

CHAPTER XXVII

WAITING

Ingleside,

1st November 1917

"It is November--and the Glen is all grey and brown, except where the Lombardy poplars stand up here and there like great golden torches in the sombre landscape, although every other tree has shed its leaves. It has been very hard to keep our courage alight of late. The Caporetto disaster is a dreadful thing and not even Susan can extract much consolation out of the present state of affairs. The rest of us don't try. Gertrude keeps saying desperately, 'They must not get Venice--they must not get Venice,' as if by saying it often enough she can prevent them. But what is to prevent them from getting Venice I cannot see. Yet, as Susan fails not to point out, there was seemingly nothing to prevent them from getting to Paris in 1914, yet they did not get it, and she affirms they shall not get Venice either. Oh, how I hope and pray they will not--Venice the beautiful Queen of the Adriatic. Although I've never seen it I feel about it just as Byron did--I've always loved it--it has always been to me 'a fairy city of the heart.' Perhaps I caught my love of it from Walter, who worshipped it. It was always one of his dreams to see Venice. I remember we planned once--down in Rainbow Valley one evening just before the war broke out--that some time we would go together to see it and float in a

gondola through its moonlit streets.

"Every fall since the war began there has been some terrible blow to our troops--Antwerp in 1914, Serbia in 1915; last fall, Rumania, and now Italy, the worst of all. I think I would give up in despair if it were not for what Walter said in his dear last letter--that 'the dead as well as the living were fighting on our side and such an army cannot be defeated.' No it cannot. We will win in the end. I will not doubt it for one moment. To let myself doubt would be to 'break faith.'

"We have all been campaigning furiously of late for the new Victory Loan. We Junior Reds canvassed diligently and landed several tough old customers who had at first flatly refused to invest. I--even I--tackled Whiskers-on-the-moon. I expected a bad time and a refusal. But to my amazement he was quite agreeable and promised on the spot to take a thousand dollar bond. He may be a pacifist, but he knows a good investment when it is handed out to him. Five and a half per cent is finve and a half per cent, even when a militaristic government pays it.

"Father, to tease Susan, says it was her speech at the Victory Loan Campaign meeting that converted Mr. Pryor. I don't think that at all likely, since Mr. Pryor has been publicly very bitter against Susan ever since her quite unmistakable rejection of his lover-like advances. But Susan did make a speech--and the best one made at the meeting, too. It was the first time she ever did such a thing and she vows it will be the last. Everybody in the Glen was at the meeting, and quite a number

of speeches were made, but somehow things were a little flat and no especial enthusiasm could be worked up. Susan was quite dismayed at the lack of zeal, because she had been burningly anxious that the Island should go over the top in regard to its quota. She kept whispering viciously to Gertrude and me that there was 'no ginger' in the speeches; and when nobody went forward to subscribe to the loan at the close Susan 'lost her head.' At least, that is how she describes it herself. She bounded to her feet, her face grim and set under her bonnet--Susan is the only woman in Glen St. Mary who still wears a bonnet--and said sarcastically and loudly, 'No doubt it is much cheaper to talk patriotism than it is to pay for it. And we are asking charity, of course--we are asking you to lend us your money for nothing! No doubt the Kaiser will feel quite downcast when he hears of this meeting!'"

"Susan has an unshaken belief that the Kaiser's spies--presumably represented by Mr. Pryor--promptly inform him of every happening in our Glen.

"Norman Douglas shouted out 'Hear! Hear!' and some boy at the back said, 'What about Lloyd George?' in a tone Susan didn't like. Lloyd George is her pet hero, now that Kitchener is gone.

"'I stand behind Lloyd George every time,' retorted Susan.

"'I suppose that will hearten him up greatly,' said Warren Mead, with

one of his disagreeable 'haw-haws.'

