

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### BLACK SUNDAY

In March of the year of grace 1918 there was one week into which must have crowded more of searing human agony than any seven days had ever held before in the history of the world. And in that week there was one day when all humanity seemed nailed to the cross; on that day the whole planet must have been aggroan with universal convulsion; everywhere the hearts of men were failing them for fear.

It dawned calmly and coldly and greyly at Ingleside. Mrs. Blythe and Rilla and Miss Oliver made ready for church in a suspense tempered by hope and confidence. The doctor was away, having been summoned during the wee sma's to the Marwood household in Upper Glen, where a little war-bride was fighting gallantly on her own battleground to give life, not death, to the world. Susan announced that she meant to stay home that morning--a rare decision for Susan.

"But I would rather not go to church this morning, Mrs. Dr. dear," she explained. "If Whiskers-on-the-moon were there and I saw him looking holy and pleased, as he always looks when he thinks the Huns are winning, I fear I would lose my patience and my sense of decorum and hurl a Bible or hymn-book at him, thereby disgracing myself and the sacred edifice. No, Mrs. Dr. dear, I shall stay home from church till the tide turns and pray hard here."

"I think I might as well stay home, too, for all the good church will do me today," Miss Oliver said to Rilla, as they walked down the hard-frozen red road to the church. "I can think of nothing but the question, 'Does the line still hold?'"

"Next Sunday will be Easter," said Rilla. "Will it herald death or life to our cause?"

Mr. Meredith preached that morning from the text, "He that endureth to the end shall be saved," and hope and confidence rang through his inspiring sentences. Rilla, looking up at the memorial tablet on the wall above their pew, "sacred to the memory of Walter Cuthbert Blythe," felt herself lifted out of her dread and filled anew with courage.

Walter could not have laid down his life for naught. His had been the gift of prophetic vision and he had foreseen victory. She would cling to that belief--the line would hold.

In this renewed mood she walked home from church almost gaily. The others, too, were hopeful, and all went smiling into Ingleside. There was no one in the living-room, save Jims, who had fallen asleep on the sofa, and Doc, who sat "hushed in grim repose" on the hearth-rug, looking very Hydeish indeed. No one was in the dining-room either--and, stranger still, no dinner was on the table, which was not even set.

Where was Susan?

"Can she have taken ill?" exclaimed Mrs. Blythe anxiously. "I thought it strange that she did not want to go to church this morning."

The kitchen door opened and Susan appeared on the threshold with such a ghastly face that Mrs. Blythe cried out in sudden panic.

"Susan, what is it?"

"The British line is broken and the German shells are falling on Paris," said Susan dully.

The three women stared at each other, stricken.

"It's not true--it's not," gasped Rilla.

"The thing would be--ridiculous," said Gertrude Oliver--and then she laughed horribly.

"Susan, who told you this--when did the news come?" asked Mrs. Blythe.

"I got it over the long-distance phone from Charlottetown half an hour ago," said Susan. "The news came to town late last night. It was Dr. Holland phoned it out and he said it was only too true. Since then I have done nothing, Mrs. Dr. dear. I am very sorry dinner is not ready. It is the first time I have been so remiss. If you will be patient I will soon have something for you to eat. But I am afraid I let the

potatoes burn."

"Dinner! Nobody wants any dinner, Susan," said Mrs. Blythe wildly. "Oh, this thing is unbelievable--it must be a nightmare."

"Paris is lost--France is lost--the war is lost," gasped Rilla, amid the utter ruins of hope and confidence and belief.

"Oh God--Oh God," moaned Gertrude Oliver, walking about the room and wringing her hands, "Oh--God!"

Nothing else--no other words--nothing but that age old plea--the old, old cry of supreme agony and appeal, from the human heart whose every human staff has failed it.

"Is God dead?" asked a startled little voice from the doorway of the living-room. Jims stood there, flushed from sleep, his big brown eyes filled with dread, "Oh Willa--oh, Willa, is God dead?"

Miss Oliver stopped walking and exclaiming, and stared at Jims, in whose eyes tears of fright were beginning to gather. Rilla ran to his comforting, while Susan bounded up from the chair upon which she had dropped.

