling of relief in some hidden part of her soul, where a little dull, unacknowledged soreness had been lurking all winter. No one--no one could ever call Walter a slacker now.

Rilla did not sleep that night. Perhaps no one at Ingleside did except Jims. The body grows slowly and steadily, but the soul grows by leaps and bounds. It may come to its full stature in an hour. From that night Rilla Blythe's soul was the soul of a woman in its capacity for suffering, for strength, for endurance.

When the bitter dawn came she rose and went to her window. Below her was a big apple-tree, a great swelling cone of rosy blossom. Walter had planted it years ago when he was a little boy. Beyond Rainbow Valley there was a cloudy shore of morning with little ripples of sunrise

breaking over it. The far, cold beauty of a lingering star shone above it. Why, in this world of springtime loveliness, must hearts break?

Rilla felt arms go about her lovingly, protectingly. It was mother--pale, large-eyed mother.

"Oh, mother, how can you bear it?" she cried wildly. "Rilla, dear, I've known for several days that Walter meant to go. I've had time to--to rebel and grow reconciled. We must give him up. There is a Call greater and more insistent than the call of our love--he has listened to it. We must not add to the bitterness of his sacrifice."

"Our sacrifice is greater than his," cried Rilla passionately. "Our boys give only themselves. We give them."

Before Mrs. Blythe could reply Susan stuck her head in at the door, never troubling over such frills of etiquette as knocking. Her eyes were suspiciously red but all she said was,

"Will I bring up your breakfast, Mrs. Dr. dear."

"No, no, Susan. We will all be down presently. Do you know--that Walter has joined up."

"Yes, Mrs. Dr. dear. The doctor told me last night. I suppose the Almighty has His own reasons for allowing such things. We must submit

and endeavour to look on the bright side. It may cure him of being a poet, at least"--Susan still persisted in thinking that poets and tramps were tarred with the same brush--"and that would be something. But thank God," she muttered in a lower tone, "that Shirley is not old enough to go."

"Isn't that the same thing as thanking Him that some other woman's son has to go in Shirley's place?" asked the doctor, pausing on the threshold.

"No, it is not, doctor dear," said Susan defiantly, as she picked up Jims, who was opening his big dark eyes and stretching up his dimpled paws. "Do not you put words in my mouth that I would never dream of uttering. I am a plain woman and cannot argue with you, but I do not thank God that anybody has to go. I only know that it seems they do have to go, unless we all want to be Kaiserised--for I can assure you that the Monroe doctrine, whatever it is, is nothing to tie to, with Woodrow Wilson behind it. The Huns, Dr. dear, will never be brought to brook by notes. And now," concluded Susan, tucking Jims in the crook of her gaunt arms and marching downstairs, "having cried my cry and said my say I shall take a brace, and if I cannot look pleasant I will look as pleasant as I can."