"Warren's remark was spark to powder. Susan just 'sailed in' as she puts it, and 'said her say.' She said it remarkably well, too. There was no lack of 'ginger' in her speech, anyhow. When Susan is warmed up she has no mean powers of oratory, and the way she trimmed those men down was funny and wonderful and effective all at once. She said it was the likes of her, millions of her, that did stand behind Lloyd George, and did hearten him up. That was the key-note of her speech. Dear old Susan! She is a perfect dynamo of patriotism and loyalty and contempt for slackers of all kinds, and when she let it loose on that audience in her one grand outburst she electrified it. Susan always vows she is no suffragette, but she gave womanhood its due that night, and she literally made those men cringe. When she finished with them they were ready to eat out of her hand. She wound up by ordering them--yes, ordering them--to march up to the platform forthwith and subscribe for Victory Bonds. And after wild applause most of them did it, even Warren Mead. When the total amount subscribed came out in the Charlottetown dailies the next day we found that the Glen led every district on the Island--and certainly Susan has the credit for it. She, herself, after she came home that night was quite ashamed and evidently feared that she had been guilty of unbecoming conduct: she confessed to mother that she had been 'rather unladylike.'

"We were all--except Susan--out for a trial ride in father's new automobile tonight. A very good one we had, too, though we did get

ingloriously ditched at the end, owing to a certain grim old dame--to wit, Miss Elizabeth Carr of the Upper Glen--who wouldn't rein her horse out to let us pass, honk as we might. Father was quite furious; but in my heart I believe I sympathized with Miss Elizabeth. If I had been a spinster lady, driving along behind my own old nag, in maiden meditation fancy free, I wouldn't have lifted a rein when an obstreperous car hooted blatantly behind me. I should just have sat up as dourly as she did and said 'Take the ditch if you are determined to pass.'

"We did take the ditch--and got up to our axles in sand--and sat foolishly there while Miss Elizabeth clucked up her horse and rattled victoriously away.

"Jem will have a laugh when I write him this. He knows Miss Elizabeth of old.

"But--will--Venice--be--saved?"

19th November 1917

"It is not saved yet--it is still in great danger. But the Italians are making a stand at last on the Piave line. To be sure military critics say they cannot possibly hold it and must retreat to the Adige. But Susan and Gertrude and I say they must hold it, because

Venice must be saved, so what are the military critics to do?

"Oh, if I could only believe that they can hold it!

"Our Canadian troops have won another great victory--they have stormed the Passchendaele Ridge and held it in the face of all counter attacks. None of our boys were in the battle--but oh, the casualty list of other people's boys! Joe Milgrave was in it but came through safe. Miranda had some bad days until she got word from him. But it is wonderful how Miranda has bloomed out since her marriage. She isn't the same girl at all. Even her eyes seem to have darkened and deepened--though I suppose that is just because they glow with the greater intensity that has come to her. She makes her father stand round in a perfectly amazing fashion; she runs up the flag whenever a yard of trench on the western front is taken; and she comes up regularly to our Junior Red Cross; and she does--yes, she does--put on funny little 'married woman' airs that are quite killing. But she is the only war-bride in the Glen and surely nobody need grudge her the satisfaction she gets out of it.

"The Russian news is bad, too--Kerensky's government has fallen and Lenin is dictator of Russia. Somehow, it is very hard to keep up courage in the dull hopelessness of these grey autumn days of suspense and boding news. But we are beginning to 'get in a low,' as old Highland Sandy says, over the approaching election. Conscription is the real issue at stake and it will be the most exciting election we ever had. All the women 'who have got de age'--to quote Jo Poirier, and who

have husbands, sons, and brothers at the front, can vote. Oh, if I were only twenty-one! Gertrude and Susan are both furious because they can't vote.

"It is not fair,' Gertrude says passionately. 'There is Agnes Carr who can vote because her husband went. She did everything she could to prevent him from going, and now she is going to vote against the Union Government. Yet I have no vote, because my man at the front is only my sweetheart and not my husband!'"

"As for Susan, when she reflects that she cannot vote, while a rank old pacifist like Mr. Pryor can--and will--her comments are sulphurous.

