

CHASE JOSEPHINE

GRACE HARLOWE WITH
THE AMERICAN ARMY
ON THE RHINE

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Jessie Graham Flower

Grace Harlowe with the American Army on the Rhine

CHAPTER I

ON THE MARCH TO THE RHINE

“HERE is where we take on our load,” observed Grace Harlowe, backing her car up to the door of a peasant cottage.

“Never was a truer word spoken,” agreed J. Elfreda Briggs. “Chad of her own sweet self is considerable of a load.” Miss Briggs reached back and threw open the door of the army automobile, to be ready for their passenger who had not yet appeared. “Baggage, some would characterize her,” added the girl.

“She is our superior, Elfreda,” reminded Grace. “One always must preserve a certain respect for one’s superior, else discipline in the army will quickly go to pieces. While Mrs. Smythe plainly is not all that we wish she were, she is our superior officer whom we must both respect and obey.”

“Ever meet her?” questioned Elfreda.

“Once. I was not favorably impressed with her, though I did not see enough of her to form an opinion worth while. That she was fat and rather fair, I recall quite distinctly.”

“Know anything about her, Grace?”

“Nothing beyond the fact that she is said to be the wife of a wealthy Chicago meat-packer, and that Mrs. Meat Packer wishes every one to know that she is a rich woman and an influential one.”

“She must be to get here, Grace. What I cannot understand is how she ever got into army welfare work, especially how she came to be assigned to join out with this American Third Army’s march to the Rhine.”

“Perhaps influence, perhaps her money; perhaps a little of both,” nodded Grace. “You know as much about it as I do.”

“And that much, little as it is, is too much,” declared J. Elfreda Briggs. “I should characterize her as an inordinately vain woman, one of the newly rich, who, clothed with a little authority, would be a mighty uncomfortable companion. The girls at the hospital who have worked under her say she is a regular martinet. How does it come that she has been unloaded on us?”

“I am sure I do not know, J. Elfreda. I do not even know with whom she came through last night when we started out on our march to the Rhine. I was ordered to pick her up and take her through in our automobile to-day, together with two other women who accompany her. However, this march to the River Rhine having only just begun, we haven’t yet settled down to a routine.”

“Neither has the enemy,” observed Elfreda.

Grace nodded reflectively.

“He has signed the armistice, but knowing the Hun as I do, I know that, if he thinks he can safely do so, he will play a scurvy trick on us. I hardly think we shall be attacked, however, but, J. Elfreda, take my word for it, there are many deep and dark Hun plots being hatched in this victorious army at this very moment,” she declared.

“What do you mean?”

“Hun treachery, Elfreda.”

“You know something, Grace Harlowe?”

“No, not in the way you mean. I know the animal and its ways; that’s all. Look at that line of observation balloons of ours floating in the sky to our rear, and moving forward as we move forward. Know what they are doing?”

“Watching the Boches.”

“Exactly. Were the Boche a worthy foe, a foe who would respect his agreements, the need for watching him would not exist. But a foe who has broken his word, his bond and all the ten commandments is not to be trusted. I suppose I shouldn’t feel that way, but I have lived at the front for many months, Elfreda, and what I have seen has chilled my very soul. It behooves us Sammies to watch our steps and keep our hands on our guns,” she added after an interval of reflection. “I think our passenger is approaching.”

Mrs. Chadsey Smythe, clad in a suit of tight-fitting khaki, which accentuated her stoutness, was walking stiffly down the path from the cottage, followed by two welfare workers, discreetly keeping to the rear of their superior. The face of the meat-packer’s wife wore an expression of austerity which Grace told herself had been borrowed from some high army officer, an officer with a grouch of several years’ standing. Mrs. Smythe halted, eyeing first the car itself, then the two young women on the front seat, both of whom were gazing stolidly ahead.

“Are you the chauffeur?” she demanded, addressing Grace.

“I am Mrs. Grace Gray, Madame. I am driving this car through,” replied Grace courteously.

“A car, did you say? No, this is not a car, it is a truck, and a very dirty truck. I venture to say that it has not been washed in some time,” observed the welfare supervisor sarcastically.

“Quite probable, Mrs. Smythe. This is wartime, you know.”

