

CHAPTER XXI

"LOVE AFFAIRS ARE HORRIBLE"

Ingleside

20th June 1916

"We have been so busy, and day after day has brought such exciting news, good and bad, that I haven't had time and composure to write in my diary for weeks. I like to keep it up regularly, for father says a diary of the years of the war should be a very interesting thing to hand down to one's children. The trouble is, I like to write a few personal things in this blessed old book that might not be exactly what I'd want my children to read. I feel that I shall be a far greater stickler for propriety in regard to them than I am for myself!

"The first week in June was another dreadful one. The Austrians seemed just on the point of overrunning Italy: and then came the first awful news of the Battle of Jutland, which the Germans claimed as a great victory. Susan was the only one who carried on. 'You need never tell me that the Kaiser has defeated the British Navy,' she said, with a contemptuous sniff. 'It is all a German lie and that you may tie to.' And when a couple of days later we found out that she was right and that it had been a British victory instead of a British defeat, we had to put up with a great many 'I told you so's,' but we endured them very comfortably.

"It took Kitchener's death to finish Susan. For the first time I saw her down and out. We all felt the shock of it but Susan plumbed the depths of despair. The news came at night by 'phone but Susan wouldn't believe it until she saw the Enterprise headline the next day. She did not cry or faint or go into hysterics; but she forgot to put salt in the soup, and that is something Susan never did in my recollection. Mother and Miss Oliver and I cried but Susan looked at us in stony sarcasm and said, 'The Kaiser and his six sons are all alive and thriving. So the world is not left wholly desolate. Why cry, Mrs. Dr. dear?' Susan continued in this stony, hopeless condition for twenty-four hours, and then Cousin Sophia appeared and began to condole with her.

"This is terrible news, ain't it, Susan? We might as well prepare for the worst for it is bound to come. You said once--and well do I remember the words, Susan Baker--that you had complete confidence in God and Kitchener. Ah well, Susan Baker, there is only God left now.'

"Whereat Cousin Sophia put her handkerchief to her eyes pathetically as if the world were indeed in terrible straits. As for Susan, Cousin Sophia was the salvation of her. She came to life with a jerk.

"Sophia Crawford, hold your peace!' she said sternly. 'You may be an idiot but you need not be an irreverent idiot. It is no more than decent to be weeping and wailing because the Almighty is the sole stay

of the Allies now. As for Kitchener, his death is a great loss and I do not dispute it. But the outcome of this war does not depend on one man's life and now that the Russians are coming on again you will soon see a change for the better.'

"Susan said this so energetically that she convinced herself and cheered up immediately. But Cousin Sophia shook her head.

"'Albert's wife wants to call the baby after Brusiloff,' she said, 'but I told her to wait and see what becomes of him first. Them Russians has such a habit of petering out.'

"The Russians are doing splendidly, however, and they have saved Italy. But even when the daily news of their sweeping advance comes we don't feel like running up the flag as we used to do. As Gertrude says, Verdun has slain all exultation. We would all feel more like rejoicing if the victories were on the western front. 'When will the British strike?' Gertrude sighed this morning. 'We have waited so long--so long.'

"Our greatest local event in recent weeks was the route march the county battalion made through the county before it left for overseas. They marched from Charlottetown to Lowbridge, then round the Harbour Head and through the Upper Glen and so down to the St. Mary station. Everybody turned out to see them, except old Aunt Fannie Clow, who is bedridden and Mr. Pryor, who hadn't been seen out even in church since

the night of the Union Prayer Meeting the previous week.

"It was wonderful and heartbreaking to see that battalion marching past. There were young men and middle-aged men in it. There was Laurie McAllister from over-harbour who is only sixteen but swore he was eighteen, so that he could enlist; and there was Angus Mackenzie, from the Upper Glen who is fifty-five if he is a day and swore he was forty-four. There were two South African veterans from Lowbridge, and the three eighteen-year-old Baxter triplets from Harbour Head. Everybody cheered as they went by, and they cheered Foster Booth, who is forty, walking side by side with his son Charley who is twenty. Charley's mother died when he was born, and when Charley enlisted Foster said he'd never yet let Charley go anywhere he daren't go himself, and he didn't mean to begin with the Flanders trenches. At the station Dog Monday nearly went out of his head. He tore about and sent messages to Jem by them all. Mr. Meredith read an address and Reta Crawford recited 'The Piper.' The soldiers cheered her like mad and cried 'We'll follow--we'll follow--we won't break faith,' and I felt so proud to think that it was my dear brother who had written such a wonderful, heart-stirring thing. And then I looked at the khaki ranks and wondered if those tall fellows in uniform could be the boys I've laughed with and played with and danced with and teased all my life. Something seems to have touched them and set them apart. They have heard the Piper's call.