"I really feel sorry for the Elliotts and Crawfords and MacAllisters over-harbour. They have always lined up in clearly divided camps of Liberal and Conservative, and now they are torn from their moorings--I know I'm mixing my metaphors dreadfully--and set hopelessly adrift. It will kill some of those old Grits to vote for Sir Robert Borden's side--and yet they have to because they believe the time has come when we must have conscription. And some poor Conservatives who are against conscription must vote for Laurier, who always has been anathema to them. Some of them are taking it terribly hard. Others seem to be in much the same attitude as Mrs. Marshall Elliott has come to be regarding Church Union.

"She was up here last night. She doesn't come as often as she used to.

She is growing too old to walk this far--dear old 'Miss Cornelia.' I hate to think of her growing old--we have always loved her so and she has always been so good to us Ingleside young fry.

"She used to be so bitterly opposed to Church Union. But last night, when father told her it was practically decided, she said in a resigned tone, 'Well, in a world where everything is being rent and torn what matters one more rending and tearing? Anyhow, compared with Germans even Methodists seem attractive to me.'

"Our Junior R.C. goes on quite smoothly, in spite of the fact that Irene has come back to it--having fallen out with the Lowbridge society, I understand. She gave me a sweet little jab last meeting--about knowing me across the square in Charlottetown 'by my green velvet hat.' Everybody knows me by that detestable and detested hat. This will be my fourth season for it. Even mother wanted me to get a new one this fall; but I said, 'No.' As long as the war lasts so long do I wear that velvet hat in winter."

23rd November 1917

"The Piave line still holds--and General Byng has won a splendid victory at Cambrai. I did run up the flag for that--but Susan only said 'I shall set a kettle of water on the kitchen range tonight. I notice little Kitchener always has an attack of croup after any

British victory. I do hope he has no pro-German blood in his veins.

Nobody knows much about his father's people.'

"Jims has had a few attacks of croup this fall--just the ordinary croup--not that terrible thing he had last year. But whatever blood runs in his little veins it is good, healthy blood. He is rosy and plump and curly and cute; and he says such funny things and asks such comical questions. He likes very much to sit in a special chair in the kitchen; but that is Susan's favourite chair, too, and when she wants it, out Jims must go. The last time she put him out of it he turned around and asked solemnly, 'When you are dead, Susan, can I sit in that chair?' Susan thought it quite dreadful, and I think that was when she began to feel anxiety about his possible ancestry. The other night I took Jims with me for a walk down to the store. It was the first time he had ever been out so late at night, and when he saw the stars he exclaimed, 'Oh, Willa, see the big moon and all the little moons!' And last Wednesday morning, when he woke up, my little alarm clock had stopped because I had forgotten to wind it up. Jims bounded out of his crib and ran across to me, his face quite aghast above his little blue flannel pyjamas. 'The clock is dead,' he gasped, 'oh Willa, the clock is dead.'

"One night he was quite angry with both Susan and me because we would not give him something he wanted very much. When he said his prayers he plumped down wrathfully, and when he came to the petition 'Make me a good boy' he tacked on emphatically, 'and please make Willa and Susan

good, 'cause they're not.'

"I don't go about quoting Jims's speeches to all I meet. That always bores me when other people do it! I just enshrine them in this old hotch-potch of a journal!

"This very evening as I put Jims to bed he looked up and asked me gravely, 'Why can't yesterday come back, Willa?'

"Oh, why can't it, Jims? That beautiful 'yesterday' of dreams and laughter--when our boys were home--when Walter and I read and rambled and watched new moons and sunsets together in Rainbow Valley. If it could just come back! But yesterdays never come back, little Jims--and the todays are dark with clouds--and we dare not think about the tomorrows."

11th December 1917

"Wonderful news came today. The British troops captured Jerusalem yesterday. We ran up the flag and some of Gertrude's old sparkle came back to her for a moment.