“That is not an excuse. The war is ended. Hereafter you will see that the car is clean when you start out in the morning.”

“Yes, Madame.”

“Another thing, driver, I do not brook impertinence from my subordinates. No matter how slack this department may have been carried on in the past, henceforth military form must be observed.”

“Yes, Madame,” replied Grace meekly.

“If proper for a superior to do so, I would ask if it is customary for a private to remain seated when such superior approaches to speak to the private?”

“When driving, yes.”

“It is not! Hereafter, driver, when a superior officer comes up to you, you will step down, hold the car door open and stand at salute, if you know how to salute, until the officer is seated. Am I clear?”

“Perfectly so, Madame.” Grace repressed a hot retort, and Elfreda’s face burned with indignation. She found herself wondering how her companion could keep her self-control under the insulting tone of the welfare supervisor.

“It is quite apparent, driver, that you are new to the army and its ways.”

“Oh!” exclaimed J. Elfreda.

“What is that?” demanded Mrs. Smythe.

“I – I think I pinched my finger in the door,” stammered Elfreda.

“Driver, step down. There is nothing like making a right start.”

Without an instant’s hesitation, Grace sprang out, grasped the door of the car, and, standing very erect, held it until Mrs. Smythe and her two “aides” had entered and taken their seats. Grace Harlowe closed the door, clicked her heels together and gave her superior a snappy salute that even a freshly made second lieutenant could not have improved upon.

“Oh, you can at least salute, I see,” observed the passenger. “I sincerely hope, however, that you are a better driver than you are a soldier. I wish a fast driver, but not a careless one. If you are afraid to drive fast I will request the colonel to give me a driver who is not.”

“Yes, Madame.”

There was mischief in the eyes of Grace Harlowe as she climbed into the driver's seat, an expression that J. Elfreda understood full well was a sure forecast of trouble to come.

The road was greatly congested, and for a time the driver worked her way cautiously along at a rate of speed of not more than ten miles an hour.

"Faster! Are you too timid to drive?" cried the passenger.

At this juncture an opening presented itself, a narrow space between two army trucks, and an officer's car tearing along behind her at a terrific pace was reaching for the opening. Grace opened up and hurled her car at the opening as if it were a projectile on its way to the enemy lines. The two cars touched hubs. Grace fed a little more gas and went into the opening a winner.

"Stop it!" shouted Mrs. Chadsey Smythe.

Ahead there were open spots and Grace made for them, dodging, swerving, the car careening, the horn sounding until the drivers ahead, thinking a staff officer was coming, made all the room they could for the charging army automobile. Madame was expostulating, threatening, jouncing about until speech became an unintelligible stutter. Reaching a clear stretch of road, by clever manipulation Grace sent the car into a series of skids that would have excited the envy of a fighting aviator. That it did not turn over was because there was no obstruction in the road to catch the tires and send the car hurtling into the ditch.

"For the love of Heaven, stop it, Grace Harlowe!" gasped Miss Briggs. "I'm on the verge of nervous prostration. You'll have us all in the hospital or worse."

Grace grinned but made no reply. She straightened up a little as the officer's car finally shot past her, and it was then that she saw she had been racing with a general, though she did not know who the general might be. She hoped he did not know who it was that had cut him off, but of course he could not expect her to look behind her when driving in that tangle of traffic. That was good logic, so she devoted her attention and thought wholly to the work in hand, and, putting on more speed, rapidly drew up on the charging automobile ahead, reasoning that the general would have a fairly clear road, which road would be hers provided she were able to keep up with him.

Ahead of them a short distance she espied a concrete bridge. There was a concrete barrier on either side of the bridge, but the bridge was amply wide to permit two vehicles to pass. The general's car took the bridge at high speed, army trucks drawing to their right so as to leave him plenty of room. Grace followed, driving at the bridge at top speed, but when within a few yards of the structure a truck driver swayed over past the center of the span, evidently not having heard her horn.

The girl thought she could still go through, but discovered too late that the truck was too far over to permit her passing. The emergency brakes went on and the horn shrieked, but too late. The truck driver, losing his head, swung further to the left instead of to the right as he should have done, thus crowding Grace further over toward the concrete wall-railing.

"Hold fast!" shouted Grace.

