

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ The Call of The Orchards ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Written for The Western Home Monthly by Blanche Gertrude Robbins

LIKE a wonderful, soft, blinding snow storm the pink and white petals of the gravenstein drifted with the June breeze, carpeting the earth. A branch cracked ominously and the boy, leaping to the ground from the gnarled limbs of the old tree, laughed aloud and pressed his trophy of blossoming branches into the arms of the girl.

Tall and slender, the winsome, sweet face flushed with the delicate pink of the apple blossoms nestling in her arms, her brown eyes glowing with the joyousness of youth, Sylvia Marr stood motionless beneath the shade of the tree. The brown curl that had slipped from the white ribbon half hid the dimpled neck, while the drooping blossoms spread out in gay profusion over the white middie dress.

"Better not rob the old tree of any more blossoms, Neil," remonstrated Sylvia, burying her face in the honey-scented fragrance.

Neil Stratton stopped suddenly by the trunk of the tree, a baffled expression darkening his gray eyes.

"Sylvia—you—you're a dream!" he broke out impetuously, a tremulous note in the boyish voice.

"Flatterer!" laughed Sylvia, "it's the apple blossoms."

But she turned her head, the burning light in the boy's eyes blinding her. Neil Stratton noted the involuntary tremor of the girlish figure and his own pulses throbbed with the mysterious ecstasy of the moment.

"It is you, Sylvia, and I never saw you like that before. You are gloriously beautiful and you're going away. You'll be the wonder of all that social set, Aunt Lexis will drag you into. She is wise—Aunt Lexis is—and she knows that your beauty will open the doors of society quicker for her than Uncle Birk's fabulous mine. Sylvia, girl, they'll spoil you. They'll turn your head and all your sweetness will be wasted. They are bound to spoil you."

"Such nonsense, Neil! I'm just a simple farm girl," protested Sylvia, her brown eyes big with wonder at the boy's passionate declaration. "I'll be a stupid little brown mouse in all that brilliance. Aunt Lexis is quite set on dressing me up and introducing me to society when I finish school. And of course that will be fun—"

A sudden flush of anger reddened Neil Stratton's cheek and with clenched fists he leaned hard against the tree trunk.

"Yes, Aunt Lexis is sharp and she'll make a society idol of you," he declared hotly. "Sylvia, girl, listen! It isn't too late yet. Let Aunt Lexis go to the city with her fat purse and her silly ambitions. You and I will stay by the orchards. Aunt Lexis is renting them to old Ben and Marthy for a song and they'll stay just the same. I won't ask you to marry me—" the boy's voice caught and he plunged on huskily—"that's too big a thing to think about, but I want to save you. I want to keep you sweet and dear and lovely."

"Hush!" Sylvia's voice, clear as a bell, broke in. "You must not talk like that, Neil. I must go with Aunt Lexis—she counts so much on it. Ever since she got those wonderful returns from Uncle Birk's old mine, she's thought of nothing else. We owe everything to her. How can you forget the night she found us homeless and alone, running hand in hand from that awful forest fire? Don't you remember how she rolled blankets around our scorched clothing and carried us to the railway train and put us to bed in the pullman car?"

The girl paused and looked straight into the impassioned eyes of the boy, her own glowing with fire. Neil Stratton was silent, his thought traveling back to the day of that awful fire, when the little western town had been wiped out and he and his little neighbor, Sylvia Marr had fled toward the railroad. There on the outskirts of the town, where the western train puffed in sullen discontent at the delay, Aunt Lexis had caught sight of the frightened little waifs and rescued them. While the train waited, she had sent back to the ruins of the town and ascertained the truth—Sylvia and Neil were indeed orphans and friendless. And she had brought them home to the orchard farm of the far Eastern Province. She had been wonderfully kind to both of them.

She was a good manager and ambitious and though Uncle Birk, the invalid husband, had died soon after she had come home from the West, where she had gone on a fruitless investigation of the mine, she had made the orchards pay well. Then had come the news that Uncle Birk's mine had been found to contain rich veins and the sale of it had poured fabulous wealth into Aunt Lexis' pocket.

