

CHAPTER XVIII

A WAR-WEDDING

"I can tell you this Dr. dear," said Susan, pale with wrath, "that Germany is getting to be perfectly ridiculous."

They were all in the big Ingleside kitchen. Susan was mixing biscuits for supper. Mrs. Blythe was making shortbread for Jem, and Rilla was compounding candy for Ken and Walter--it had once been "Walter and Ken" in her thoughts but somehow, quite unconsciously, this had changed until Ken's name came naturally first. Cousin Sophia was also there, knitting. All the boys were going to be killed in the long run, so Cousin Sophia felt in her bones, but they might better die with warm feet than cold ones, so Cousin Sophia knitted faithfully and gloomily.

Into this peaceful scene erupted the doctor, wrathful and excited over the burning of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. And Susan became automatically quite as wrathful and excited.

"What will those Huns do next?" she demanded. "Coming over here and burning our Parliament building! Did anyone ever hear of such an outrage?"

"We don't know that the Germans are responsible for this," said the doctor--much as if he felt quite sure they were. "Fires do start

without their agency sometimes. And Uncle Mark MacAllister's barn was burnt last week. You can hardly accuse the Germans of that, Susan."

"Indeed, Dr. dear, I do not know." Susan nodded slowly and portentously. "Whiskers-on-the-moon was there that very day. The fire broke out half an hour after he was gone. So much is a fact--but I shall not accuse a Presbyterian elder of burning anybody's barn until I have proof. However, everybody knows, Dr. dear, that both Uncle Mark's boys have enlisted, and that Uncle Mark himself makes speeches at all the recruiting meetings. So no doubt Germany is anxious to get square with him."

"I could never speak at a recruiting meeting," said Cousin Sophia solemnly. "I could never reconcile it to my conscience to ask another woman's son to go, to murder and be murdered."

"Could you not?" said Susan. "Well, Sophia Crawford, I felt as if I could ask anyone to go when I read last night that there were no children under eight years of age left alive in Poland. Think of that, Sophia Crawford"--Susan shook a floury finger at Sophia--"not--one--child--under--eight--years--of--age!"

"I suppose the Germans has et 'em all," sighed Cousin Sophia.

"Well, no-o-o," said Susan reluctantly, as if she hated to admit that there was any crime the Huns couldn't be accused of. "The Germans have

not turned cannibal yet--as far as I know. They have died of starvation and exposure, the poor little creatures. There is murdering for you, Cousin Sophia Crawford. The thought of it poisons every bite and sup I take."

"I see that Fred Carson of Lowbridge has been awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal," remarked the doctor, over his local paper.

"I heard that last week," said Susan. "He is a battalion runner and he did something extra brave and daring. His letter, telling his folks about it, came when his old Grandmother Carson was on her dying-bed. She had only a few minutes more to live and the Episcopal minister, who was there, asked her if she would not like him to pray. 'Oh yes, yes, you can pray,' she said impatient-like--she was a Dean, Dr. dear, and the Deans were always high-spirited--'you can pray, but for pity's sake pray low and don't disturb me. I want to think over this splendid news and I have not much time left to do it.' That was Almira Carson all over. Fred was the apple of her eye. She was seventy-five years of age and had not a grey hair in her head, they tell me."

"By the way, that reminds me--I found a grey hair this morning--my very first," said Mrs. Blythe.

"I have noticed that grey hair for some time, Mrs. Dr. dear, but I did not speak of it. Thought I to myself, 'She has enough to bear.' But now that you have discovered it let me remind you that grey hairs are

honourable."

"I must be getting old, Gilbert." Mrs. Blythe laughed a trifle ruefully. "People are beginning to tell me I look so young. They never tell you that when you are young. But I shall not worry over my silver thread. I never liked red hair. Gilbert, did I ever tell you of that time, years ago at Green Gables, when I dyed my hair? Nobody but Marilla and I knew about it."

"Was that the reason you came out once with your hair shingled to the bone?"

"Yes. I bought a bottle of dye from a German Jew pedlar. I fondly expected it would turn my hair black--and it turned it green. So it had to be cut off."

"You had a narrow escape, Mrs. Dr. dear," exclaimed Susan. "Of course you were too young then to know what a German was. It was a special mercy of Providence that it was only green dye and not poison."