"'After all,' she said, 'it is worth while to live in the days which see the object of the Crusades attained. The ghosts of all the Crusaders must have crowded the walls of Jerusalem last night, with

Coeur-de-lion at their head.'

"Susan had cause for satisfaction also.

"I am so thankful I can pronounce Jerusalem and Hebron,' she said.

'They give me a real comfortable feeling after Przemysl and Brest-Litovsk! Well, we have got the Turks on the run, at least, and Venice is safe and Lord Lansdowne is not to be taken seriously; and I see no reason why we should be downhearted.'

"Jerusalem! The 'meteor flag of England!' floats over you--the Crescent is gone. How Walter would have thrilled over that!"

18th December 1917

"Yesterday the election came off. In the evening mother and Susan and Gertrude and I forgathered in the living-room and waited in breathless suspense, father having gone down to the village. We had no way of hearing the news, for Carter Flagg's store is not on our line, and when we tried to get it Central always answered that the line 'was busy'--as no doubt it was, for everybody for miles around was trying to get Carter's store for the same reason we were.

"About ten o'clock Gertrude went to the 'phone and happened to catch someone from over-harbour talking to Carter Flagg. Gertrude shamelessly

listened in and got for her comforting what eavesdroppers are proverbially supposed to get--to wit, unpleasant hearing; the Union Government had 'done nothing' in the West.

"We looked at each other in dismay. If the Government had failed to carry the West, it was defeated.

"Canada is disgraced in the eyes of the world,' said Gertrude bitterly.

"If everybody was like the Mark Crawfords over-harbour this would not have happened,' groaned Susan. 'They locked their Uncle up in the barn this morning and would not let him out until he promised to vote Union. That is what I call effective argument, Mrs. Dr. dear.'

"Gertrude and I couldn't rest after all that. We walked the floor until our legs gave out and we had to sit down perforce. Mother knitted away as steadily as clockwork and pretended to be calm and serene--pretended so well that we were all deceived and envious until the next day, when I caught her ravelling out four inches of her sock. She had knit that far past where the heel should have begun!

"It was twelve before father came home. He stood in the doorway and looked at us and we looked at him. We did not dare ask him what the news was. Then he said that it was Laurier who had 'done nothing' in the West, and that the Union Government was in with a big majority. Gertrude clapped her hands. I wanted to laugh and cry, mother's eyes

flashed with their old-time starriness and Susan emitted a queer sound between a gasp and a whoop.

"This will not comfort the Kaiser much,' she said.

"Then we went to bed, but were too excited to sleep. Really, as Susan said solemnly this morning, 'Mrs. Dr. dear, I think politics are too strenuous for women.'"

31st December 1917

"Our fourth War Christmas is over. We are trying to gather up some courage wherewith to face another year of it. Germany has, for the most part, been victorious all summer. And now they say she has all her troops from the Russian front ready for a 'big push' in the spring. Sometimes it seems to me that we just cannot live through the winter waiting for that.

"I had a great batch of letters from overseas this week. Shirley is at the front now, too, and writes about it all as coolly and matter-of-factly as he used to write of football at Queen's. Carl wrote that it had been raining for weeks and that nights in the trenches always made him think of the night of long ago when he did penance in the graveyard for running away from Henry Warren's ghost. Carl's letters are always full of jokes and bits of fun. They had a great

rat-hunt the night before he wrote--spearing rats with their bayonets--and he got the best bag and won the prize. He has a tame rat that knows him and sleeps in his pocket at night. Rats don't worry Carl as they do some people--he was always chummy with all little beasts. He says he is making a study of the habits of the trench rat and means to write a treatise on it some day that will make him famous.

