

CHAPTER XXIV

MARY IS JUST IN TIME

The autumn of 1916 was a bitter season for Ingleside. Mrs. Blythe's return to health was slow, and sorrow and loneliness were in all hearts. Every one tried to hide it from the others and "carry on" cheerfully. Rilla laughed a good deal. Nobody at Ingleside was deceived by her laughter; it came from her lips only, never from her heart. But outsiders said some people got over trouble very easily, and Irene Howard remarked that she was surprised to find how shallow Rilla Blythe really was. "Why, after all her pose of being so devoted to Walter, she doesn't seem to mind his death at all. Nobody has ever seen her shed a tear or heard her mention his name. She has evidently quite forgotten him. Poor fellow--you'd really think his family would feel it more. I spoke of him to Rilla at the last Junior Red meeting--of how fine and brave and splendid he was--and I said life could never be just the same to me again, now that Walter had gone--we were such friends, you know--why I was the very first person he told about having enlisted--and Rilla answered, as coolly and indifferently as if she were speaking of an entire stranger, 'He was just one of many fine and splendid boys who have given everything for their country.' Well, I wish I could take things as calmly--but I'm not made like that. I'm so sensitive--things hurt me terribly--I really never get over them. I asked Rilla right out why she didn't put on mourning for Walter. She said her mother didn't wish it. But every one is talking about it."

"Rilla doesn't wear colours--nothing but white," protested Betty Mead.

"White becomes her better than anything else," said Irene significantly. "And we all know black doesn't suit her complexion at all. But of course I'm not saying that is the reason she doesn't wear it. Only, it's funny. If my brother had died I'd have gone into deep mourning. I wouldn't have had the heart for anything else. I confess I'm disappointed in Rilla Blythe."

"I am not, then," cried Betty Meade, loyally, "I think Rilla is just a wonderful girl. A few years ago I admit I did think she was rather too vain and gigglesome; but now she is nothing of the sort. I don't think there is a girl in the Glen who is so unselfish and plucky as Rilla, or who has done her bit as thoroughly and patiently. Our Junior Red Cross would have gone on the rocks a dozen times if it hadn't been for her tact and perseverance and enthusiasm--you know that perfectly well, Irene."

"Why, I am not running Rilla down," said Irene, opening her eyes widely. "It was only her lack of feeling I was criticizing. I suppose she can't help it. Of course, she's a born manager--everyone knows that. She's very fond of managing, too--and people like that are very necessary I admit. So don't look at me as if I'd said something perfectly dreadful, Betty, please. I'm quite willing to agree that Rilla Blythe is the embodiment of all the virtues, if that will please

you. And no doubt it is a virtue to be quite unmoved by things that would crush most people."

Some of Irene's remarks were reported to Rilla; but they did not hurt her as they would once have done. They didn't matter, that was all. Life was too big to leave room for pettiness. She had a pact to keep and a work to do; and through the long hard days and weeks of that disastrous autumn she was faithful to her task. The war news was consistently bad, for Germany marched from victory to victory over poor Rumania. "Foreigners--foreigners," Susan muttered dubiously. "Russians or Rumanians or whatever they may be, they are foreigners and you cannot tie to them. But after Verdun I shall not give up hope. And can you tell me, Mrs. Dr. dear, if the Dobruja is a river or a mountain range, or a condition of the atmosphere?"

The Presidential election in the United States came off in November, and Susan was red-hot over that--and quite apologetic for her excitement.

"I never thought I would live to see the day when I would be interested in a Yankee election, Mrs. Dr. dear. It only goes to show we can never know what we will come to in this world, and therefore we should not be proud."

Susan stayed up late on the evening of the eleventh, ostensibly to finish a pair of socks. But she 'phoned down to Carter Flagg's store at

intervals, and when the first report came through that Hughes had been elected she stalked solemnly upstairs to Mrs. Blythe's room and announced it in a thrilling whisper from the foot of the bed.

"I thought if you were not asleep you would be interested in knowing it. I believe it is for the best. Perhaps he will just fall to writing notes, too, Mrs. Dr. dear, but I hope for better things. I never was very partial to whiskers, but one cannot have everything."