"It seems hundreds of years since those Green Gables days," sighed Mrs. Blythe. "They belonged to another world altogether. Life has been cut in two by the chasm of war. What is ahead I don't know--but it can't be a bit like the past. I wonder if those of us who have lived half our lives in the old world will ever feel wholly at home in the new."

"Have you noticed," asked Miss Oliver, glancing up from her book, "how everything written before the war seems so far away now, too? One feels as if one was reading something as ancient as the Iliad. This poem of Wordsworth's--the Senior class have it in their entrance work--I've been glancing over it. Its classic calm and repose and the beauty of the lines seem to belong to another planet, and to have as little to do with the present world-welter as the evening star."

"The only thing that I find much comfort in reading nowadays is the Bible," remarked Susan, whisking her biscuits into the oven. "There are so many passages in it that seem to me exactly descriptive of the Huns. Old Highland Sandy declares that there is no doubt that the Kaiser is the Anti-Christ spoken of in Revelations, but I do not go as far as that. It would, in my humble opinion, Mrs. Dr. dear, be too great an honour for him."

Early one morning, several days later, Miranda Pryor slipped up to Ingleside, ostensibly to get some Red Cross sewing, but in reality to talk over with sympathetic Rilla troubles that were past bearing alone. She brought her dog with her--an over-fed, bandy-legged little animal very dear to her heart because Joe Milgrave had given it to her when it was a puppy. Mr. Pryor regarded all dogs with disfavour; but in those days he had looked kindly upon Joe as a suitor for Miranda's hand and so he had allowed her to keep the puppy. Miranda was so grateful that she endeavoured to please her father by naming her dog after his political idol, the great Liberal chieftain, Sir Wilfrid

Laurier--though his title was soon abbreviated to Wilfy. Sir Wilfrid grew and flourished and waxed fat; but Miranda spoiled him absurdly and nobody else liked him. Rilla especially hated him because of his detestable trick of lying flat on his back and entreating you with waving paws to tickle his sleek stomach. When she saw that Miranda's pale eyes bore unmistakable testimony of her having cried all night, Rilla asked her to come up to her room, knowing Miranda had a tale of woe to tell, but she ordered Sir Wilfrid to remain below.

"Oh, can't he come, too?" said Miranda wistfully. "Poor Wilfy won't be any bother--and I wiped his paws so carefully before I brought him in. He is always so lonesome in a strange place without me--and very soon he'll be--all--I'll have left--to remind me--of Joe."

Rilla yielded, and Sir Wilfrid, with his tail curled at a saucy angle over his brindled back, trotted triumphantly up the stairs before them.

"Oh, Rilla," sobbed Miranda, when they had reached sanctuary. "I'm so unhappy. I can't begin to tell you how unhappy I am. Truly, my heart is breaking."

Rilla sat down on the lounge beside her. Sir Wilfrid squatted on his haunches before them, with his impertinent pink tongue stuck out, and listened. "What is the trouble, Miranda?"

"Joe is coming home tonight on his last leave. I had a letter from him

on Saturday--he sends my letters in care of Bob Crawford, you know, because of father--and, oh, Rilla, he will only have four days--he has to go away Friday morning--and I may never see him again."

"Does he still want you to marry him?" asked Rilla.

"Oh, yes. He implored me in his letter to run away and be married. But I cannot do that, Rilla, not even for Joe. My only comfort is that I will be able to see him for a little while tomorrow afternoon. Father has to go to Charlottetown on business. At least we will have one good farewell talk. But oh--afterwards--why, Rilla, I know father won't even let me go to the station Friday morning to see Joe off."

"Why in the world don't you and Joe get married tomorrow afternoon at home?" demanded Rilla.

Miranda swallowed a sob in such amazement that she almost choked.

"Why--why--that is impossible, Rilla."

"Why?" briefly demanded the organizer of the Junior Red Cross and the transporter of babies in soup tureens.

"Why--why--we never thought of such a thing--Joe hasn't a license--I have no dress--I couldn't be married in black--I--I--we--you--you--"

Miranda lost herself altogether and Sir Wilfrid, seeing that she was in

dire distress threw back his head and emitted a melancholy yelp.

Rilla Blythe thought hard and rapidly for a few minutes. Then she said, "Miranda, if you will put yourself into my hands I'll have you married to Joe before four o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

"Oh, you couldn't."