"Ken wrote a short letter. His letters are all rather short now--and he doesn't often slip in those dear little sudden sentences I love so much. Sometimes I think he has forgotten all about the night he was here to say goodbye--and then there will be just a line or a word that makes me think he remembers and always will remember. For instance to-day's letter hadn't a thing in it that mightn't have been written to any girl, except that he signed himself 'Your Kenneth,' instead of 'Yours, Kenneth,' as he usually does. Now, did he leave that 's' off intentionally or was it only carelessness? I shall lie awake half the night wondering. He is a captain now. I am glad and proud--and yet Captain Ford sounds so horribly far away and high up. Ken and Captain Ford seem like two different persons. I may be practically engaged to Ken--mother's opinion on that point is my stay and bulwark--but I can't be to Captain Ford!

"And Jem is a lieutenant now--won his promotion on the field. He sent me a snap-shot, taken in his new uniform. He looked thin and old--old--my boy-brother Jem. I can't forget mother's face when I showed it to her. 'That--my little Jem--the baby of the old House of

Dreams?' was all she said.

"There was a letter from Faith, too. She is doing V.A.D. work in England and writes hopefully and brightly. I think she is almost happy--she saw Jem on his last leave and she is so near him she could go to him, if he were wounded. That means so much to her. Oh, if I were only with her! But my work is here at home. I know Walter wouldn't have wanted me to leave mother and in everything I try to 'keep faith' with him, even to the little details of daily life. Walter died for Canada--I must live for her. That is what he asked me to do."

28th January 1918

"I shall anchor my storm-tossed soul to the British fleet and make a batch of bran biscuits,' said Susan today to Cousin Sophia, who had come in with some weird tale of a new and all-conquering submarine, just launched by Germany. But Susan is a somewhat disgruntled woman at present, owing to the regulations regarding cookery. Her loyalty to the Union Government is being sorely tried. It surmounted the first strain gallantly. When the order about flour came Susan said, quite cheerfully, 'I am an old dog to be learning new tricks, but I shall learn to make war bread if it will help defeat the Huns.'

"But the later suggestions went against Susan's grain. Had it not been

for father's decree I think she would have snapped her fingers at Sir Robert Borden.

"Talk about trying to make bricks without straw, Mrs. Dr. dear! How am I to make a cake without butter or sugar? It cannot be done--not cake that is cake. Of course one can make a slab, Mrs. Dr. dear. And we cannot even camouflage it with a little icing! To think that I should have lived to see the day when a government at Ottawa should step into my kitchen and put me on rations!"

"Susan would give the last drop of her blood for her 'king and country,' but to surrender her beloved recipes is a very different and much more serious matter.

"I had letters from Nan and Di too--or rather notes. They are too busy to write letters, for exams are looming up. They will graduate in Arts this spring. I am evidently to be the dunce of the family. But somehow I never had any hankering for a college course, and even now it doesn't appeal to me. I'm afraid I'm rather devoid of ambition. There is only one thing I really want to be--and I don't know if I'll be it or not. If not--I don't want to be anything. But I shan't write it down. It is all right to think it; but, as Cousin Sophia would say, it might be brazen to write it down.

"I will write it down. I won't be cowed by the conventions and Cousin Sophia! I want to be Kenneth Ford's wife! There now!"

"I've just looked in the glass, and I hadn't the sign of a blush on my face. I suppose I'm not a properly constructed damsel at all.

"I was down to see little Dog Monday today. He has grown quite stiff and rheumatic but there he sat, waiting for the train. He thumped his tail and looked pleadingly into my eyes. 'When will Jem come?' he seemed to say. Oh, Dog Monday, there is no answer to that question; and there is, as yet, no answer to the other which we are all constantly asking 'What will happen when Germany strikes again on the western front--her one great, last blow for victory!'"

1st March 1918

"'What will spring bring?' Gertrude said today. 'I dread it as I never dreaded spring before. Do you suppose there will ever again come a time when life will be free from fear? For almost four years we have lain down with fear and risen up with it. It has been the unbidden guest at every meal, the unwelcome companion at every gathering.'

"'Hindenburg says he will be in Paris on 1st April,' sighed Cousin Sophia.

