

CHAPTER XXXV. "LET THE PIPER COME"

"And so," said Miss Cornelia, "the double wedding is to be sometime about the middle of this month."

There was a faint chill in the air of the early September evening, so Anne had lighted her ever ready fire of driftwood in the big living room, and she and Miss Cornelia basked in its fairy flicker.

"It is so delightful--especially in regard to Mr. Meredith and Rosemary," said Anne. "I'm as happy in the thought of it, as I was when I was getting married myself. I felt exactly like a bride again last evening when I was up on the hill seeing Rosemary's trousseau."

"They tell me her things are fine enough for a princess," said Susan from a shadowy corner where she was cuddling her brown boy. "I have been invited up to see them also and I intend to go some evening. I understand that Rosemary is to wear white silk and a veil, but Ellen is to be married in navy blue. I have no doubt, Mrs. Dr. dear, that that is very sensible of her, but for my own part I have always felt that if I were ever married I would prefer the white and the veil, as being more bride-like."

A vision of Susan in "white and a veil" presented itself before

Anne's inner vision and was almost too much for her.

"As for Mr. Meredith," said Miss Cornelia, "even his engagement has made a different man of him. He isn't half so dreamy and absent-minded, believe me. I was so relieved when I heard that he had decided to close the manse and let the children visit round while he was away on his honeymoon. If he had left them and old Aunt Martha there alone for a month I should have expected to wake every morning and see the place burned down."

"Aunt Martha and Jerry are coming here," said Anne. "Carl is going to Elder Clow's. I haven't heard where the girls are going."

"Oh, I'm going to take them," said Miss Cornelia. "Of course, I was glad to, but Mary would have given me no peace till I asked them any way. The Ladies' Aid is going to clean the manse from top to bottom before the bride and groom come back, and Norman Douglas has arranged to fill the cellar with vegetables. Nobody ever saw or heard anything quite like Norman Douglas these days, believe ME. He's so tickled that he's going to marry Ellen West after wanting her all his life. If I was Ellen--but then, I'm not, and if she is satisfied I can very well be. I heard her say years ago when she was a schoolgirl that she didn't want a tame puppy for a husband. There's nothing tame about Norman, believe ME."

The sun was setting over Rainbow Valley. The pond was wearing a wonderful tissue of purple and gold and green and crimson. A faint blue haze rested on the eastern hill, over which a great, pale, round moon was just floating up like a silver bubble.

They were all there, squatted in the little open glade--Faith and Una, Jerry and Carl, Jem and Walter, Nan and Di, and Mary Vance. They had been having a special celebration, for it would be Jem's last evening in Rainbow Valley. On the morrow he would leave for Charlottetown to attend Queen's Academy. Their charmed circle would be broken; and, in spite of the jollity of their little festival, there was a hint of sorrow in every gay young heart.

"See--there is a great golden palace over there in the sunset," said Walter, pointing. "Look at the shining tower--and the crimson banners streaming from them. Perhaps a conqueror is riding home from battle--and they are hanging them out to do honour to him."

"Oh, I wish we had the old days back again," exclaimed Jem. "I'd love to be a soldier--a great, triumphant general. I'd give EVERYTHING to see a big battle."

Well, Jem was to be a soldier and see a greater battle than had ever been fought in the world; but that was as yet far in the

future; and the mother, whose first-born son he was, was wont to look on her boys and thank God that the "brave days of old," which Jem longed for, were gone for ever, and that never would it be necessary for the sons of Canada to ride forth to battle "for the ashes of their fathers and the temples of their gods."

The shadow of the Great Conflict had not yet made felt any forerunner of its chill. The lads who were to fight, and perhaps fall, on the fields of France and Flanders, Gallipoli and Palestine, were still roguish schoolboys with a fair life in prospect before them: the girls whose hearts were to be wrung were yet fair little maidens a-star with hopes and dreams.

Slowly the banners of the sunset city gave up their crimson and gold; slowly the conqueror's pageant faded out. Twilight crept over the valley and the little group grew silent. Walter had been reading again that day in his beloved book of myths and he remembered how he had once fancied the Pied Piper coming down the valley on an evening just like this.

He began to speak dreamily, partly because he wanted to thrill his companions a little, partly because something apart from him seemed to be speaking through his lips.

"The Piper is coming nearer," he said, "he is nearer than he was that evening I saw him before. His long, shadowy cloak is

blowing around him. He pipes--he pipes--and we must follow--Jem and Carl and Jerry and I--round and round the world. Listen--listen--can't you hear his wild music?"

The girls shivered.

"You know you're only pretending," protested Mary Vance, "and I wish you wouldn't. You make it too real. I hate that old Piper of yours."

But Jem sprang up with a gay laugh. He stood up on a little hillock, tall and splendid, with his open brow and his fearless eyes. There were thousands like him all over the land of the maple.

"Let the Piper come and welcome," he cried, waving his hand.

"I'll follow him gladly round and round the world."

THE END