"They won't spoil me, Neil," Sylvia's protest aroused him and he looked up to catch the flash in the girl's eyes. "Why, thinking about the orchards and the apple blossoms will keep me sweet and true. If ever I'm tempted, I'll think back to these dear blossoms."

The lovely face bent bewitchingly and the scarlet lips pressed against the pink blossoms. The boy's eyes turned toward the western sky, bathed in the glory of the June sunset. Over the orchard glowed a soft light of saffron and purple, the drifting petals rosy hued as they swept the green sods. He turned his gray eyes luminous with an understanding light.

"The dear, old orchards will ever lure

posterous thing—this recognition of his shattered surgeon's hand—filled him with a horrible dread.

He was going back to Canada, crippled and denied the surgeon's skill. He had not the courage to face the city, where he had worked, rung by rung, to his success. His crippled arm would but arouse the pity of his colleagues and he abhorred pity.

He was going back to the orchards, where Aunt Lexis had given him his boyhood's home. Startlingly distinct they had loomed before him in a vision of blossoming loveliness. They called out to him to come back. They held out to his lacerated soul and tortured body a sense of peace. He had not once seen the orchards in the fifteen years that he had been working to his goal.

He tried to picture the orchards as he had last seen them, and always he caught a vision of the girl, her sweet face luminous with happiness, her arms filled with apple blossoms. But he must rid his picture of that vision. Poor Sylvia! Poor, foolish, vain little Sylvia! They had spoiled her as he had feared they would. The flames of the gaudy, dazzling social whirl had drawn her irresistibly and her butterfly wings had been singed.

For a few years letters had passed regularly between them, then gradually

her, watching her mingling with the crippled, making merry till the laughter of the sad-faced answered her. Suffering was too plainly chiseled in the delicate womanly features of her face, yet there shone from her eyes a smile of courage which illuminated the blue lines.

Major Stratton stirred himself into action and turning toward the stairway leading to the drawing saloon, he chided himself unmercifully. He had been a bear, so churlish all the voyage, nursing his bitterness; and the nursing sister so free with her joy-giving and sympathy.

At dusk, Neil Stratton glanced up from his book in alarm as a passenger boisterously burst into the saloon, speaking excitedly in low tones to a group of khaki-clad men.

"A U-boat following the Marciette abaft—a little on the port quarter—two miles away!" Neil Stratton caught the words of the message distinctly and sprang toward the group.

"We must keep cool and not alarm the women passengers," continued the man who had brought the news below. "The Captain has given orders to keep the ship off before the wind and to increase speed."

Hurriedly the group of men, Neil Stratton following, went up on deck, their eyes scanning the ocean for a glimpse of the submarine. Already there was a noticeable excitement among the passengers crowding the deck and an evidence of cool, crisp orders delivered by the officers.

"The U-boat has changed her course and is surely overtaking us!" muttered a passing official.

Neil Stratton leaned forward and scrutinized the submarine. Now he saw her distinctly—awash, her decks, the conning tower and the two guns—one forward, the other abaft.

Suddenly, without warning there fired across the Marciette's bow one shot and sounds of confusion along the decks answered. Two more shots fired from the U-boat and the Captain of the Marciette ordered the boats lowered.

Excitedly, in bewilderment the passengers crowded the deck, men and women and children searching wildly for life belts. Dully Neil Stratton noted the curious fact that none of the shells fired by the U-boat had yet exploded. The boats were being lowered rapidly, women and children forced into them.

Suddenly his cheek paled and he turned searching the crowd. Where was the nursing sister? She would be so helpless with her one arm. Ah! there she was, her face beautiful in its serenity, her right arm guiding a blind soldier.

Major Stratton struggled forward and rested his left hand on her shoulder. "You are not afraid? You have a life belt?" he questioned eagerly.

"No, we who have seen greater danger, should not fear," she answered quietly. "It only worries me that I haven't two arms to help those who are more helpless."

Major Stratton leaned forward, breathless, fire in his gray eyes, and resting his finger on the empty sleeve, blurted out the question tormenting his mind.

"How did it happen?" "A bomb struck the hospital. I don't remember the rest. Only I know there were wounded killed and I only suffered this. At first I thought I was through with active service. Then I had a vision of a service, even a crippled nursing sister might render her country and that is why I am going home to Canada," she answered readily.