"I can and I will. But you'll have to do exactly as I tell you."

"Oh--I--don't think--oh, father will kill me--"

"Nonsense. He'll be very angry I suppose. But are you more afraid of your father's anger than you are of Joe's never coming back to you?"

"No," said Miranda, with sudden firmness, "I'm not."

"Will you do as I tell you then?"

"Yes, I will."

"Then get Joe on the long-distance at once and tell him to bring out a license and ring tonight."

"Oh, I couldn't," wailed the aghast Miranda, "it--it would be so--so indelicate."

Rilla shut her little white teeth together with a snap. "Heaven grant me patience," she said under her breath. "I'll do it then," she said aloud, "and meanwhile, you go home and make what preparations you can. When I 'phone down to you to come up and help me sew come at once."

As soon as Miranda, pallid, scared, but desperately resolved, had gone, Rilla flew to the telephone and put in a long-distance call for Charlottetown. She got through with such surprising quickness that she was convinced Providence approved of her undertaking, but it was a good hour before she could get in touch with Joe Milgrave at his camp. Meanwhile, she paced impatiently about, and prayed that when she did get Joe there would be no listeners on the line to carry news to Whiskers-on-the-moon.

"Is that you, Joe? Rilla Blythe is speaking--Rilla--Rilla--oh, never mind. Listen to this. Before you come home tonight get a marriage license--a marriage license--yes, a marriage license--and a wedding-ring. Did you get that? And will you do it? Very well, be sure you do it--it is your only chance."

Flushed with triumph--for her only fear was that she might not be able to locate Joe in time--Rilla rang the Pryor ring. This time she had not such good luck for she drew Whiskers-on-the-moon.

"Is that Miranda? Oh--Mr. Pryor! Well, Mr. Pryor, will you kindly ask

Miranda if she can come up this afternoon and help me with some sewing. It is very important, or I would not trouble her. Oh--thank you."

Mr. Pryor had consented somewhat grumpily, but he had consented--he did not want to offend Dr. Blythe, and he knew that if he refused to allow Miranda to do any Red Cross work public opinion would make the Glen too hot for comfort. Rilla went out to the kitchen, shut all the doors with a mysterious expression which alarmed Susan, and then said solemnly, "Susan can you make a wedding-cake this afternoon?"

"A wedding-cake!" Susan stared. Rilla had, without any warning, brought her a war-baby once upon a time. Was she now, with equal suddenness, going to produce a husband?

"Yes, a wedding-cake--a scrumptious wedding-cake, Susan--a beautiful, plummy, eggy, citron-peely wedding-cake. And we must make other things too. I'll help you in the morning. But I can't help you in the afternoon for I have to make a wedding-dress and time is the essence of the contract, Susan."

Susan felt that she was really too old to be subjected to such shocks.

"Who are you going to marry, Rilla?" she asked feebly.

"Susan, darling, I am not the happy bride. Miranda Pryor is going to marry Joe Milgrave tomorrow afternoon while her father is away in town.

A war-wedding, Susan--isn't that thrilling and romantic? I never was so excited in my life."

The excitement soon spread over Ingleside, infecting even Mrs. Blythe and Susan.

"I'll go to work on that cake at once," vowed Susan, with a glance at the clock. "Mrs. Dr. dear, will you pick over the fruit and beat up the eggs? If you will I can have that cake ready for the oven by the evening. Tomorrow morning we can make salads and other things. I will work all night if necessary to get the better of Whiskers-on-the-moon."

Miranda arrived, tearful and breathless.

"We must fix over my white dress for you to wear," said Rilla. "It will fit you very nicely with a little alteration."

To work went the two girls, ripping, fitting, basting, sewing for dear life. By dint of unceasing effort they got the dress done by seven o'clock and Miranda tried it on in Rilla's room.

"It's very pretty--but oh, if I could just have a veil," sighed Miranda. "I've always dreamed of being married in a lovely white veil."

Some good fairy evidently waits on the wishes of war-brides. The door opened and Mrs. Blythe came in, her arms full of a filmy burden.

"Miranda dear," she said, "I want you to wear my wedding-veil tomorrow. It is twenty-four years since I was a bride at old Green Gables--the happiest bride that ever was--and the wedding-veil of a happy bride brings good luck, they say."