When news came in the morning that after all Wilson was re-elected, Susan tacked to catch another breeze of optimism.

"Well, better a fool you know than a fool you do not know, as the old proverb has it," she remarked cheerfully. "Not that I hold Woodrow to be a fool by any means, though by times you would not think he has the sense he was born with. But he is a good letter writer at least, and we do not know if the Hughes man is even that. All things being considered I commend the Yankees. They have shown good sense and I do not mind admitting it. Cousin Sophia wanted them to elect Roosevelt, and is much disgruntled because they would not give him a chance. I had a hankering for him myself, but we must believe that Providence over-rules these matters and be satisfied--though what the Almighty means in this affair of Rumania I cannot fathom--saying it with all reverence."

Susan fathomed it--or thought she did--when the Asquith ministry went down and Lloyd George became Premier.

"Mrs. Dr. dear, Lloyd George is at the helm at last. I have been praying for this for many a day. Now we shall soon see a blessed change. It took the Rumanian disaster to bring it about, no less, and that is the meaning of it, though I could not see it before. There will be no more shilly-shallying. I consider that the war is as good as won, and that I shall tie to, whether Bucharest falls or not."

Bucharest did fall--and Germany proposed peace negotiations. Whereat Susan scornfully turned a deaf ear and absolutely refused to listen to such proposals. When President Wilson sent his famous December peace note Susan waxed violently sarcastic.

"Woodrow Wilson is going to make peace, I understand. First Henry Ford had a try at it and now comes Wilson. But peace is not made with ink, Woodrow, and that you may tie to," said Susan, apostrophizing the unlucky President out of the kitchen window nearest the United States. "Lloyd George's speech will tell the Kaiser what is what, and you may keep your peace screeds at home and save postage."

"What a pity President Wilson can't hear you, Susan," said Rilla slyly.

"Indeed, Rilla dear, it is a pity that he has no one near him to give him good advice, as it is clear he has not, in all those Democrats and Republicans," retorted Susan. "I do not know the difference between them, for the politics of the Yankees is a puzzle I cannot solve, study

it as I may. But as far as seeing through a grindstone goes, I am afraid--" Susan shook her head dubiously, "that they are all tarred with the same brush."

"I am thankful Christmas is over," Rilla wrote in her diary during the last week of a stormy December. "We had dreaded it so--the first Christmas since Courcelette. But we had all the Merediths down for dinner and nobody tried to be gay or cheerful. We were all just quiet and friendly, and that helped. Then, too, I was so thankful that Jims had got better--so thankful that I almost felt glad--almost but not quite. I wonder if I shall ever feel really glad over anything again. It seems as if gladness were killed in me--shot down by the same bullet that pierced Walter's heart. Perhaps some day a new kind of gladness will be born in my soul--but the old kind will never live again.

"Winter set in awfully early this year. Ten days before Christmas we had a big snowstorm--at least we thought it big at the time. As it happened, it was only a prelude to the real performance. It was fine the next day, and Ingleside and Rainbow Valley were wonderful, with the trees all covered with snow, and big drifts everywhere, carved into the most fantastic shapes by the chisel of the northeast wind. Father and mother went up to Avonlea. Father thought the change would do mother good, and they wanted to see poor Aunt Diana, whose son Jock had been seriously wounded a short time before. They left Susan and me to keep house, and father expected to be back the next day. But he never got back for a week. That night it began to storm again, and it stormed

unbrokenly for four days. It was the worst and longest storm that Prince Edward Island has known for years. Everything was disorganized--the roads were completely choked up, the trains blockaded, and the telephone wires put entirely out of commission.

"And then Jims took ill.

"He had a little cold when father and mother went away, and he kept getting worse for a couple of days, but it didn't occur to me that there was danger of anything serious. I never even took his temperature, and I can't forgive myself, because it was sheer carelessness. The truth is I had slumped just then. Mother was away, so I let myself go. All at once I was tired of keeping up and pretending to be brave and cheerful, and I just gave up for a few days and spent most of the time lying on my face on my bed, crying. I neglected Jims--that is the hateful truth--I was cowardly and false to what I promised Walter--and if Jims had died I could never have forgiven myself.