"No," she said briskly, with a sudden return of her real self. "No, God isn't dead--nor Lloyd George either. We were forgetting that, Mrs. Dr.

dear. Don't cry, little Kitchener. Bad as things are, they might be worse. The British line may be broken but the British navy is not. Let us tie to that. I will take a brace and get up a bite to eat, for strength we must have."

They made a pretence of eating Susan's "bite," but it was only a pretence. Nobody at Ingleside ever forgot that black afternoon. Gertrude Oliver walked the floor--they all walked the floor; except Susan, who got out her grey war sock.

"Mrs. Dr. dear, I must knit on Sunday at last. I have never dreamed of doing it before for, say what might be said, I have considered it was a violation of the third commandment. But whether it is or whether it is not I must knit today or I shall go mad."

"Knit if you can, Susan," said Mrs. Blythe restlessly. "I would knit if I could--but I cannot--I cannot."

"If we could only get fuller information," moaned Rilla. "There might be something to encourage us--if we knew all."

"We know that the Germans are shelling Paris," said Miss Oliver bitterly. "In that case they must have smashed through everywhere and be at the very gates. No, we have lost--let us face the fact as other peoples in the past have had to face it. Other nations, with right on their side, have given their best and bravest--and gone down to defeat

in spite of it. Ours is 'but one more To baffled millions who have gone before."

"I won't give up like that," cried Rilla, her pale face suddenly flushing. "I won't despair. We are not conquered--no, if Germany overruns all France we are not conquered. I am ashamed of myself for this hour of despair. You won't see me slump again like that, I'm going to ring up town at once and ask for particulars."

But town could not be got. The long-distance operator there was submerged by similar calls from every part of the distracted country. Rilla finally gave up and slipped away to Rainbow Valley. There she knelt down on the withered grey grasses in the little nook where she and Walter had had their last talk together, with her head bowed against the mossy trunk of a fallen tree. The sun had broken through the black clouds and drenched the valley with a pale golden splendour. The bells on the Tree Lovers twinkled elfinly and fitfully in the gusty March wind.

"Oh God, give me strength," Rilla whispered. "Just strength--and courage." Then like a child she clasped her hands together and said, as simply as Jims could have done, "Please send us better news tomorrow."

She knelt there a long time, and when she went back to Ingleside she was calm and resolute. The doctor had arrived home, tired but triumphant, little Douglas Haig Marwood having made a safe landing on

the shores of time. Gertrude was still pacing restlessly but Mrs. Blythe and Susan had reacted from the shock, and Susan was already planning a new line of defence for the channel ports.

"As long as we can hold them," she declared, "the situation is saved. Paris has really no military significance."

"Don't," said Gertrude sharply, as if Susan had run something into her. She thought the old worn phrase 'no military significance' nothing short of ghastly mockery under the circumstances, and more terrible to endure than the voice of despair would have been.

"I heard up at Marwood's of the line being broken," said the doctor, "but this story of the Germans shelling Paris seems to be rather incredible. Even if they broke through they were fifty miles from Paris at the nearest point and how could they get their artillery close enough to shell it in so short a time? Depend upon it, girls, that part of the message can't be true. I'm going to try to try a long-distance call to town myself."

The doctor was no more successful than Rilla had been, but his point of view cheered them all a little, and helped them through the evening. And at nine o'clock a long-distance message came through at last, that helped them through the night.

"The line broke only in one place, before St. Quentin," said the

doctor, as he hung up the receiver, "and the British troops are retreating in good order. That's not so bad. As for the shells that are falling on Paris, they are coming from a distance of seventy miles--from some amazing long-range gun the Germans have invented and sprung with the opening offensive. That is all the news to date, and Dr. Holland says it is reliable."

"It would have been dreadful news yesterday," said Gertrude, "but compared to what we heard this morning it is almost like good news. But still," she added, trying to smile, "I am afraid I will not sleep much tonight."

"There is one thing to be thankful for at any rate, Miss Oliver, dear," said Susan, "and that is that Cousin Sophia did not come in today. I really could not have endured her on top of all the rest."