Ere the passengers could "hold fast" the car met the end of the concrete railing head-on with a mighty crash, the rear of the car shot up into the air and the passengers were hurled over the dash. They cleared the obstruction and went hurtling into the river, disappearing beneath its surface. The car lurched sideways until half its length hung over, threatening any moment to slip down after them into the stream. Harlowe luck had not improved. This time Grace had overreached the mark.

Those readers who have followed Grace through the eventful years from her exciting days in the Oakdale High School have learned to love her for her gentle qualities and to admire her for her pluck and achievements, for the sterling qualities that from her early school days drew to her so many loyal friends.

It was in "Grace Harlowe's Plebe Year at High School" that the readers of this series first became acquainted with her. They followed her through her high school course as told in "Grace Harlowe's Sophomore Year at High School," "Grace Harlowe's Junior Year at High School" and

“Grace Harlowe’s Senior Year at High School,” in which those dear friends of her girlhood days, Nora O’Malley, Anne Pierson and Jessica Bright – the Original Four – shared her joys and her sorrows.

After high school came college, Grace and Anne going to Overton, Nora and Jessica choosing for their further education an eastern conservatory of music. At Overton new friends rallied to Grace’s colors, such as Elfreda Briggs, Arline Thayer, Emma Dean, Mabel Ashe and many others. Four eventful years were spent at old Overton, the experiences of those college years being related in “Grace Harlowe’s First Year at Overton College,” “Grace Harlowe’s Second Year at Overton College,” “Grace Harlowe’s Third Year at Overton College” and “Grace Harlowe’s Fourth Year at Overton College,” followed by “Grace Harlowe’s Return to Overton Campus” and “Grace Harlowe’s Problem.”

The story of the fruition of the Overton girl’s dreams is told in “Grace Harlowe’s Golden Summer,” when she became the bride of her lifelong friend and chum, Tom Gray, and went to “Haven Home” a happy wife. Grace’s home life was a brief one, for the great world war enveloped the big white “House Behind the World,” as she had so happily characterized it. First Tom Gray went away to serve his country in its hour of need, then Grace followed him as a member of the Overton unit, and in “Grace Harlowe Overseas” is related the story of how she became involved in the plots of the Old World nearly to her own undoing. In “Grace Harlowe with the Red Cross in France” she is assigned to drive an ambulance at the front, which she had long yearned to do, and out there in the thick of the fighting she is called upon to face death in many forms. It is, however, in a following volume, “Grace Harlowe with the Marines at Chateau Thierry,” however, that the Overton girl meets with hardships and perils that nearly cost her her life. Yet more thrilling even than this were her experiences as related in “Grace Harlowe with the U. S. Army in the Argonne,” where perhaps the most desperate fighting of the war occurred.

“Grace Harlowe with the Yankee Shock Boys at St. Quentin” finds Grace an active participant in that most brilliant single achievement of the war, the breaking of the Hindenburg Line, in which, by sheer pluck and daring, she saves an entire regiment from certain annihilation and wins a decoration for her heroism.

Following the signing of the armistice the march of the American troops toward the Rhine began. With them went Grace Harlowe and her faithful friend, J. Elfreda Briggs, Anne Nesbit having been left behind to continue her work in a hospital.

Just how it had come about that Grace and Elfreda were to accompany the troops neither girl knew. The assignment brought joy to both girls, and especially to Grace, for when the sound of the big guns died away and an unnatural stillness settled over war-torn Europe she felt ill at ease, felt as if there were something lacking, though down deep in her heart was a thankfulness that overbalanced the regret that the excitement of months in the war zone was a thing of the past. She was first thankful for the soldiers, then for her husband, Tom Gray, who also was on his way to the Rhine, and for the little Yvonne, now their daughter, the child whom Grace had picked up as a waif in a deserted French village under fire.

Grace, at her own request, was permitted to drive through with her friend, in an army car. The first day she carried, besides herself, supplies for canteen work, for both she and Elfreda Briggs were now welfare workers. It had been understood that Mrs. Smythe was to go with the invading army, but that she would take an active part in directing the work neither girl considered probable, for, as a rule, such workers left the actual directing to some person of experience. Not so with Mrs. Chadsey Smythe. She proposed to be a working head, and she was. At least she had been an active participant on the march to the Rhine since she came up with Grace Harlowe. Her real troubles began with the starting of the car with Grace at the wheel, and the troubles continued without a second’s intermission right up to and including that fatal second when Grace collided with the bridge rail and Mrs. “Chadsey,” together with the other occupants of the car, took an unexpected dive into the river.

