

CHAPTER XVI

REALISM AND ROMANCE

"Warsaw has fallen," said Dr. Blythe with a resigned air, as he brought the mail in one warm August day.

Gertrude and Mrs. Blythe looked dismally at each other, and Rilla, who was feeding Jims a Morganzed diet from a carefully sterilized spoon, laid the said spoon down on his tray, utterly regardless of germs, and said, "Oh, dear me," in as tragic a tone as if the news had come as a thunderbolt instead of being a foregone conclusion from the preceding week's dispatches. They had thought they were quite resigned to Warsaw's fall but now they knew they had, as always, hoped against hope.

"Now, let us take a brace," said Susan. "It is not the terrible thing we have been thinking. I read a dispatch three columns long in the Montreal Herald yesterday that proved that Warsaw was not important from a military point of view at all. So let us take the military point of view, doctor dear."

"I read that dispatch, too, and it has encouraged me immensely," said Gertrude. "I knew then and I know now that it was a lie from beginning to end. But I am in that state of mind where even a lie is a comfort, providing it is a cheerful lie."

"In that case, Miss Oliver dear, the German official reports ought to be all you need," said Susan sarcastically. "I never read them now because they make me so mad I cannot put my thoughts properly on my work after a dose of them. Even this news about Warsaw has taken the edge off my afternoon's plans. Misfortunes never come singly. I spoiled my baking of bread today--and now Warsaw has fallen--and here is little Kitchener bent on choking himself to death."

Jims was evidently trying to swallow his spoon, germs and all. Rilla rescued him mechanically and was about to resume the operation of feeding him when a casual remark of her father's sent such a shock and thrill over her that for the second time she dropped that doomed spoon.

"Kenneth Ford is down at Martin West's over-harbour," the doctor was saying. "His regiment was on its way to the front but was held up in Kingsport for some reason, and Ken got leave of absence to come over to the Island."

"I hope he will come up to see us," exclaimed Mrs. Blythe.

"He only has a day or two off, I believe," said the doctor absently.

Nobody noticed Rilla's flushed face and trembling hands. Even the most thoughtful and watchful of parents do not see everything that goes on under their very noses. Rilla made a third attempt to give the long-suffering Jims his dinner, but all she could think of was the

question--Would Ken come to see her before he went away? She had not heard from him for a long while. Had he forgotten her completely? If he did not come she would know that he had. Perhaps there was even--some other girl back there in Toronto. Of course there was. She was a little fool to be thinking about him at all. She would not think about him. If he came, well and good. It would only be courteous of him to make a farewell call at Ingleside where he had often been a guest. If he did not come--well and good, too. It did not matter very much. Nobody was going to fret. That was all settled comfortably--she was quite indifferent--but meanwhile Jims was being fed with a haste and recklessness that would have filled the soul of Morgan with horror. Jims himself didn't like it, being a methodical baby, accustomed to swallowing spoonfuls with a decent interval for breath between each. He protested, but his protests availed him nothing. Rilla, as far as the care and feeding of infants was concerned, was utterly demoralized.

Then the telephone-bell rang. There was nothing unusual about the telephone ringing. It rang on an average every ten minutes at Ingleside. But Rilla dropped Jims' spoon again--on the carpet this time--and flew to the 'phone as if life depended on her getting there before anybody else. Jims, his patience exhausted, lifted up his voice and wept.

"Hello, is this Ingleside?"

"Yes."

"That you, Rilla?" "Yeth--yeth." Oh, why couldn't Jims stop howling for just one little minute? Why didn't somebody come in and choke him?

"Know who's speaking?"

Oh, didn't she know! Wouldn't she know that voice anywhere--at any time?

"It's Ken--isn't it?"

"Sure thing. I'm here for a look-in. Can I come up to Ingleside tonight and see you?"

"Of courthe."

Had he used "you" in the singular or plural sense? Presently she would wring Jims' neck--oh, what was Ken saying?

"See here, Rilla, can you arrange that there won't be more than a few dozen people round? Understand? I can't make my meaning clearer over this bally rural line. There are a dozen receivers down."

Did she understand! Yes, she understood.

"I'll try," she said.

"I'll be up about eight then. By-by."