"You put me to shame. I am rebellious that I cannot go back to the front and fight to the end because of that—"

His eyes stared with a look of frenzy at the blue sleeve hanging so cruelly limp and the nursing sister turned away, her face drawn and tense.

The explosion of the shells, now so continuously fired from the U-boat, spread alarm among the passengers. By the glaring light of an exploded shell, Neil Stratton surveyed the lithe figure of the nursing sister with horror.

"You have no life belt. Take mine and I'll find another!" he exclaimed harshly, passing his life belt to the protesting girl.

The search proved fruitless and the smoke below deck was suffocating. He was gone but a few minutes, yet he sensed the danger he had run for flames were breaking out along the hull of the Marciette. He must find the nursing sister, but as he struggled back to the deck rail where he had left her, he saw that all of the women and children had been lowered to the boats. The ranks of men were rapidly thinning and he felt himself

O CANADA!

O Canada! Our home and native land,
True patriot love in all thy sons command;
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The true North strong and free,
And stand on guard, O Canada,
Stand aye on guard for thee.
O Canada! O Canada! O Canada!
We stand on guard for thee.
O Canada! We stand on guard for thee.

O Canada! Where pines and maples grow,
Great prairies spread and lordly rivers flow,
How dear to us thy broad domain,
From East to Western sea,
Thou land of hope for all who toil,
Thou true North, strong and free.
O Canada! O Canada! O Canada!
We stand on guard for thee.
O Canada! We stand on guard for thee.

O Canada! Beneath thy shining skies
May stalwart sons and gentle maidens rise
To keep thee steadfast through the years
From East to Western sea,
Our Father land, our Mother land!
Our true North, strong and free!
O Canada! O Canada! O Canada!
We stand on guard for thee.
O Canada! We stand on guard for thee.

us back with memories!" he exclaimed, "They will ever keep us true to the best in ourselves. I'm going out in the world and win success all on my own merits. Aunt Lexis has offered to meet all the expenses of the University course, but I want to work my own way to the top so I shall be free to think and act. But, Sylvia, some day the orchards will call us back. Come, let us go up to the farm house through the orchards and across the stream to the hill, where we can look down on the orchards."

The girl laughed joyously and clasping the branches of apple blossoms in her dimpled arms, she followed the boy's lead, the blossom laden branches of the trees sweeping the earth and brushing her brown curls.

Once the boy turned at an angle of the orchard and looking into the flushed face of the girl, his eyes dark with passion he muttered huskily: "Oh, Sylvia, Sylvia, they will spoil you."

Major Stratton paced the deck of the Marciette restlessly, his left arm flung protectively across his right in an endeavor to hide from view the stump that ever protruded before his sight like some evil thing.

He could not forget it and as the wave of bitterness swept his being, he shivered involuntarily. He had not flinched though duty had led him through heavy fire, leading his unit of the Ambulance Corps in its heroic rescue work. Yet this pre-

they had dropped and for ten years Neil Stratton had heard only indirectly of Sylvia Marr and her brilliant social success. The littleness of the girl's existence breathing through her letters had bored him as he judged the serious note which crept into his letters, must have bored her.

His heart had ached in pity for the girl whose sweet simplicity had been destroyed. Yet, even in his pity, he had never lost the ideal of his boyhood. Remembering the Sylvia he had learned to love that sunset hour of the blossom time in the old orchards, he had not cared aught for the friendship of other women.

All through the voyage of the Marciette he had kept much to himself, his bitterness of heart repulsing the friendly overtures of other military men returning to Canada. His eyes scanned the group on deck with a curious glance.

Ah! there was the "Little Sister" her right arm linked within that of a blind soldier. Her gay laughter came clearly to Major Stratton and he started. Plucky little soul! Jolly as the Springtime! And he could see plainly that her left sleeve hung empty. Ye gods, a woman with an empty sleeve! It had become altogether too familiar a scene watching the khaki-clad men pass with armless sleeves. But a nursing sister with her blue sleeve hanging empty fired him with revenge as no story of German cruelty had done.

"Little Sister," he had learned to call