"Then, the third night after father and mother went away, Jims suddenly got worse--oh, so much worse--all at once. Susan and I were all alone. Gertrude had been at Lowbridge when the storm began and had never got back. At first we were not much alarmed. Jims has had several bouts of croup and Susan and Morgan and I have always brought him through without much trouble. But it wasn't very long before we were dreadfully alarmed.

"I never saw croup like this before,' said Susan.

"As for me, I knew, when it was too late, what kind of croup it was. I knew it was not the ordinary croup--'false croup' as doctors call it--but the 'true croup'--and I knew that it was a deadly and dangerous thing. And father was away and there was no doctor nearer than Lowbridge--and we could not 'phone and neither horse nor man could get through the drifts that night.

"Gallant little Jims put up a good fight for his life,--Susan and I tried every remedy we could think of or find in father's books, but he continued to grow worse. It was heart-rending to see and hear him. He gasped so horribly for breath--the poor little soul--and his face turned a dreadful bluish colour and had such an agonized expression, and he kept struggling with his little hands, as if he were appealing to us to help him somehow. I found myself thinking that the boys who had been gassed at the front must have looked like that, and the thought haunted me amid all my dread and misery over Jims. And all the time the fatal membrane in his wee throat grew and thickened and he couldn't get it up.

"Oh, I was just wild! I never realized how dear Jims was to me until that moment. And I felt so utterly helpless."

"And then Susan gave up. 'We cannot save him! Oh, if your father was

here--look at him, the poor little fellow! I know not what to do.'

"I looked at Jims and I thought he was dying. Susan was holding him up in his crib to give him a better chance for breath, but it didn't seem as if he could breathe at all. My little war-baby, with his dear ways and sweet roguish face, was choking to death before my very eyes, and I couldn't help him. I threw down the hot poultice I had ready in despair. Of what use was it? Jims was dying, and it was my fault--I hadn't been careful enough!

"Just then--at eleven o'clock at night--the door bell rang. Such a ring--it pealed all over the house above the roar of the storm. Susan couldn't go--she dared not lay Jims down--so I rushed downstairs. In the hall I paused just a minute--I was suddenly overcome by an absurd dread. I thought of a weird story Gertrude had told me once. An aunt of hers was alone in a house one night with her sick husband. She heard a knock at the door. And when she went and opened it there was nothing there--nothing that could be seen, at least. But when she opened the door a deadly cold wind blew in and seemed to sweep past her right up the stairs, although it was a calm, warm summer night outside. Immediately she heard a cry. She ran upstairs--and her husband was dead. And she always believed, so Gertrude said, that when she opened that door she let Death in.

"It was so ridiculous of me to feel so frightened. But I was distracted and worn out, and I simply felt for a moment that I dared not open the

door--that death was waiting outside. Then I remembered that I had no time to waste--must not be so foolish--I sprang forward and opened the door.

"Certainly a cold wind did blow in and filled the hall with a whirl of snow. But there on the threshold stood a form of flesh and blood--Mary Vance, coated from head to foot with snow--and she brought Life, not Death, with her, though I didn't know that then. I just stared at her.

"'I haven't been turned out,' grinned Mary, as she stepped in and shut the door. 'I came up to Carter Flagg's two days ago and I've been stormed-stayed there ever since. But old Abbie Flagg got on my nerves at last, and tonight I just made up my mind to come up here. I thought I could wade this far, but I can tell you it was as much as a bargain. Once I thought I was stuck for keeps. Ain't it an awful night?'

"I came to myself and knew I must hurry upstairs. I explained as quickly as I could to Mary, and left her trying to brush the snow off. Upstairs I found that Jims was over that paroxysm, but almost as soon as I got back to the room he was in the grip of another. I couldn't do anything but moan and cry--oh, how ashamed I am when I think of it; and yet what could I do--we had tried everything we knew--and then all at once I heard Mary Vance saying loudly behind me, 'Why, that child is dying!'

"I whirled around. Didn't I know he was dying--my little Jims! I could

have thrown Mary Vance out of the door or the window--anywhere--at that moment. There she stood, cool and composed, looking down at my baby, with those, weird white eyes of hers, as she might look at a choking kitten. I had always disliked Mary Vance--and just then I hated her.