Rilla hung up the 'phone and flew to Jims. But she did not wring that injured infant's neck. Instead she snatched him bodily out of his chair, crushed him against her face, kissed him rapturously on his milky mouth, and danced wildly around the room with him in her arms. After this Jims was relieved to find that she returned to sanity, gave him the rest of his dinner properly, and tucked him away for his afternoon nap with the little lullaby he loved best of all. She sewed at Red Cross shirts for the rest of the afternoon and built a crystal castle of dreams, all a-quiver with rainbows. Ken wanted to see her--to see her alone. That could be easily managed. Shirley wouldn't bother them, father and mother were going to the Manse, Miss Oliver never played gooseberry, and Jims always slept the clock round from seven to seven. She would entertain Ken on the veranda--it would be moonlight--she would wear her white georgette dress and do her hair up--yes, she would--at least in a low knot at the nape of her neck. Mother couldn't object to that, surely. Oh, how wonderful and romantic it would be! Would Ken say anything--he must mean to say something or why should he be so particular about seeing her alone? What if it rained--Susan had been complaining about Mr. Hyde that morning! What if some officious Junior Red called to discuss Belgians and shirts? Or, worst of all, what if Fred Arnold dropped in? He did occasionally.

The evening came at last and was all that could be desired in an evening. The doctor and his wife went to the Manse, Shirley and Miss

Oliver went they alone knew where, Susan went to the store for household supplies, and Jims went to Dreamland. Rilla put on her georgette gown, knotted up her hair and bound a little double string of pearls around it. Then she tucked a cluster of pale pink baby roses at her belt. Would Ken ask her for a rose for a keepsake? She knew that Jem had carried to the trenches in Flanders a faded rose that Faith Meredith had kissed and given him the night before he left.

Rilla looked very sweet when she met Ken in the mingled moonlight and vine shadows of the big veranda. The hand she gave him was cold and she was so desperately anxious not to lisp that her greeting was prim and precise. How handsome and tall Kenneth looked in his lieutenant's uniform! It made him seem older, too--so much so that Rilla felt rather foolish. Hadn't it been the height of absurdity for her to suppose that this splendid young officer had anything special to say to her, little Rilla Blythe of Glen St. Mary? Likely she hadn't understood him after all--he had only meant that he didn't want a mob of folks around making a fuss over him and trying to lionize him, as they had probably done over-harbour. Yes, of course, that was all he meant--and she, little idiot, had gone and vainly imagined that he didn't want anybody but her. And he would think she had manoeuvred everybody away so that they could be alone together, and he would laugh to himself at her.

"This is better luck than I hoped for," said Ken, leaning back in his chair and looking at her with very unconcealed admiration in his eloquent eyes. "I was sure someone would be hanging about and it was

just you I wanted to see, Rilla-my-Rilla."

Rilla's dream castle flashed into the landscape again. This was unmistakable enough certainly--not much doubt as to his meaning here.

"There aren't--so many of us--to poke around as there used to be," she said softly.

"No, that's so," said Ken gently. "Jem and Walter and the girls away--it makes a big blank, doesn't it? But--" he leaned forward until his dark curls almost brushed her hair--"doesn't Fred Arnold try to fill the blank occasionally. I've been told so."

At this moment, before Rilla could make any reply, Jims began to cry at the top of his voice in the room whose open window was just above them--Jims, who hardly ever cried in the evening. Moreover, he was crying, as Rilla knew from experience, with a vim and energy that betokened that he had been already whimpering softly unheard for some time and was thoroughly exasperated. When Jims started in crying like that he made a thorough job of it. Rilla knew that there was no use to sit still and pretend to ignore him. He wouldn't stop; and conversation of any kind was out of the question when such shrieks and howls were floating over your head. Besides, she was afraid Kenneth would think she was utterly unfeeling if she sat still and let a baby cry like that. He was not likely acquainted with Morgan's invaluable volume.

She got up. "Jims has had a nightmare, I think. He sometimes has one and he is always badly frightened by it. Excuse me for a moment."