"Fred Arnold was in the battalion and I felt dreadfully about him, for

I realized that it was because of me that he was going away with such a sorrowful expression. I couldn't help it but I felt as badly as if I could.

"The last evening of his leave Fred came up to Ingleside and told me he loved me and asked me if I would promise to marry him some day, if he ever came back. He was desperately in earnest and I felt more wretched than I ever did in my life. I couldn't promise him that--why, even if there was no question of Ken, I don't care for Fred that way and never could--but it seemed so cruel and heartless to send him away to the front without any hope of comfort. I cried like a baby; and yet--oh, I am afraid that there must be something incurably frivolous about me, because, right in the middle of it all, with me crying and Fred looking so wild and tragic, the thought popped into my head that it would be an unendurable thing to see that nose across from me at the breakfast table every morning of my life. There, that is one of the entries I wouldn't want my descendants to read in this journal. But it is the humiliating truth; and perhaps it's just as well that thought did come or I might have been tricked by pity and remorse into giving him some rash assurance. If Fred's nose were as handsome as his eyes and mouth some such thing might have happened. And then what an unthinkable predicament I should have been in!

"When poor Fred became convinced that I couldn't promise him, he behaved beautifully--though that rather made things worse. If he had been nasty about it I wouldn't have felt so heartbroken and

remorseful--though why I should feel remorseful I don't know, for I never encouraged Fred to think I cared a bit about him. Yet feel remorseful I did--and do. If Fred Arnold never comes back from overseas, this will haunt me all my life.

"Then Fred said if he couldn't take my love with him to the trenches at least he wanted to feel that he had my friendship, and would I kiss him just once in good-bye before he went--perhaps for ever?

"I don't know how I could ever had imagined that love affairs were delightful, interesting things. They are horrible. I couldn't even give poor heartbroken Fred one little kiss, because of my promise to Ken. It seemed so brutal. I had to tell Fred that of course he would have my friendship, but that I couldn't kiss him because I had promised somebody else I wouldn't.

"He said, 'It is--is it--Ken Ford?'

"I nodded. It seemed dreadful to have to tell it--it was such a sacred little secret just between me and Ken.

"When Fred went away I came up here to my room and cried so long and so bitterly that mother came up and insisted on knowing what was the matter. I told her. She listened to my tale with an expression that clearly said, 'Can it be possible that anyone has been wanting to marry this baby?' But she was so nice and understanding and sympathetic, oh,

just so race-of-Josephy--that I felt indescribably comforted. Mothers are the dearest things.

"But oh, mother,' I sobbed, 'he wanted me to kiss him good-bye--and I couldn't--and that hurt me worse than all the rest.'

"Well, why didn't you kiss him?' asked mother coolly. 'Considering the circumstances, I think you might have.'

"But I couldn't, mother--I promised Ken when he went away that I wouldn't kiss anybody else until he came back.'

"This was another high explosive for poor mother. She exclaimed, with the queerest little catch in her voice, 'Rilla, are you engaged to Kenneth Ford?'

"I--don't--know,' I sobbed.

"You--don't--know?' repeated mother.

"Then I had to tell her the whole story, too; and every time I tell it it seems sillier and sillier to imagine that Ken meant anything serious. I felt idiotic and ashamed by the time I got through.

"Mother sat a little while in silence. Then she came over, sat down beside me, and took me in her arms.

"Don't cry, dear little Rilla-my-Rilla. You have nothing to reproach yourself with in regard to Fred; and if Leslie West's son asked you to keep your lips for him, I think you may consider yourself engaged to him. But--oh, my baby--my last little baby--I have lost you--the war has made a woman of you too soon.'

"I shall never be too much of a woman to find comfort in mother's hugs. Nevertheless, when I saw Fred marching by two days later in the parade, my heart ached unbearably.

"But I'm glad mother thinks I'm really engaged to Ken!"