Fortunately for the five women in the car, the machine had remained on the road, else it might have fallen on them and finished them entirely.

Grace came up to the surface first, shook the water from her eyes, and then dived and brought up one of the welfare workers who had accompanied Mrs. "Chadsey." The other woman and Elfreda came up of their own accord and Grace quickly went in search of Mrs. "Chadsey."

"There she is," gasped Elfreda, pointing downstream, where the welfare supervisor was seen floundering, fighting desperately to get to shore, not realizing that the water at that point was shallow enough to permit her to stand up and keep her chin above water.

Grace swam to her quickly and grasped the supervisor by the hair of her head just as Mrs. "Chadsey," giving up, had gone under. Even though the water there was only about five feet deep, Grace had never come nearer to drowning, for not only did Mrs. "Chadsey" grip her with both arms, but fought desperately, when Grace got her head above water.

"Stop it!" gasped Grace, struggling to free herself from the grip of those really strong arms. "You'll drown us both."

"Let me go!" screamed the supervisor, fastening a hand in the Overton girl's hair.

One of Grace's hands being thus freed she took a firm grip in the hair of her opponent, pushed her head under the water and both sank out of sight.

CHAPTER II

“GRACE HARLOWE, TROUBLE-MAKER”

WHEN Mrs. Smythe and Grace came to the surface, the fight had been all taken out of the supervisor. She was limp, choking and gasping, but not in a serious condition, as the Overton girl observed, though the water was chill and serious consequences might follow the wetting, there being no way to secure dry clothing until they arrived at the end of the day's march, a few miles further on.

“You will be all right now,” comforted Grace. “Don't fight. Give me half a chance to get you ashore. I'm sorry, Mrs. Smythe. The water is not over our heads, so please try to walk in.”

The woman screamed and choked some more, so Grace grasped her by the collar of her blouse and began swimming toward shore with her. They had not gone more than half of the way, when doughboys who had witnessed the accident plunged into the river and went to the rescue. Grace turned over her burden to them quite willingly, but waved the soldiers aside when they offered to assist her. The men had their hands full in getting the supervisor ashore, where they laid her down on the bank and shook her until she was able to sit up.

“Please wring the water out of me, Grace,” begged the disheveled J. Elfreda Briggs, who was shivering.

“That will not help any. Keep moving, is my advice. Were you hurt, Elfreda?”

“My feelings were very much hurt. Grace Harlowe, you are the original trouble-maker. I blame myself wholly in this matter, not you at all, for I should have known better than to remain in that car for an instant after I saw that look in your eyes. It was a perfectly safe intimation that something terrible was about to occur.”

“There's the lieutenant talking with Mrs. Smythe. I must see what she has to say.”

“Probably recommending you for the Congressional Medal,” observed Miss Briggs sourly.

Mrs. Smythe was sitting on the bank wringing the water out of her blouse when Grace came up, the lieutenant standing by and apparently not knowing what he should do in the circumstances. The supervisor's hair was down over her shoulders and she was half crying, half raging. Grace was filled with regret.

“I'm sorry, Mrs. Smythe,” she said, bending over the supervisor. “May I assist you to your feet? You must not sit here, you know. The ground is cold and you are very wet.”

Mrs. Chadsey Smythe blinked at the Overton girl and struggled for words. The words finally came, a torrent of them.

“She did it!” screamed the woman. “She did it on purpose! She set out to mur – ”

“Mrs. Smythe, you know better than that,” rebuked Grace.

“Arrest that woman!” commanded Mrs. Smythe.

“Well, I – I don't know about that. Do you wish to make a charge against her, Madame?”

“Of course. She threw me into the river.”

“But,” protested the officer, “she did no more to you than she did to herself and the others in the car. Of course you may make a complaint to the captain, or to your superior whoever he or she may be, but I do not think this woman can be arrested, because the wreck plainly was an accident.”

“It was not! I tell you she did it on purpose!”

The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders.