Rilla flew upstairs, wishing quite frankly that soup tureens had never been invented. But when Jims, at sight of her, lifted his little arms entreatingly and swallowed several sobs, with tears rolling down his cheeks, resentment went out of her heart. After all, the poor darling was frightened. She picked him up gently and rocked him soothingly until his sobs ceased and his eyes closed. Then she essayed to lay him down in his crib. Jims opened his eyes and shrieked a protest. This performance was repeated twice. Rilla grew desperate. She couldn't leave Ken down there alone any longer--she had been away nearly half an hour already. With a resigned air she marched downstairs, carrying Jims, and sat down on the veranda. It was, no doubt, a ridiculous thing to sit and cuddle a contrary war-baby when your best young man was making his farewell call, but there was nothing else to be done.

Jims was supremely happy. He kicked his little pink-soled feet rapturously out under his white nighty and gave one of his rare laughs. He was beginning to be a very pretty baby; his golden hair curled in silken ringlets all over his little round head and his eyes were beautiful.

"He's a decorative kiddy all right, isn't he?" said Ken.

"His looks are very well," said Rilla, bitterly, as if to imply that

they were much the best of him. Jims, being an astute infant, sensed trouble in the atmosphere and realized that it was up to him to clear it away. He turned his face up to Rilla, smiled adorably and said, clearly and beguilingly, "Will--Will."

It was the very first time he had spoken a word or tried to speak. Rilla was so delighted that she forgot her grudge against him. She forgave him with a hug and kiss. Jims, understanding that he was restored to favour, cuddled down against her just where a gleam of light from the lamp in the living-room struck across his hair and turned it into a halo of gold against her breast.

Kenneth sat very still and silent, looking at Rilla--at the delicate, girlish silhouette of her, her long lashes, her dented lip, her adorable chin. In the dim moonlight, as she sat with her head bent a little over Jims, the lamplight glinting on her pearls until they glistened like a slender nimbus, he thought she looked exactly like the Madonna that hung over his mother's desk at home. He carried that picture of her in his heart to the horror of the battlefields of France. He had had a strong fancy for Rilla Blythe ever since the night of the Four Winds dance; but it was when he saw her there, with little Jims in her arms, that he loved her and realized it. And all the while, poor Rilla was sitting, disappointed and humiliated, feeling that her last evening with Ken was spoiled and wondering why things always had to go so contrarily outside of books. She felt too absurd to try to talk. Evidently Ken was completely disgusted, too, since he was sitting

there in such stony silence.

Hope revived momentarily when Jims went so thoroughly asleep that she thought it would be safe to lay him down on the couch in the living-room. But when she came out again Susan was sitting on the veranda, loosening her bonnet strings with the air of one who meant to stay where she was for some time.

"Have you got your baby to sleep?" she asked kindly.

Your baby! Really, Susan might have more tact.

"Yes," said Rilla shortly.

Susan laid her parcels on the reed table, as one determined to do her duty. She was very tired but she must help Rilla out. Here was Kenneth Ford who had come to call on the family and they were all unfortunately out, and "the poor child" had had to entertain him alone. But Susan had come to her rescue--Susan would do her part no matter how tired she was.

"Dear me, how you have grown up," she said, looking at Ken's six feet of khaki uniform without the least awe. Susan had grown used to khaki now, and at sixty-four even a lieutenant's uniform is just clothes and nothing else. "It is an amazing thing how fast children do grow up. Rilla here, now, is almost fifteen."

"I'm going on seventeen, Susan," cried Rilla almost passionately. She was a whole month past sixteen. It was intolerable of Susan.

"It seems just the other day that you were all babies," said Susan, ignoring Rilla's protest. "You were really the prettiest baby I ever saw, Ken, though your mother had an awful time trying to cure you of sucking your thumb. Do you remember the day I spanked you?"

"No," said Ken.

"Oh well, I suppose you would be too young--you were only about four and you were here with your mother and you insisted on teasing Nan until she cried. I had tried several ways of stopping you but none availed, and I saw that a spanking was the only thing that would serve. So I picked you up and laid you across my knee and lambasted you well. You howled at the top of your voice but you left Nan alone after that."

