

CHAPTER XXXII

WORD FROM JEM

4th August 1918

"It is four years tonight since the dance at the lighthouse--four years of war. It seems like three times four. I was fifteen then. I am nineteen now. I expected that these past four years would be the most delightful years of my life and they have been years of war--years of fear and grief and worry--but I humbly hope, of a little growth in strength and character as well.

"Today I was going through the hall and I heard mother saying something to father about me. I didn't mean to listen--I couldn't help hearing her as I went along the hall and upstairs--so perhaps that is why I heard what listeners are said never to hear--something good of myself. And because it was mother who said it I'm going to write it here in my journal, for my comforting when days of discouragement come upon me, in which I feel that I am vain and selfish and weak and that there is no good thing in me.

"Rilla has developed in a wonderful fashion these past four years. She used to be such an irresponsible young creature. She has changed into a capable, womanly girl and she is such a comfort to me. Nan and Di have grown a little away from me--they have been so little at home--but

Rilla has grown closer and closer to me. We are chums. I don't see how I could have got through these terrible years without her, Gilbert.'

"There, that is just what mother said--and I feel glad--and sorry--and proud--and humble! It's beautiful to have my mother think that about me--but I don't deserve it quite. I'm not as good and strong as all that. There are heaps of times when I have felt cross and impatient and woeful and despairing. It is mother and Susan who have been this family's backbone. But I have helped a little, I believe, and I am so glad and thankful.

"The war news has been good right along. The French and Americans are pushing the Germans back and back and back. Sometimes I am afraid it is too good to last--after nearly four years of disasters one has a feeling that this constant success is unbelievable. We don't rejoice noisily over it. Susan keeps the flag up but we go softly. The price paid has been too high for jubilation. We are just thankful that it has not been paid in vain.

"No word has come from Jem. We hope--because we dare not do anything else. But there are hours when we all feel--though we never say so--that such hoping is foolishness. These hours come more and more frequently as the weeks go by. And we may never know. That is the most terrible thought of all. I wonder how Faith is bearing it. To judge from her letters she has never for a moment given up hope, but she must have had her dark hours of doubt like the rest of us."

20th August 1918

"The Canadians have been in action again and Mr. Meredith had a cable today saying that Carl had been slightly wounded and is in the hospital. It did not say where the wound was, which is unusual, and we all feel worried. There is news of a fresh victory every day now."

30th August 1918

"The Merediths had a letter from Carl today. His wound was "only a slight one"--but it was in his right eye and the sight is gone for ever!

"One eye is enough to watch bugs with,' Carl writes cheerfully. And we know it might have been oh so much worse! If it had been both eyes! But I cried all the afternoon after I saw Carl's letter. Those beautiful, fearless blue eyes of his!

"There is one comfort--he will not have to go back to the front. He is coming home as soon as he is out of the hospital--the first of our boys to return. When will the others come?

"And there is one who will never come. At least we will not see him if he does. But, oh, I think he will be there--when our Canadian soldiers return there will be a shadow army with them--the army of the fallen. We will not see them--but they will be there!"

1st September 1918

"Mother and I went into Charlottetown yesterday to see the moving picture, "Hearts of the World." I made an awful goose of myself--father will never stop teasing me about it for the rest of my life. But it all seemed so horribly real--and I was so intensely interested that I forgot everything but the scenes I saw enacted before my eyes. And then, quite near the last came a terribly exciting one. The heroine was struggling with a horrible German soldier who was trying to drag her away. I knew she had a knife--I had seen her hide it, to have it in readiness--and I couldn't understand why she didn't produce it and finish the brute. I thought she must have forgotten it, and just at the tensest moment of the scene I lost my head altogether. I just stood right up on my feet in that crowded house and shrieked at the top of my voice--"The knife is in your stocking--the knife is in your stocking!"

"I created a sensation!

"The funny part was, that just as I said it, the girl did snatch out

the knife and stab the soldier with it!

"Everybody in the house laughed. I came to my senses and fell back in my seat, overcome with mortification. Mother was shaking with laughter. I could have shaken her. Why hadn't she pulled me down and choked me before I had made such an idiot of myself. She protests that there wasn't time.

"Fortunately the house was dark, and I don't believe there was anybody there who knew me. And I thought I was becoming sensible and self-controlled and womanly! It is plain I have some distance to go yet before I attain that devoutly desired consummation."

20th September 1918

"In the east Bulgaria has asked for peace, and in the west the British have smashed the Hindenburg line; and right here in Glen St. Mary little Bruce Meredith has done something that I think wonderful--wonderful because of the love behind it. Mrs. Meredith was here tonight and told us about it--and mother and I cried, and Susan got up and clattered the things about the stove.

"Bruce always loved Jem very devotedly, and the child has never forgotten him in all these years. He has been as faithful in his way as Dog Monday was in his. We have always told him that Jem would come

back. But it seems that he was in Carter Flagg's store last night and he heard his Uncle Norman flatly declaring that Jem Blythe would never come back and that the Ingleside folk might as well give up hoping he would. Bruce went home and cried himself to sleep. This morning his mother saw him going out of the yard, with a very sorrowful and determined look, carrying his pet kitten. She didn't think much more about it until later on he came in, with the most tragic little face, and told her, his little body shaking with sobs, that he had drowned Stripey.

"Why did you do that?' Mrs. Meredith exclaimed.

"To bring Jem back,' sobbed Bruce. 'I thought if I sacrificed Stripey God would send Jem back. So I drowned him--and, oh mother, it was awful hard--but surely God will send Jem back now, 'cause Stripey was the dearest thing I had. I just told God I would give Him Stripey if He would send Jem back. And He will, won't He, mother?'