“I will inform my superior, Captain Rowland,” answered the lieutenant gravely. “You are – ”

“Mrs. Chadsey Smythe, in command of the welfare workers.”

The officer turned to Grace inquiringly.

“Mrs. Grace Gray, former ambulance driver on the western front, now a welfare worker on the march to the Rhine, sir,” answered Grace meekly, out of the corners of her eyes observing that the lieutenant was passing a hand over his face, to hide the grin that had appeared there.

“Anything to say, Mrs. Gray?”

“I think not, sir, except that we should be moving.”

“Yes, get me a car at once, if you will be so good,” urged Mrs. Smythe.

“If I may offer a suggestion, sir, I do not think it would be prudent for either Mrs. Smythe or the others to ride in. We would all be chilled through and on the verge of pneumonia. My advice, if I may offer it, would be that we walk.”

“Walk? Never!” exclaimed the supervisor. “I demand a car. It is my right to make such a demand.”

“I fear I cannot give you a car. The best I can possibly do is to put you on a truck, but I agree with Mrs. Gray that it would be much wiser for you to walk, all of you.”

“A truck!” moaned the woman. “I’ll walk, thank you. It is much more dignified than being jounced about on an army truck. No army truck for me, thank you.”

“Very good. I will see to it that the belongings of the party are sent in so that you may have change of clothing as soon as we reach the end of the day’s march.”

“Do I understand that you will do nothing to this woman?” demanded Mrs. Smythe.

“I will report the matter to Captain Rowland. May I assist you up the bank?” he offered politely.

Mrs. Smythe accepted with all the grace she could assume. Grace’s face wore a serious expression as she looked at the car hanging over the edge of the bridge.

“I could do no worse myself,” observed Miss Briggs to her companion.

“I doubt if I could equal that achievement,” agreed Grace. “That woman is going to make trouble for me, and I am inclined to think that I deserve all that she will try to give me. You know it was an accident, Elfreda?”

“An accident? It was that! Why, the train wreck on our way to Paris with the wounded doughboys was no more of an accident than this. What you mean to say is that you did not do it on purpose. Personally, Elfreda Briggs has her own views on that phase of the matter.”

“Elfreda!” rebuked Grace.

“However, it is some satisfaction to see our beloved superior taking the same medicine that we are taking; walking for our health, as it were.”

Mrs. Smythe was making heavy weather of it, and Grace, filled with compassion, stepped up to her and linked an arm within that of the supervisor.

“Please permit me to assist you along,” she urged gently.

Mrs. Smythe threw off Grace’s arm angrily.

“Be good enough to keep your hands off. I wish nothing whatever to do with you.”

“Mrs. Smythe, please do not speak to me in that tone. I feel much worse about it than you possibly can, and I blame myself, even if that truck driver did crowd me into the railing. Won’t you please forgive me?”

“You will learn later what I propose to do to you, driver. Do not forget that you are speaking to your superior officer and not to your equal.”

“I had suspected something of the sort myself,” answered the Overton girl, drawing herself up and moving on ahead at a rapid stride.

“Chad spoke the truth for once,” chuckled Miss Briggs. “I wonder if she realizes what she said? That is too good to keep. I shall have to tell the girls about that. Do you really think she will do something to you?”

“I would not be at all surprised.”

“In that event remember that I am a lawyer, and that I invite myself to defend you,” declared Elfreda eloquently. “This going is the toughest experience I have ever had.”

Two hours before dark they reached their destination, which proved to be the little city of Etain, a deserted city, not a living thing being in sight there when the advance guard reached the place. The city was pretty well pounded to pieces. For a long time before the armistice was signed those of the inhabitants who had clung to their homes lived in holes in the ground. It was a cheerless place, and the cellar where the welfare workers were berthed was more than dismal.

The belongings of Grace and her party were brought in by a Chinaman, who grinned as he put the first bundle down, and was rewarded by a smile from Grace. He did not speak when he entered the first time, but upon the second trip he straightened up and saluted, which Grace returned snappily.

“Missie plenty fine deliver, a-la,” observed the Chinaman.

“Not very, I fear. You mean my running into the bridge?”

“Les.”

“What is your name?”

“Won Lue.”

“Belong to the labor battalion?”