Rilla was writhing. Hadn't Susan any realization that she was addressing an officer of the Canadian Army? Apparently she had not. Oh, what would Ken think? "I suppose you do not remember the time your mother spanked you either," continued Susan, who seemed to be bent on reviving tender reminiscences that evening. "I shall never, no never, forget it. She was up here one night with you when you were about three, and you and Walter were playing out in the kitchen yard with a kitten. I had a big puncheon of rainwater by the spout which I was reserving for making soap. And you and Walter began quarrelling over

the kitten. Walter was at one side of the puncheon standing on a chair, holding the kitten, and you were standing on a chair at the other side. You leaned across that puncheon and grabbed the kitten and pulled. You were always a great hand for taking what you wanted without too much ceremony. Walter held on tight and the poor kitten yelled but you dragged Walter and the kitten half over and then you both lost your balance and tumbled into that puncheon, kitten and all. If I had not been on the spot you would both have been drowned. I flew to the rescue and hauled you all three out before much harm was done, and your mother, who had seen it all from the upstairs window, came down and picked you up, dripping as you were, and gave you a beautiful spanking. Ah," said Susan with a sigh, "those were happy old days at Ingleside."

"Must have been," said Ken. His voice sounded queer and stiff. Rilla supposed he was hopelessly enraged. The truth was he dared not trust his voice lest it betray his frantic desire to laugh.

"Rilla here, now," said Susan, looking affectionately at that unhappy damsel, "never was much spanked. She was a real well-behaved child for the most part. But her father did spank her once. She got two bottles of pills out of his office and dared Alice Clow to see which of them could swallow all the pills first, and if her father had not happened in the nick of time those two children would have been corpses by night. As it was, they were both sick enough shortly after. But the doctor spanked Rilla then and there and he made such a thorough job of it that she never meddled with anything in his office afterwards. We

hear a great deal nowadays of something that is called 'moral persuasion,' but in my opinion a good spanking and no nagging afterwards is a much better thing."

Rilla wondered viciously whether Susan meant to relate all the family spankings. But Susan had finished with the subject and branched off to another cheerful one.

"I remember little Tod MacAllister over-harbour killed himself that very way, eating up a whole box of fruitatives because he thought they were candy. It was a very sad affair. He was," said Susan earnestly, "the very cutest little corpse I ever laid my eyes on. It was very careless of his mother to leave the fruitatives where he could get them, but she was well-known to be a heedless creature. One day she found a nest of five eggs as she was going across the fields to church with a brand new blue silk dress on. So she put them in the pocket of her petticoat and when she got to church she forgot all about them and sat down on them and her dress was ruined, not to speak of the petticoat. Let me see--would not Tod be some relation of yours? Your great grandmother West was a MacAllister. Her brother Amos was a MacDonaldite in religion. I am told he used to take the jerks something fearful. But you look more like your great grandfather West than the MacAllisters. He died of a paralytic stroke quite early in life."

"Did you see anybody at the store?" asked Rilla desperately, in the faint hope of directing Susan's conversation into more agreeable

channels.

"Nobody except Mary Vance," said Susan, "and she was stepping round as brisk as the Irishman's flea."

What terrible similes Susan used! Would Kenneth think she acquired them from the family!

"To hear Mary talk about Miller Douglas you would think he was the only Glen boy who had enlisted," Susan went on. "But of course she always did brag and she has some good qualities I am willing to admit, though I did not think so that time she chased Rilla here through the village with a dried codfish till the poor child fell, heels over head, into the puddle before Carter Flagg's store."

Rilla went cold all over with wrath and shame. Were there any more disgraceful scenes in her past that Susan could rake up? As for Ken, he could have howled over Susan's speeches, but he would not so insult the duenna of his lady, so he sat with a preternaturally solemn face which seemed to poor Rilla a haughty and offended one.

"I paid eleven cents for a bottle of ink tonight," complained Susan.

"Ink is twice as high as it was last year. Perhaps it is because Woodrow Wilson has been writing so many notes. It must cost him considerable. My cousin Sophia says Woodrow Wilson is not the man she expected him to be--but then no man ever was. Being an old maid, I do

not know much about men and have never pretended to, but my cousin Sophia is very hard on them, although she married two of them, which you might think was a fair share. Albert Crawford's chimney blew down in that big gale we had last week, and when Sophia heard the bricks clattering on the roof she thought it was a Zeppelin raid and went into hysterics. And Mrs. Albert Crawford says that of the two things she would have preferred the Zeppelin raid."

