

CHAPTER XXXV

"RILLA-MY-RILLA!"

Carl Meredith and Miller Douglas came home just before Christmas and Glen St. Mary met them at the station with a brass band borrowed from Lowbridge and speeches of home manufacture. Miller was brisk and beaming in spite of his wooden leg; he had developed into a broad-shouldered, imposing looking fellow and the D. C. Medal he wore reconciled Miss Cornelia to the shortcomings of his pedigree to such a degree that she tacitly recognized his engagement to Mary.

The latter put on a few airs--especially when Carter Flagg took Miller into his store as head clerk--but nobody grudged them to her.

"Of course farming's out of the question for us now," she told Rilla, "but Miller thinks he'll like storekeeping fine once he gets used to a quiet life again, and Carter Flagg will be a more agreeable boss than old Kitty. We're going to be married in the fall and live in the old Mead house with the bay windows and the mansard roof. I've always thought that the handsomest house in the Glen, but never did I dream I'd ever live there. We're only renting it, of course, but if things go as we expect and Carter Flagg takes Miller into partnership we'll own it some day. Say, I've got on some in society, haven't I, considering what I come from? I never aspired to being a storekeeper's wife. But Miller's real ambitious and he'll have a wife that'll back him up. He

says he never saw a French girl worth looking at twice and that his heart beat true to me every moment he was away."

Jerry Meredith and Joe Milgrave came back in January, and all winter the boys from the Glen and its environs came home by twos and threes. None of them came back just as they went away, not even those who had been so fortunate as to escape injury.

One spring day, when the daffodils were blowing on the Ingleside lawn, and the banks of the brook in Rainbow Valley were sweet with white and purple violets, the little, lazy afternoon accommodation train pulled into the Glen station. It was very seldom that passengers for the Glen came by that train, so nobody was there to meet it except the new station agent and a small black-and-yellow dog, who for four and a half years had met every train that had steamed into Glen St. Mary.

Thousands of trains had Dog Monday met and never had the boy he waited and watched for returned. Yet still Dog Monday watched on with eyes that never quite lost hope. Perhaps his dog-heart failed him at times; he was growing old and rheumatic; when he walked back to his kennel after each train had gone his gait was very sober now--he never trotted but went slowly with a drooping head and a depressed tail that had quite lost its old saucy uplift.

One passenger stepped off the train--a tall fellow in a faded lieutenant's uniform, who walked with a barely perceptible limp. He had a bronzed face and there were some grey hairs in the ruddy curls that

clustered around his forehead. The new station agent looked at him anxiously. He was used to seeing the khaki-clad figures come off the train, some met by a tumultuous crowd, others, who had sent no word of their coming, stepping off quietly like this one. But there was a certain distinction of bearing and features in this soldier that caught his attention and made him wonder a little more interestedly who he was.

A black-and-yellow streak shot past the station agent. Dog Monday stiff? Dog Monday rheumatic? Dog Monday old? Never believe it. Dog Monday was a young pup, gone clean mad with rejuvenating joy.

He flung himself against the tall soldier, with a bark that choked in his throat from sheer rapture. He flung himself on the ground and writhed in a frenzy of welcome. He tried to climb the soldier's khaki legs and slipped down and groveled in an ecstasy that seemed as if it must tear his little body in pieces. He licked his boots and when the lieutenant had, with laughter on his lips and tears in his eyes, succeeded in gathering the little creature up in his arms Dog Monday laid his head on the khaki shoulder and licked the sunburned neck, making queer sounds between barks and sobs.

The station agent had heard the story of Dog Monday. He knew now who the returned soldier was. Dog Monday's long vigil was ended. Jem Blythe had come home.

"We are all very happy--and sad--and thankful," wrote Rilla in her

diary a week later, "though Susan has not yet recovered--never will recover, I believe--from the shock of having Jem come home the very night she had, owing to a strenuous day, prepared a 'pick up' supper. I shall never forget the sight of her, tearing madly about from pantry to cellar, hunting out stored away goodies. Just as if anybody cared what was on the table--none of us could eat, anyway. It was meat and drink just to look at Jem. Mother seemed afraid to take her eyes off him lest he vanish out of her sight. It is wonderful to have Jem back--and little Dog Monday. Monday refuses to be separated from Jem for a moment. He sleeps on the foot of his bed and squats beside him at meal-times. And on Sunday he went to church with him and insisted on going right into our pew, where he went to sleep on Jem's feet. In the middle of the sermon he woke up and seemed to think he must welcome Jem

all over again, for he bounded up with a series of barks and wouldn't quiet down until Jem took him up in his arms. But nobody seemed to mind, and Mr. Meredith came and patted his head after the service and said, "Faith and affection and loyalty are precious things wherever they are found. That little dog's love is a treasure, Jem.'