“Les. Plenty blad men b’long labor blattalion,” observed Won.

“So I have heard, but surely you are not a bad man, Won?”

He shook his head with emphasis.

“Me good Chinaman, a-la.”

“I am glad to hear that.”

“Well, I never,” declared Elfreda Briggs. “One would think you and Won were very old friends. Better look out for those oily Orientals. They are not to be trusted.”

“So I have been told,” replied Grace absently. “I wonder where Mrs. Smythe has taken herself. Ah, here comes one of her aides.”

The young woman said she had come for the supervisor’s bags, having been directed there by the officer who had come to their assistance on the river bank.

“I trust Mrs. Smythe is feeling better,” said Grace with a voice full of sympathy. “You are Miss Cahill, I believe?”

“Yes. Madame is in high temper because they have put her in a cellar. The lieutenant told her she was in luck that she didn’t have to wrap herself up in a blanket and sleep on the ground, which did not serve to improve her temper. I wish we might stay here with you two ladies.”

“Why not come with us, then?” urged Grace.

“The supervisor wouldn’t let me. However, I am going to request that we be relieved some way.”

“Better go through with it until we get to the Rhine,” advised Grace. “Something may develop that will make a change possible. If I can assist you to that end you may depend upon me to do so.”

“Thank you. May – may I tell you something, Mrs. Gray?”

Grace nodded smilingly.

“Mrs. Smythe, I fear, is going to make you a lot of trouble. She is making all sorts of threats of what she is going to do and – ”

“If she doesn’t succeed any better than she has thus far, there won’t be much left of her,” interjected Miss Briggs. “How long have you been with her?”

“Only since we started for the Rhine. We were directed from headquarters to join out with the outfit to act as her assistants, Miss O’Leary and myself, but we have had about enough of it already. She is making servants of us and – ”

“In wartime we must do many things that we don’t care to do,” suggested Grace. “We are still at war with the Huns, so we must take whatever comes to us, doing our best to keep our heads level.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Gray. You make me feel better. I shall do my best not to lose my temper, but really I do not see how such a woman could be chosen for our important work. I call it a rank injustice.”

“That’s what the doughboys say about their treatment,” smiled Grace. “*C’est la guerre* (it is war). Come in to see us whenever you can. So few of us women are out here that we should do what we can to make it pleasant for one another.”

Miss Cahill thanked her and went out, after which the two Overton girls changed their wrinkled uniforms, put on dry underwear and sat down each before a steel trench mirror to do her hair. This proceeding occupied all their time up to the mess hour, when they went out with their kits to draw their evening meal. Doughboys made way for them and insisted on their taking a place at the front of the line, but Grace smilingly declined to do anything of the sort.

Most of the men in that division had seen the welfare women and knew by that time who they were, for a woman at the front was too rare a sight not to attract attention. Then, too, there were among them men who either knew of their own knowledge what Grace Harlowe had accomplished or had heard the story from others. Her smash on the bridge was already known to several regiments, and when the two girls appeared, looking as fresh and well-groomed as if they had been serving in Paris rather than out at the front, the doughboys wondered and admired.

Grace and Elfreda, having drawn their rations, returned to their cellar, where, to their surprise, they found a bundle of fagots, which some considerate person had left for them.

“Isn’t that fine? I wonder who gave the wood to us?” cried Grace. “Now we can brew some tea. Get the tea ready while I start the fire. Well, I do declare, here is a can of water, and in a petrol can too. J. Elfreda, have you an admirer? Have you been deceiving me?”

“If I have he isn’t a Chinaman,” retorted Miss Briggs.

“Thank you.”

The cellar was soon filled with smoke, but neither girl cared so long as tea was to be the result. After finishing the meal they began considering where they were going to sleep. There were two cots in the cellar, cots without springs, rough boards having been nailed on, but no mattress.

“Not very inviting, but I for one shall be able to sleep soundly, I know,” declared Grace. “When we get to the Rhine we probably shall be billeted in a house where we can have ordinary comforts. I know I shall have difficulty in accustoming myself to civilized life again, won’t you, J. Elfreda?”

“Not so that you could notice it,” was Miss Briggs’ brief reply. “I – ”

“Hulloa the cellar!” shouted a voice from above.

“Enter,” answered Grace.

