

CHAPTER XXIII

"AND SO, GOODNIGHT"

The fierce flame of agony had burned itself out and the grey dust of its ashes was over all the world. Rilla's younger life recovered physically sooner than her mother. For weeks Mrs. Blythe lay ill from grief and shock. Rilla found it was possible to go on with existence, since existence had still to be reckoned with. There was work to be done, for Susan could not do all. For her mother's sake she had to put on calmness and endurance as a garment in the day; but night after night she lay in her bed, weeping the bitter rebellious tears of youth until at last tears were all wept out and the little patient ache that was to be in her heart until she died took their place.

She clung to Miss Oliver, who knew what to say and what not to say. So few people did. Kind, well-meaning callers and comforters gave Rilla some terrible moments.

"You'll get over it in time," Mrs. William Reese said, cheerfully. Mrs. Reese had three stalwart sons, not one of whom had gone to the front.

"It's such a blessing it was Walter who was taken and not Jem," said Miss Sarah Clow. "Walter was a member of the church, and Jem wasn't. I've told Mr. Meredith many a time that he should have spoken seriously to Jem about it before he went away."

"Pore, pore Walter," sighed Mrs. Reese.

"Do not you come here calling him poor Walter," said Susan indignantly, appearing in the kitchen door, much to the relief of Rilla, who felt that she could endure no more just then. "He was not poor. He was richer than any of you. It is you who stay at home and will not let your sons go who are poor--poor and naked and mean and small--pisen poor, and so are your sons, with all their prosperous farms and fat cattle and their souls no bigger than a flea's--if as big."

"I came here to comfort the afflicted and not to be insulted," said Mrs. Reese, taking her departure, unregretted by anyone. Then the fire went out of Susan and she retreated to her kitchen, laid her faithful old head on the table and wept bitterly for a time. Then she went to work and ironed Jims's little rompers. Rilla scolded her gently for it when she herself came in to do it.

"I am not going to have you kill yourself working for any war-baby," Susan said obstinately.

"Oh, I wish I could just keep on working all the time, Susan," cried poor Rilla. "And I wish I didn't have to go to sleep. It is hideous to go to sleep and forget it for a little while, and wake up and have it all rush over me anew the next morning. Do people ever get used to things like this, Susan? And oh, Susan, I can't get away from what Mrs.

Reese said. Did Walter suffer much--he was always so sensitive to pain. Oh, Susan, if I knew that he didn't I think I could gather up a little courage and strength."

This merciful knowledge was given to Rilla. A letter came from Walter's commanding officer, telling them that he had been killed instantly by a bullet during a charge at Courcelette. The same day there was a letter for Rilla from Walter himself.

Rilla carried it unopened to Rainbow Valley and read it there, in the spot where she had had her last talk with him. It is a strange thing to read a letter after the writer is dead--a bitter-sweet thing, in which pain and comfort are strangely mingled. For the first time since the blow had fallen Rilla felt--a different thing from tremulous hope and faith--that Walter, of the glorious gift and the splendid ideals, still lived, with just the same gift and just the same ideals. That could not be destroyed--these could suffer no eclipse. The personality that had expressed itself in that last letter, written on the eve of Courcelette, could not be snuffed out by a German bullet. It must carry on, though the earthly link with things of earth were broken.

"We're going over the top tomorrow, Rilla-my-Rilla," wrote Walter. "I wrote mother and Di yesterday, but somehow I feel as if I must write you tonight. I hadn't intended to do any writing tonight--but I've got to. Do you remember old Mrs. Tom Crawford over-harbour, who was always saying that it was 'laid on her' to do such and such a thing? Well,

that is just how I feel. It's 'laid on me' to write you tonight--you, sister and chum of mine. There are some things I want to say before--well, before tomorrow.

"You and Ingleside seem strangely near me tonight. It's the first time I've felt this since I came. Always home has seemed so far away--so hopelessly far away from this hideous welter of filth and blood. But tonight it is quite close to me--it seems to me I can almost see you--hear you speak. And I can see the moonlight shining white and still on the old hills of home. It has seemed to me ever since I came here that it was impossible that there could be calm gentle nights and unshattered moonlight anywhere in the world. But tonight somehow, all the beautiful things I have always loved seem to have become possible again--and this is good, and makes me feel a deep, certain, exquisite happiness. It must be autumn at home now--the harbour is a-dream and the old Glen hills blue with haze, and Rainbow Valley a haunt of delight with wild asters blowing all over it--our old "farewell-summers." I always liked that name better than 'aster'--it was a poem in itself.

