

CHAPTER XIX

"THEY SHALL NOT PASS"

One cold grey morning in February Gertrude Oliver wakened with a shiver, slipped into Rilla's room, and crept in beside her.

"Rilla--I'm frightened--frightened as a baby--I've had another of my strange dreams. Something terrible is before us--I know."

"What was it?" asked Rilla.

"I was standing again on the veranda steps--just as I stood in that dream on the night before the lighthouse dance, and in the sky a huge black, menacing thunder cloud rolled up from the east. I could see its shadow racing before it and when it enveloped me I shivered with icy cold. Then the storm broke--and it was a dreadful storm--blinding flash after flash and deafening peal after peal, driving torrents of rain. I turned in panic and tried to run for shelter, and as I did so a man--a soldier in the uniform of a French army officer--dashed up the steps and stood beside me on the threshold of the door. His clothes were soaked with blood from a wound in his breast, he seemed spent and exhausted; but his white face was set and his eyes blazed in his hollow face. 'They shall not pass,' he said, in low, passionate tones which I heard distinctly amid all the turmoil of the storm. Then I awakened. Rilla, I'm frightened--the spring will not bring the Big Push we've all

been hoping for--instead it is going to bring some dreadful blow to France. I am sure of it. The Germans will try to smash through somewhere."

"But he told you that they would not pass," said Rilla, seriously. She never laughed at Gertrude's dreams as the doctor did.

"I do not know if that was prophecy or desperation, Rilla, the horror of that dream holds me yet in an icy grip. We shall need all our courage before long."

Dr. Blythe did laugh at the breakfast table--but he never laughed at Miss Oliver's dreams again; for that day brought news of the opening of the Verdun offensive, and thereafter through all the beautiful weeks of spring the Ingleside family, one and all, lived in a trance of dread. There were days when they waited in despair for the end as foot by foot the Germans crept nearer and nearer to the grim barrier of desperate France.

Susan's deeds were in her spotless kitchen at Ingleside, but her thoughts were on the hills around Verdun. "Mrs. Dr. dear," she would stick her head in at Mrs. Blythe's door the last thing at night to remark, "I do hope the French have hung onto the Crow's Wood today," and she woke at dawn to wonder if Dead Man's Hill--surely named by some prophet--was still held by the "poyloos." Susan could have drawn a map of the country around Verdun that would have satisfied a chief of staff.

"If the Germans capture Verdun the spirit of France will be broken," Miss Oliver said bitterly.

"But they will not capture it," staunchly said Susan, who could not eat her dinner that day for fear lest they do that very thing. "In the first place, you dreamed they would not--you dreamed the very thing the French are saying before they ever said it--'they shall not pass.' I declare to you, Miss Oliver, dear, when I read that in the paper, and remembered your dream, I went cold all over with awe. It seemed to me like Biblical times when people dreamed things like that quite frequently.

"I know--I know," said Gertrude, walking restlessly about. "I cling to a persistent faith in my dream, too--but every time bad news comes it fails me. Then I tell myself 'mere coincidence'--'subconscious memory' and so forth."

"I do not see how any memory could remember a thing before it was ever said at all," persisted Susan, "though of course I am not educated like you and the doctor. I would rather not be, if it makes anything as simple as that so hard to believe. But in any case we need not worry over Verdun, even if the Huns get it. Joffre says it has no military significance."

"That old sop of comfort has been served up too often already when

reverses came," retorted Gertrude. "It has lost its power to charm."

"Was there ever a battle like this in the world before?" said Mr. Meredith, one evening in mid-April.

"It's such a titanic thing we can't grasp it," said the doctor. "What were the scraps of a few Homeric handfuls compared to this? The whole Trojan war might be fought around a Verdun fort and a newspaper correspondent would give it no more than a sentence. I am not in the confidence of the occult powers"--the doctor threw Gertrude a twinkle--"but I have a hunch that the fate of the whole war hangs on the issue of Verdun. As Susan and Joffre say, it has no real military significance; but it has the tremendous significance of an Idea. If Germany wins there she will win the war. If she loses, the tide will set against her."

"Lose she will," said Mr. Meredith: emphatically. "The Idea cannot be conquered. France is certainly very wonderful. It seems to me that in her I see the white form of civilization making a determined stand against the black powers of barbarism. I think our whole world realizes this and that is why we all await the issue so breathlessly. It isn't merely the question of a few forts changing hands or a few miles of blood-soaked ground lost and won."