"Mrs. Meredith didn't know what to say to the poor child. She just could not tell him that perhaps his sacrifice wouldn't bring Jem back--that God didn't work that way. She told him that he mustn't expect it right away--that perhaps it would be quite a long time yet before Jem came back.

"But Bruce said, 'It oughtn't to take longer'n a week, mother. Oh, mother, Stripey was such a nice little cat. He purred so pretty. Don't

you think God ought to like him enough to let us have Jem?"

"Mr. Meredith is worried about the effect on Bruce's faith in God, and Mrs. Meredith is worried about the effect on Bruce himself if his hope isn't fulfilled. And I feel as if I must cry every time I think of it.

It was so splendid--and sad--and beautiful. The dear devoted little fellow! He worshipped that kitten. And if it all goes for nothing--as so many sacrifices seem to go for nothing--he will be brokenhearted, for he isn't old enough to understand that God doesn't answer our prayers just as we hope--and doesn't make bargains with us when we yield something we love up to Him."

24th September 1918

"I have been kneeling at my window in the moonshine for a long time, just thanking God over and over again. The joy of last night and today has been so great that it seemed half pain--as if our hearts weren't big enough to hold it.

"Last night I was sitting here in my room at eleven o'clock writing a letter to Shirley. Every one else was in bed, except father, who was out. I heard the telephone ring and I ran out to the hall to answer it, before it should waken mother. It was long-distance calling, and when I answered it said 'This is the telegraph Company's office in Charlottetown. There is an overseas cable for Dr. Blythe.'

"I thought of Shirley--my heart stood still--and then I heard him saying, 'It's from Holland.'

"The message was,

'Just arrived. Escaped from Germany. Quite well. Writing.

James Blythe.'

"I didn't faint or fall or scream. I didn't feel glad or surprised. I didn't feel anything. I felt numb, just as I did when I heard Walter had enlisted. I hung up the receiver and turned round. Mother was standing in her doorway. She wore her old rose kimono, and her hair was hanging down her back in a long thick braid, and her eyes were shining. She looked just like a young girl.

"'There is word from Jem?' she said.

"How did she know? I hadn't said a word at the phone except 'Yes--yes--yes.' She says she doesn't know how she knew, but she did know. She was awake and she heard the ring and she knew that there was word from Jem.

"'He's alive--he's well--he's in Holland,' I said.

"Mother came out into the hall and said, 'I must get your father on the

'phone and tell him. He is in the Upper Glen.'

"She was very calm and quiet--not a bit like I would have expected her to be. But then I wasn't either. I went and woke up Gertrude and Susan and told them. Susan said 'Thank God,' firstly, and secondly she said 'Did I not tell you Dog Monday knew?' and thirdly, 'I'll go down and make a cup of tea'--and she stalked down in her nightdress to make it. She did make it--and made mother and Gertrude drink it--but I went back to my room and shut my door and locked it, and I knelt by my window and cried--just as Gertrude did when her great news came.

"I think I know at last exactly what I shall feel like on the resurrection morning."

4th October 1918

"Today Jem's letter came. It has been in the house only six hours and it is almost read to pieces. The post-mistress told everybody in the Glen it had come, and everybody came up to hear the news.

"Jem was badly wounded in the thigh--and he was picked up and taken to prison, so delirious with fever that he didn't know what was happening to him or where he was. It was weeks before he came to his senses and was able to write. Then he did write--but it never came. He wasn't treated at all badly at his camp--only the food was poor. He had

nothing to eat but a little black bread and boiled turnips and now and then a little soup with black peas in it. And we sat down every one of those days to three good square luxurious meals! He wrote us as often as he could but he was afraid we were not getting his letters because no reply came. As soon as he was strong enough he tried to escape, but was caught and brought back; a month later he and a comrade made another attempt and succeeded in reaching Holland.

"Jem can't come home right away. He isn't quite so well as his cable said, for his wound has not healed properly and he has to go into a hospital in England for further treatment. But he says he will be all right eventually, and we know he is safe and will be back home sometime, and oh, the difference it makes in everything!

"I had a letter from Jim Anderson today, too. He has married an English girl, got his discharge, and is coming right home to Canada with his bride. I don't know whether to be glad or sorry. It will depend on what kind of a woman she is. I had a second letter also of a somewhat mysterious tenor. It is from a Charlottetown lawyer, asking me to go in to see him at my earliest convenience in regard to a certain matter connected with the estate of the 'late Mrs. Matilda Pitman.'

"I read a notice of Mrs. Pitman's death--from heart failure--in the Enterprise a few weeks ago. I wonder if this summons has anything to do with Jims."

5th October 1918

"I went into town this morning and had an interview with Mrs. Pitman's lawyer--a little thin, wispy man, who spoke of his late client with such a profound respect that it is evident that he as was much under her thumb as Robert and Amelia were. He drew up a new will for her a short time before her death. She was worth thirty thousand dollars, the bulk of which was left to Amelia Chapley. But she left five thousand to me in trust for Jims. The interest is to be used as I see fit for his education, and the principal is to be paid over to him on his twentieth birthday. Certainly Jims was born lucky. I saved him from slow extinction at the hands of Mrs. Conover--Mary Vance saved him from death by diptheritic croup--his star saved him when he fell off the train. And he tumbled not only into a clump of bracken, but right into this nice little legacy.

"Evidently, as Mrs. Matilda Pitman said, and as I have always believed, he is no common child and he has no common destiny in store for him.

"At all events he is provided for, and in such a fashion that Jim Anderson can't squander his inheritance if he wanted to. Now, if the new English stepmother is only a good sort I shall feel quite easy about the future of my war-baby.

"I wonder what Robert and Amelia think of it. I fancy they will nail

down their windows when they leave home after this!"