"One night when Jem and I were talking things over in Rainbow Valley, I asked him if he had ever felt afraid at the front.

"Jem laughed.

"'Afraid! I was afraid scores of times--sick with fear--I who used to

laugh at Walter when he was frightened. Do you know, Walter was never frightened after he got to the front. Realities never scared him--only his imagination could do that. His colonel told me that Walter was the bravest man in the regiment. Rilla, I never realized that Walter was dead till I came back home. You don't know how I miss him now--you folks here have got used to it in a sense--but it's all fresh to me. Walter and I grew up together--we were chums as well as brothers--and now here, in this old valley we loved when we were children, it has come home to me that I'm not to see him again.'

"Jem is going back to college in the fall and so are Jerry and Carl. I suppose Shirley will, too. He expects to be home in July. Nan and Di will go on teaching. Faith doesn't expect to be home before September. I suppose she will teach then too, for she and Jem can't be married until he gets through his course in medicine. Una Meredith has decided, I think, to take a course in Household Science at Kingsport--and Gertrude is to be married to her Major and is frankly happy about it--'shamelessly happy' she says; but I think her attitude is very beautiful. They are all talking of their plans and hopes--more soberly than they used to do long ago, but still with interest, and a determination to carry on and make good in spite of lost years.

"'We're in a new world,' Jem says, 'and we've got to make it a better one than the old. That isn't done yet, though some folks seem to think it ought to be. The job isn't finished--it isn't really begun. The old world is destroyed and we must build up the new one. It will be the

task of years. I've seen enough of war to realize that we've got to make a world where wars can't happen. We've given Prussianism its mortal wound but it isn't dead yet and it isn't confined to Germany either. It isn't enough to drive out the old spirit--we've got to bring in the new.'

"I'm writing down those words of Jem's in my diary so that I can read them over occasionally and get courage from them, when moods come when I find it not so easy to 'keep faith.'"

Rilla closed her journal with a little sigh. Just then she was not finding it easy to keep faith. All the rest seemed to have some special aim or ambition about which to build up their lives--she had none. And she was very lonely, horribly lonely. Jem had come back--but he was not the laughing boy-brother who had gone away in 1914 and he belonged to Faith. Walter would never come back. She had not even Jims left. All at once her world seemed wide and empty--that is, it had seemed wide and empty from the moment yesterday when she had read in a Montreal paper a fortnight-old list of returned soldiers in which was the name of Captain Kenneth Ford.

So Ken was home--and he had not even written her that he was coming. He had been in Canada two weeks and she had not had a line from him. Of course he had forgotten--if there was ever anything to forget--a handclasp--a kiss--a look--a promise asked under the influence of a passing emotion. It was all absurd--she had been a silly, romantic,

inexperienced goose. Well, she would be wiser in the future--very wise--and very discreet--and very contemptuous of men and their ways.

"I suppose I'd better go with Una and take up Household Science too," she thought, as she stood by her window and looked down through a delicate emerald tangle of young vines on Rainbow Valley, lying in a wonderful lilac light of sunset. There did not seem anything very attractive just then about Household Science, but, with a whole new world waiting to be built, a girl must do something.

The door bell rang, Rilla turned reluctantly stairwards. She must answer it--there was no one else in the house; but she hated the idea of callers just then. She went downstairs slowly, and opened the front door.

A man in khaki was standing on the steps--a tall fellow, with dark eyes and hair, and a narrow white scar running across his brown cheek. Rilla stared at him foolishly for a moment. Who was it?

She ought to know him--there was certainly something very familiar about him--"Rilla-my-Rilla," he said.

"Ken," gasped Rilla. Of course, it was Ken--but he looked so much older--he was so much changed--that scar--the lines about his eyes and lips--her thoughts went whirling helplessly.

Ken took the uncertain hand she held out, and looked at her. The slim Rilla of four years ago had rounded out into symmetry. He had left a school girl, and he found a woman--a woman with wonderful eyes and a dented lip, and rose-bloom cheek--a woman altogether beautiful and desirable--the woman of his dreams.

"Is it Rilla-my-Rilla?" he asked, meaningly.

Emotion shook Rilla from head to foot.

Joy--happiness--sorrow--fear--every passion that had wrung her heart in those four long years seemed to surge up in her soul for a moment as the deeps of being were stirred. She had tried to speak; at first voice would not come. Then--"Yeth," said Rilla.