Rilla sat limply in her chair like one hypnotized. She knew Susan would stop talking when she was ready to stop and that no earthly power could make her stop any sooner. As a rule, she was very fond of Susan but just now she hated her with a deadly hatred. It was ten o'clock. Ken would soon have to go--the others would soon be home--and she had not even had a chance to explain to Ken that Fred Arnold filled no blank in her life nor ever could. Her rainbow castle lay in ruins round her.

Kenneth got up at last. He realized that Susan was there to stay as long as he did, and it was a three mile walk to Martin West's over-harbour. He wondered if Rilla had put Susan up to this, not wanting to be left alone with him, lest he say something Fred Arnold's sweetheart did not want to hear. Rilla got up, too, and walked silently the length of the veranda with him. They stood there for a moment, Ken on the lower step. The step was half sunk into the earth and mint grew thickly about and over its edge. Often crushed by so many passing feet it gave out its essence freely, and the spicy odour hung round them like a soundless, invisible benediction. Ken looked up at Rilla, whose

hair was shining in the moonlight and whose eyes were pools of allurements. All at once he felt sure there was nothing in that gossip about Fred Arnold.

"Rilla," he said in a sudden, intense whisper, "you are the sweetest thing."

Rilla flushed and looked at Susan. Ken looked, too, and saw that Susan's back was turned. He put his arm about Rilla and kissed her. It was the first time Rilla had ever been kissed. She thought perhaps she ought to resent it but she didn't. Instead, she glanced timidly into Kenneth's seeking eyes and her glance was a kiss.

"Rilla-my-Rilla," said Ken, "will you promise that you won't let anyone else kiss you until I come back?"

"Yes," said Rilla, trembling and thrilling.

Susan was turning round. Ken loosened his hold and stepped to the walk.

"Good-bye," he said casually. Rilla heard herself saying it just as casually. She stood and watched him down the walk, out of the gate, and down the road. When the fir wood hid him from her sight she suddenly said "Oh," in a choked way and ran down to the gate, sweet blossomy things catching at her skirts as she ran. Leaning over the gate she saw Kenneth walking briskly down the road, over the bars of tree shadows

and moonlight, his tall, erect figure grey in the white radiance. As he reached the turn he stopped and looked back and saw her standing amid the tall white lilies by the gate. He waved his hand--she waved hers--he was gone around the turn.

Rilla stood there for a little while, gazing across the fields of mist and silver. She had heard her mother say that she loved turns in roads--they were so provocative and alluring. Rilla thought she hated them. She had seen Jem and Jerry vanish from her around a bend in the road--then Walter--and now Ken. Brothers and playmate and sweetheart--they were all gone, never, it might be, to return. Yet still the Piper piped and the dance of death went on.

When Rilla walked slowly back to the house Susan was still sitting by the veranda table and Susan was sniffing suspiciously.

"I have been thinking, Rilla dear, of the old days in the House of Dreams, when Kenneth's mother and father were courting and Jem was a little baby and you were not born or thought of. It was a very romantic affair and she and your mother were such chums. To think I should have lived to see her son going to the front. As if she had not had enough trouble in her early life without this coming upon her! But we must take a brace and see it through."

All Rilla's anger against Susan had evaporated. With Ken's kiss still burning on her lips, and the wonderful significance of the promise he

had asked thrilling heart and soul, she could not be angry with anyone. She put her slim white hand into Susan's brown, work-hardened one and gave it a squeeze. Susan was a faithful old dear and would lay down her life for any one of them.

"You are tired, Rilla dear, and had better go to bed," Susan said, patting her hand. "I noticed you were too tired to talk tonight. I am glad I came home in time to help you out. It is very tiresome trying to entertain young men when you are not accustomed to it."

Rilla carried Jims upstairs and went to bed, but not before she had sat for a long time at her window reconstructing her rainbow castle, with several added domes and turrets.

"I wonder," she said to herself, "if I am, or am not, engaged to Kenneth Ford."