"Rilla, you know I've always had premonitions. You remember the Pied Piper--but no, of course you wouldn't--you were too young. One evening long ago when Nan and Di and Jem and the Merediths and I were together in Rainbow Valley I had a queer vision or presentiment--whatever you like to call it. Rilla, I saw the Piper coming down the Valley with a shadowy host behind him. The others thought I was only pretending--but

I saw him for just one moment. And Rilla, last night I saw him again. I was doing sentry-go and I saw him marching across No-man's-land from our trenches to the German trenches--the same tall shadowy form, piping weirdly--and behind him followed boys in khaki. Rilla, I tell you I saw him--it was no fancy--no illusion. I heard his music, and then--he was gone. But I had seen him--and I knew what it meant--I knew that I was among those who followed him.

"Rilla, the Piper will pipe me 'west' tomorrow. I feel sure of this. And Rilla, I'm not afraid. When you hear the news, remember that. I've won my own freedom here--freedom from all fear. I shall never be afraid of anything again--not of death--nor of life, if after all, I am to go on living. And life, I think, would be the harder of the two to face--for it could never be beautiful for me again. There would always be such horrible things to remember--things that would make life ugly and painful always for me. I could never forget them. But whether it's life or death, I'm not afraid, Rilla-my-Rilla, and I am not sorry that I came. I'm satisfied. I'll never write the poems I once dreamed of writing--but I've helped to make Canada safe for the poets of the future--for the workers of the future--ay, and the dreamers, too--for if no man dreams, there will be nothing for the workers to fulfil--the future, not of Canada only but of the world--when the 'red rain' of Langemarck and Verdun shall have brought forth a golden harvest--not in a year or two, as some foolishly think, but a generation later, when the seed sown now shall have had time to germinate and grow. Yes, I'm glad I came, Rilla. It isn't only the fate of the little sea-born

island I love that is in the balance--nor of Canada nor of England. It's the fate of mankind. That is what we're fighting for. And we shall win--never for a moment doubt that, Rilla. For it isn't only the living who are fighting--the dead are fighting too. Such an army cannot be defeated.

"Is there laughter in your face yet, Rilla? I hope so. The world will need laughter and courage more than ever in the years that will come next. I don't want to preach--this isn't any time for it. But I just want to say something that may help you over the worst when you hear that I've gone 'west.' I've a premonition about you, Rilla, as well as about myself. I think Ken will go back to you--and that there are long years of happiness for you by-and-by. And you will tell your children of the Idea we fought and died for--teach them it must be lived for as well as died for, else the price paid for it will have been given for nought. This will be part of your work, Rilla. And if you--all you girls back in the homeland--do it, then we who don't come back will know that you have not 'broken faith' with us.

"I meant to write to Una tonight, too, but I won't have time now. Read this letter to her and tell her it's really meant for you both--you two dear, fine loyal girls. Tomorrow, when we go over the top--I'll think of you both--of your laughter, Rilla-my-Rilla, and the steadfastness in Una's blue eyes--somehow I see those eyes very plainly tonight, too. Yes, you'll both keep faith--I'm sure of that--you and Una. And so--goodnight. We go over the top at dawn."

Rilla read her letter over many times. There was a new light on her pale young face when she finally stood up, amid the asters Walter had loved, with the sunshine of autumn around her. For the moment at least, she was lifted above pain and loneliness.

"I will keep faith, Walter," she said steadily. "I will work--and teach--and learn--and laugh, yes, I will even laugh--through all my years, because of you and because of what you gave when you followed the call."

Rilla meant to keep Walter's letter as a a sacred treasure. But, seeing the look on Una Meredith's face when Una had read it and held it back to her, she thought of something. Could she do it? Oh, no, she could not give up Walter's letter--his last letter. Surely it was not selfishness to keep it. A copy would be such a soulless thing. But Una--Una had so little--and her eyes were the eyes of a woman stricken to the heart, who yet must not cry out or ask for sympathy.

"Una, would you like to have this letter--to keep?" she asked slowly.

"Yes--if you can give it to me," Una said dully.

"Then--you may have it," said Rilla hurriedly.

"Thank you," said Una. It was all she said, but there was something in

her voice which repaid Rilla for her bit of sacrifice.

Una took the letter and when Rilla had gone she pressed it against her lonely lips. Una knew that love would never come into her life now--it was buried for ever under the blood-stained soil "Somewhere in France." No one but herself--and perhaps Rilla--knew it--would ever know it. She had no right in the eyes of her world to grieve. She must hide and bear her long pain as best she could--alone. But she, too, would keep faith.