"Oh, how sweet of you, Mrs. Blythe," said Miranda, the ready tears starting to her eyes.

The veil was tried on and draped. Susan dropped in to approve but dared not linger.

"I've got that cake in the oven," she said, "and I am pursuing a policy of watchful waiting. The evening news is that the Grand Duke has captured Erzerum. That is a pill for the Turks. I wish I had a chance to tell the Czar just what a mistake he made when he turned Nicholas down."

Susan disappeared downstairs to the kitchen, whence a dreadful thud and a piercing shriek presently sounded. Everybody rushed to the kitchen--the doctor and Miss Oliver, Mrs. Blythe, Rilla, Miranda in her wedding-veil. Susan was sitting flatly in the middle of the kitchen floor with a dazed, bewildered look on her face, while Doc, evidently in his Hyde incarnation, was standing on the dresser, with his back up, his eyes blazing, and his tail the size of three tails.

"Susan, what has happened?" cried Mrs. Blythe in alarm. "Did you fall? Are you hurt?"

Susan picked herself up.

"No," she said grimly, "I am not hurt, though I am jarred all over. Do not be alarmed. As for what has happened--I tried to kick that darned cat with both feet, that is what happened."

Everybody shrieked with laughter. The doctor was quite helpless.

"Oh, Susan, Susan," he gasped. "That I should live to hear you swear."

"I am sorry," said Susan in real distress, "that I used such an expression before two young girls. But I said that beast was darned, and darned it is. It belongs to Old Nick."

"Do you expect it will vanish some of these days with a bang and the odour of brimstone, Susan?"

"It will go to its own place in due time and that you may tie to," said Susan dourly, shaking out her raddled bones and going to her oven. "I suppose my plunking down like that has shaken my cake so that it will be as heavy as lead."

But the cake was not heavy. It was all a bride's cake should be, and

Susan iced it beautifully. Next day she and Rilla worked all the forenoon, making delicacies for the wedding-feast, and as soon as Miranda phoned up that her father was safely off everything was packed in a big hamper and taken down to the Pryor house. Joe soon arrived in his uniform and a state of violent excitement, accompanied by his best man, Sergeant Malcolm Crawford. There were quite a few guests, for all the Manse and Ingleside folk were there, and a dozen or so of Joe's relatives, including his mother, "Mrs. Dead Angus Milgrave," so called, cheerfully, to distinguish her from another lady whose Angus was living. Mrs. Dead Angus wore a rather disapproving expression, not caring over-much for this alliance with the house of Whiskers-on-the-moon.

So Miranda Pryor was married to Private Joseph Milgrave on his last leave. It should have been a romantic wedding but it was not. There were too many factors working against romance, as even Rilla had to admit. In the first place, Miranda, in spite of her dress and veil, was such a flat-faced, commonplace, uninteresting little bride. In the second place, Joe cried bitterly all through the ceremony, and this vexed Miranda unreasonably. Long afterwards she told Rilla, "I just felt like saying to him then and there, 'If you feel so bad over having to marry me you don't have to.' But it was just because he was thinking all the time of how soon he would have to leave me."

In the third place, Jims, who was usually so well-behaved in public, took a fit of shyness and contrariness combined and began to cry at the

top of his voice for "Willa." Nobody wanted to take him out, because everybody wanted to see the marriage, so Rilla who was a bridesmaid, had to take him and hold him during the ceremony.

In the fourth place, Sir Wilfrid Laurier took a fit.

Sir Wilfrid was entrenched in a corner of the room behind Miranda's piano. During his seizure he made the weirdest, most unearthly noises. He would begin with a series of choking, spasmodic sounds, continuing into a gruesome gurgle, and ending up with a strangled howl. Nobody could hear a word Mr. Meredith was saying, except now and then, when Sir Wilfrid stopped for breath. Nobody looked at the bride except Susan, who never dragged her fascinated eyes from Miranda's face--all the others were gazing at the dog. Miranda had been trembling with nervousness but as soon as Sir Wilfrid began his performance she forgot it. All that she could think of was that her dear dog was dying and she could not go to him. She never remembered a word of the ceremony.