"I wonder," said Gertrude dreamily, "if some great blessing, great enough for the price, will be the meed of all our pain? Is the agony in

which the world is shuddering the birth-pang of some wondrous new era?
Or is it merely a futile

struggle of ants

In the gleam of a million million of suns?

We think very lightly, Mr. Meredith, of a calamity which destroys an ant-hill and half its inhabitants. Does the Power that runs the universe think us of more importance than we think ants?"

"You forget," said Mr. Meredith, with a flash of his dark eyes, "that an infinite Power must be infinitely little as well as infinitely great. We are neither, therefore there are things too little as well as too great for us to apprehend. To the infinitely little an ant is of as much importance as a mastodon. We are witnessing the birth-pangs of a new era--but it will be born a feeble, wailing life like everything else. I am not one of those who expect a new heaven and a new earth as the immediate result of this war. That is not the way God works. But work He does, Miss Oliver, and in the end His purpose will be fulfilled."

"Sound and orthodox--sound and orthodox," muttered Susan approvingly in the kitchen. Susan liked to see Miss Oliver sat upon by the minister now and then. Susan was very fond of her but she thought Miss Oliver liked saying heretical things to ministers far too well, and deserved an occasional reminder that these matters were quite beyond her

province.

In May Walter wrote home that he had been awarded a D.C. Medal. He did not say what for, but the other boys took care that the Glen should know the brave thing Walter had done. "In any war but this," wrote Jerry Meredith, "it would have meant a V.C. But they can't make V.C.'s as common as the brave things done every day here."

"He should have had the V.C.," said Susan, and was very indignant over it. She was not quite sure who was to blame for his not getting it, but if it were General Haig she began for the first time to entertain serious doubts as to his fitness for being Commander-in-Chief.

Rilla was beside herself with delight. It was her dear Walter who had done this thing--Walter, to whom someone had sent a white feather at Redmond--it was Walter who had dashed back from the safety of the trench to drag in a wounded comrade who had fallen on No-man's-land. Oh, she could see his white beautiful face and wonderful eyes as he did it! What a thing to be the sister of such a hero! And he hadn't thought it worth while writing about. His letter was full of other things--little intimate things that they two had known and loved together in the dear old cloudless days of a century ago.

"I've been thinking of the daffodils in the garden at Ingleside," he wrote. "By the time you get this they will be out, blowing there under that lovely rosy sky. Are they really as bright and golden as ever,

Rilla? It seems to me that they must be dyed red with blood--like our poppies here. And every whisper of spring will be falling as a violet in Rainbow Valley.

"There is a young moon tonight--a slender, silver, lovely thing hanging over these pits of torment. Will you see it tonight over the maple grove?

"I'm enclosing a little scrap of verse, Rilla. I wrote it one evening in my trench dug-out by the light of a bit of candle--or rather it came to me there--I didn't feel as if I were writing it--something seemed to use me as an instrument. I've had that feeling once or twice before, but very rarely and never so strongly as this time. That was why I sent it over to the London Spectator. It printed it and the copy came today. I hope you'll like it. It's the only poem I've written since I came overseas."

The poem was a short, poignant little thing. In a month it had carried Walter's name to every corner of the globe. Everywhere it was copied--in metropolitan dailies and little village weeklies--in profound reviews and "agony columns," in Red Cross appeals and Government recruiting propaganda. Mothers and sisters wept over it, young lads thrilled to it, the whole great heart of humanity caught it up as an epitome of all the pain and hope and pity and purpose of the mighty conflict, crystallized in three brief immortal verses. A Canadian lad in the Flanders trenches had written the one great poem of

the war. "The Piper," by Pte. Walter Blythe, was a classic from its first printing.

Rilla copied it in her diary at the beginning of an entry in which she poured out the story of the hard week that had just passed.

"It has been such a dreadful week," she wrote, "and even though it is over and we know that it was all a mistake that does not seem to do away with the bruises left by it. And yet it has in some ways been a very wonderful week and I have had some glimpses of things I never realized before--of how fine and brave people can be even in the midst of horrible suffering. I am sure I could never be as splendid as Miss Oliver was.

"Just a week ago today she had a letter from Mr. Grant's mother in Charlottetown. And it told her that a cable had just come saying that Major Robert Grant had been killed in action a few days before.

"Oh, poor Gertrude! At first she was crushed. Then after just a day she pulled herself together and went back to her school. She did not cry--I never saw her shed a tear--but oh, her face and her eyes!

"I must go on with my work,' she said. 'That is my duty just now.'

"I could never have risen to such a height.

"She never spoke bitterly except once, when Susan said something about spring being here at last, and Gertrude said,

"Can the spring really come this year?"