"We have tried everything," said poor Susan dully. "It is not ordinary croup."

"No, it's the diphtery croup," said Mary briskly, snatching up an apron. "And there's mighty little time to lose--but I know what to do. When I lived over-harbour with Mrs. Wiley, years ago, Will Crawford's kid died of diphtery croup, in spite of two doctors. And when old Aunt Christina MacAllister heard of it--she was the one brought me round when I nearly died of pneumonia you know--she was a wonder--no doctor was a patch on her--they don't hatch her breed of cats nowadays, let me tell you--she said she could have saved him with her grandmother's remedy if she'd been there. She told Mrs. Wiley what it was and I've never forgot it. I've the greatest memory ever--a thing just lies in the back of my head till the time comes to use it. Got any sulphur in the house, Susan?"

"Yes, we had sulphur. Susan went down with Mary to get it, and I held Jims. I hadn't any hope--not the least. Mary Vance might brag as she liked--she was always bragging--but I didn't believe any grandmother's remedy could save Jims now. Presently Mary came back. She had tied a piece of thick flannel over her mouth and nose, and she carried Susan's

old tin chip pan, half full of burning coals.

"'You watch me,' she said boastfully. 'I've never done this, but it's kill or cure that child is dying anyway.'

"She sprinkled a spoonful of sulphur over the coals; and then she picked up Jims, turned him over, and held him face downward, right over those choking, blinding fumes. I don't know why I didn't spring forward and snatch him away. Susan says it was because it was fore-ordained that I shouldn't, and I think she is right, because it did really seem that I was powerless to move. Susan herself seemed transfixed, watching Mary from the doorway. Jims writhed in those big, firm, capable hands of Mary--oh yes, she is capable all right--and choked and wheezed--and choked and wheezed--and I felt that he was being tortured to death--and then all at once, after what seemed to me an hour, though it really wasn't long, he coughed up the membrane that was killing him. Mary turned him over and laid him back on his bed. He was white as marble and the tears were pouring out of his brown eyes--but that awful livid look was gone from his face and he could breathe quite easily.

"'Wasn't that some trick?' said Mary gaily. 'I hadn't any idea how it would work, but I just took a chance. I'll smoke his throat out again once or twice before morning, just to kill all the germs, but you'll see he'll be all right now.'

"Jims went right to sleep--real sleep, not coma, as I feared at first.

Mary 'smoked him,' as she called it, twice through the night, and at daylight his throat was perfectly clear and his temperature was almost normal. When I made sure of that I turned and looked at Mary Vance. She was sitting on the lounge laying down the law to Susan on some subject about which Susan must have known forty times as much as she did. But I didn't mind how much law she laid down or how much she bragged. She had

a right to brag--she had dared to do what I would never have dared, and had saved Jims from a horrible death. It didn't matter any more that she had once chased me through the Glen with a codfish; it didn't matter that she had smeared goose-grease all over my dream of romance the night of the lighthouse dance; it didn't matter that she thought she knew more than anybody else and always rubbed it in--I would never dislike Mary Vance again. I went over to her and kissed her.

"'What's up now?' she said.

"'Nothing--only I'm so grateful to you, Mary.'

"'Well, I think you ought to be, that's a fact. You two would have let that baby die on your hands if I hadn't happened along,' said Mary, just beaming with complacency. She got Susan and me a tip-top breakfast and made us eat it, and 'bossed the life out of us,' as Susan says, for two days, until the roads were opened so that she could get home. Jims was almost well by that time, and father turned up. He heard our tale without saying much. Father is rather scornful generally about what he

calls 'old wives' remedies.' He laughed a little and said, 'After this, Mary Vance will expect me to call her in for consultation in all my serious cases.'

"So Christmas was not so hard as I expected it to be; and now the New Year is coming--and we are still hoping for the 'Big Push' that will end the war--and Little Dog Monday is getting stiff and rheumatic from his cold vigils, but still he 'carries on,' and Shirley continues to read the exploits of the aces. Oh, nineteen-seventeen, what will you bring?"