Rilla, who in spite of Jims, had been trying her best to look rapt and romantic, as becomed a war bridesmaid, gave up the hopeless attempt, and devoted her energies to choking down untimely merriment. She dared not look at anybody in the room, especially Mrs. Dead Angus, for fear all her suppressed mirth should suddenly explode in a most un-young-ladylike yell of laughter.

But married they were, and then they had a wedding-supper in the

dining-room which was so lavish and bountiful that you would have thought it was the product of a month's labour. Everybody had brought something. Mrs. Dead Angus had brought a large apple-pie, which she placed on a chair in the dining-room and then absently sat down on it. Neither her temper nor her black silk wedding garment was improved thereby, but the pie was never missed at the gay bridal feast. Mrs. Dead Angus eventually took it home with her again. Whiskers-on-the-moon's pacifist pig should not get it, anyhow.

That evening Mr. and Mrs. Joe, accompanied by the recovered Sir Wilfrid, departed for the Four Winds Lighthouse, which was kept by Joe's uncle and in which they meant to spend their brief honeymoon. Una Meredith and Rilla and Susan washed the dishes, tidied up, left a cold supper and Miranda's pitiful little note on the table for Mr. Pryor, and walked home, while the mystic veil of dreamy, haunted winter twilight wrapped itself over the Glen.

"I would really not have minded being a war-bride myself," remarked Susan sentimentally.

But Rilla felt rather flat--perhaps as a reaction to all the excitement and rush of the past thirty-six hours. She was disappointed somehow--the whole affair had been so ludicrous, and Miranda and Joe so lachrymose and commonplace.

"If Miranda hadn't given that wretched dog such an enormous dinner he

wouldn't have had that fit," she said crossly. "I warned her--but she said she couldn't starve the poor dog--he would soon be all she had left, etc. I could have shaken her."

"The best man was more excited than Joe was," said Susan. "He wished Miranda many happy returns of the day. She did not look very happy, but perhaps you could not expect that under the circumstances."

"Anyhow," thought Rilla, "I can write a perfectly killing account of it all to the boys. How Jem will howl over Sir Wilfrid's part in it!"

But if Rilla was rather disappointed in the war wedding she found nothing lacking on Friday morning when Miranda said good-bye to her bridegroom at the Glen station. The dawn was white as a pearl, clear as a diamond. Behind the station the balsamy copse of young firs was frost-misted. The cold moon of dawn hung over the westering snow fields but the golden fleeces of sunrise shone above the maples up at Ingleside. Joe took his pale little bride in his arms and she lifted her face to his. Rilla choked suddenly. It did not matter that Miranda was insignificant and commonplace and flat-featured. It did not matter that she was the daughter of Whiskers-on-the-moon. All that mattered was that rapt, sacrificial look in her eyes--that ever-burning, sacred fire of devotion and loyalty and fine courage that she was mutely promising Joe she and thousands of other women would keep alive at home while their men held the Western front. Rilla walked away, realising that she must not spy on such a moment. She went down to the end of the

platform where Sir Wilfrid and Dog Monday were sitting, looking at each other.

Sir Wilfrid remarked condescendingly: "Why do you haunt this old shed when you might lie on the hearthrug at Ingleside and live on the fat of the land? Is it a pose? Or a fixed idea?"

Whereat Dog Monday, laconically: "I have a tryst to keep."

When the train had gone Rilla rejoined the little trembling Miranda.

"Well, he's gone," said Miranda, "and he may never come back--but I'm his wife, and I'm going to be worthy of him. I'm going home."

"Don't you think you had better come with me now?" asked Rilla doubtfully. Nobody knew yet how Mr. Pryor had taken the matter.

"No. If Joe can face the Huns I guess I can face father," said Miranda daringly. "A soldier's wife can't be a coward. Come on, Wilfy. I'll go straight home and meet the worst."

There was nothing very dreadful to face, however. Perhaps Mr. Pryor had reflected that housekeepers were hard to get and that there were many Milgrave homes open to Miranda--also, that there was such a thing as a separation allowance. At all events, though he told her grumpily that she had made a nice fool of herself, and would live to regret it, he said nothing worse, and Mrs. Joe put on her apron and went to work as

usual, while Sir Wilfrid Laurier, who had a poor opinion of lighthouses for winter residences, went to sleep in his pet nook behind the woodbox, a thankful dog that he was done with war-weddings.