"'Hindenburg!' There is no power in pen and ink to express the contempt

which Susan infused into that name. 'Has he forgotten what day the first of April is?'

"Hindenburg has kept his word hitherto,' said Gertrude, as gloomily as Cousin Sophia herself could have said it.

"Yes, fighting against the Russians and Rumanians,' retorted Susan. 'Wait you till he comes up against the British and French, not to speak of the Yankees, who are getting there as fast as they can and will no doubt give a good account of themselves.'

"You said just the same thing before Mons, Susan,' I reminded her.

"Hindenburg says he will spend a million lives to break the Allied front,' said Gertrude. 'At such a price he must purchase some successes and how can we live through them, even if he is baffled in the end. These past two months when we have been crouching and waiting for the blow to fall have seemed as long as all the preceding months of the war put together. I work all day feverishly and waken at three o'clock at night to wonder if the iron legions have struck at last. It is then I see Hindenburg in Paris and Germany triumphant. I never see her so at any other time than that accursed hour.'

"Susan looked dubious over Gertrude's adjective, but evidently concluded that the 'a' saved the situation.

"I wish it were possible to take some magic draught and go to sleep for the next three months--and then waken to find Armageddon over,' said mother, almost impatiently.

"It is not often that mother slumps into a wish like that--or at least the verbal expression of it. Mother has changed a great deal since that terrible day in September when we knew that Walter would not come back; but she has always been brave and patient. Now it seemed as if even she had reached the limit of her endurance.

"Susan went over to mother and touched her shoulder.

"Do not you be frightened or downhearted, Mrs. Dr. dear,' she said gently. 'I felt somewhat that way myself last night, and I rose from my bed and lighted my lamp and opened my Bible; and what do you think was the first verse my eyes lighted upon? It was 'And they shall fight against thee but they shall not prevail against thee, for I am with thee, saith the Lord of Hosts, to deliver thee.' I am not gifted in the way of dreaming, as Miss Oliver is, but I knew then and there, Mrs. Dr. dear, that it was a manifest leading, and that Hindenburg will never see Paris. So I read no further but went back to my bed and I did not waken at three o'clock or at any other hour before morning.'

"I say that verse Susan read over and over again to myself. The Lord of Hosts is with us--and the spirits of all just men made perfect--and even the legions and guns that Germany is massing on the western front

must break against such a barrier. This is in certain uplifted moments; but when other moments come I feel, like Gertrude, that I cannot endure any longer this awful and ominous hush before the coming storm."

23rd March 1918

"Armageddon has begun!--'the last great fight of all!' Is it, I wonder? Yesterday I went down to the post office for the mail. It was a dull, bitter day. The snow was gone but the grey, lifeless ground was frozen hard and a biting wind was blowing. The whole Glen landscape was ugly and hopeless.

"Then I got the paper with its big black headlines. Germany struck on the twenty-first. She makes big claims of guns and prisoners taken. General Haig reports that 'severe fighting continues.' I don't like the sound of that last expression.

"We all find we cannot do any work that requires concentration of thought. So we all knit furiously, because we can do that mechanically. At least the dreadful waiting is over--the horrible wondering where and when the blow will fall. It has fallen--but they shall not prevail against us!

"Oh, what is happening on the western front tonight as I write this, sitting here in my room with my journal before me? Jims is asleep in

his crib and the wind is wailing around the window; over my desk hangs Walter's picture, looking at me with his beautiful deep eyes; the Mona Lisa he gave me the last Christmas he was home hangs on one side of it, and on the other a framed copy of "The Piper." It seems to me that I can hear Walter's voice repeating it--that little poem into which he put his soul, and which will therefore live for ever, carrying Walter's name on through the future of our land. Everything about me is calm and peaceful and 'homey.' Walter seems very near me--if I could just sweep aside the thin wavering little veil that hangs between, I could see him--just as he saw the Pied Piper the night before Courcelette.

"Over there in France tonight--does the line hold?"