"Then she laughed--such a dreadful little laugh, just as one might laugh in the face of death, I think, and said,

"Observe my egotism. Because I, Gertrude Oliver, have lost a friend, it is incredible that the spring can come as usual. The spring does not fail because of the million agonies of others--but for mine--oh, can the universe go on?"

"Don't feel bitter with yourself, dear,' mother said gently. 'It is a very natural thing to feel as if things couldn't go on just the same when some great blow has changed the world for us. We all feel like that.'

"Then that horrid old Cousin Sophia of Susan's piped up. She was sitting there, knitting and croaking like an old 'raven of bode and woe' as Walter used to call her.

"You ain't as bad off as some, Miss Oliver,' she said, 'and you shouldn't take it so hard. There's some as has lost their husbands; that's a hard blow; and there's some as has lost their sons. You haven't lost either husband or son.'

"'No,' said Gertrude, more bitterly still. 'It's true I haven't lost a husband--I have only lost the man who would have been my husband. I have lost no son--only the sons and daughters who might have been born to me--who will never be born to me now.'

"'It isn't ladylike to talk like that,' said Cousin Sophia in a shocked tone; and then Gertrude laughed right out, so wildly that Cousin Sophia was really frightened. And when poor tortured Gertrude, unable to endure it any longer, hurried out of the room, Cousin Sophia asked mother if the blow hadn't affected Miss Oliver's mind.

"'I suffered the loss of two good kind partners,' she said, 'but it did not affect me like that.'

"'I should think it wouldn't! Those poor men must have been thankful to die.

"'I heard Gertrude walking up and down her room most of the night. She walked like that every night. But never so long as that night. And once I heard her give a dreadful sudden little cry as if she had been stabbed. I couldn't sleep for suffering with her; and I couldn't help her. I thought the night would never end. But it did; and then 'joy came in the morning' as the Bible says. Only it didn't come exactly in the morning but well along in the afternoon. The telephone rang and I answered it. It was old Mrs. Grant speaking from Charlottetown, and her

news was that it was all a mistake--Robert wasn't killed at all; he had only been slightly wounded in the arm and was safe in the hospital out of harm's way for a time anyhow. They hadn't learned yet how the mistake had happened but supposed there must have been another Robert Grant.

"I hung up the telephone and flew to Rainbow Valley. I'm sure I did fly--I can't remember my feet ever touching the ground. I met Gertrude on her way home from school in the glade of spruces where we used to play, and I just gasped out the news to her. I ought to have had more sense, of course. But I was so crazy with joy and excitement that I never stopped to think. Gertrude just dropped there among the golden young ferns as if she had been shot. The fright it gave me ought to make me sensible--in this respect at least--for the rest of my life. I thought I had killed her--I remembered that her mother had died very suddenly from heart failure when quite a young woman. It seemed years to me before I discovered that her heart was still beating. A pretty time I had! I never saw anybody faint before, and I knew there was nobody up at the house to help, because everybody else had gone to the station to meet Di and Nan coming home from Redmond. But I knew--theoretically--how people in a faint should be treated, and now I know it practically. Luckily the brook was handy, and after I had worked frantically over her for a while Gertrude came back to life. She never said one word about my news and I didn't dare to refer to it again. I helped her walk up through the maple grove and up to her room, and then she said, 'Rob--is--living,' as if the words were torn out of

her, and flung herself on her bed and cried and cried and cried. I never saw anyone cry so before. All the tears that she hadn't shed all that week came then. She cried most of last night, I think, but her face this morning looked as if she had seen a vision of some kind, and we were all so happy that we were almost afraid.

"Di and Nan are home for a couple of weeks. Then they go back to Red Cross work in the training camp at Kingsport. I envy them. Father says I'm doing just as good work here, with Jims and my Junior Reds. But it lacks the romance theirs must have.

"Kut has fallen. It was almost a relief when it did fall, we had been dreading it so long. It crushed us flat for a day and then we picked up and put it behind us. Cousin Sophia was as gloomy as usual and came over and groaned that the British were losing everywhere.

"'They're good losers,' said Susan grimly. 'When they lose a thing they keep on looking till they find it again! Anyhow, my king and country need me now to cut potato sets for the back garden, so get you a knife and help me, Sophia Crawford. It will divert your thoughts and keep you from worrying over a campaign that you are not called upon to run.'

"Susan is an old brick, and the way she flattens out poor Cousin Sophia is beautiful to behold.

"As for Verdun, the battle goes on and on, and we see-saw between hope

and fear. But I know that strange dream of Miss Oliver's foretold the victory of France. "They shall not pass."