A sergeant of infantry crunched in, coughed as he inhaled the smoke, and, snapping to attention, saluted, which both girls returned.

“What is it, Sergeant?” asked Grace.

“Captain Rowland wishes you to report at his headquarters at half past seven o’clock, Madame.”

“Very good, Sergeant. Where are the captain’s headquarters?”

“Four dumps down the street from here, to the right as you go out, down one flight to the cellar.”

“Thank you. Will you have a nip of tea? We still have some left.”

The sergeant accepted a tin-cup of tea, gulped it down, thanked them, and saluting tramped out.

“Queer fellows those doughboys,” murmured Grace. “All gold, but odd josies every one of them.”

“Is that what you are thinking of? Were I in your place I should be thinking of what I am going to say to Captain Rowland this evening. This is the summons I have been waiting for. You understand what this means, do you not, Grace?”

“I presume so. However, I will cross that bridge when I come to it.”

“Humph! That is more than you did to-day,” grumbled J. Elfreda Briggs.

Half an hour later, after a final look into the steel mirror, Grace, accompanied by Miss Briggs, left the cellar and started for Captain Rowland’s headquarters, Grace having first pinned her *croix de guerre* and Distinguished Service Cross to her breast. She had neglected to wear them in the confusion of the start that morning, though being supposed to wear them at all times when in uniform.

CHAPTER III

THE IRON HAND

CAPTAIN ROWLAND sat at a table that had seen more prosperous days, and the camp chair that he was using creaked ominously. Elfreda Briggs feared that it was about to collapse under him, for the captain was not a slight man by any means.

Neither Overton girl had ever before met Captain Rowland, but they had heard of him as a severe man, cold and not always as just as were most of his fellow officers, so rumor had said.

Mrs. Smythe was seated on a camp stool just back of the captain, and with her was a young woman that Grace had never seen before, though she afterwards learned that the girl was Marie Debussy, a French woman, who, it appeared, was acting as the supervisor's maid. Except for the lieutenant who had assisted Mrs. Smythe on the occasion of her rescue from the river, there were no others present.

"Are you Mrs. Grace Gray?" demanded the captain, fixing a stern look on Grace Harlowe.

"I am, sir."

"What right have you to those decorations?" he demanded, pointing an accusing finger at her. Grace for the instant was staggered. She found herself at a loss to answer.

"Sir?"

He repeated the question, but more sharply accentuated than before.

"With all respect, sir, your question carries with it an inference not at all creditable to me."

Elfreda Briggs was proud of Grace. She could not have said it better herself, and being a lawyer, Elfreda ordinarily was quite equal to making the retort courteous.

The face of the army officer hardened, but before he could reply, Grace continued.

"The decorations, sir, were awarded to me, one by the commander-in-chief and the other by the French Government."

"For what?"

"I have frequently asked myself that very same question, sir," replied the Overton girl.

"This is a military inquiry, Mrs. Gray. You will answer my questions directly. Why were you awarded the decorations you are wearing?"

Grace's face hardened ever so little, and Elfreda looked for an explosion, but none came.

"If you will pardon me, I must be excused from answering. The records will show why I am wearing them. General Gordon knows something of this matter. May I ask why you are pressing me on this point, sir?"

"You may. It has been said that you were wearing decorations to which you had no right. This is a very serious accusation, Madame."

Grace caught her breath sharply.

"Then the person who told you that either was misinformed or was telling a malicious falsehood," she declared with some heat, fixing a steady look on Mrs. Chadsey Smythe.

"You see, Captain! The woman is an impertinent creature," interjected Mrs. Smythe.

The captain waved a hand for her to be silent.

"I will attend to that phase of the matter later on. You wrecked an automobile to-day and imperilled the lives of your passengers. I am informed that previous to the accident you had been driving recklessly, doing so with the intent to intimidate your passenger, and at the same time endangering other lives. Is this true?"

"I was driving rather fast, I will admit, sir."

"Why?"

“Mrs. Smythe ordered me to do so, and accused me of being afraid to speed up, so I speeded up. That, however, had nothing to do with the accident. At the time of the crash I was following an officer’s car. A truck crowded me against the bridge railing. Understand, sir, I am not excusing myself. In a way I was not wholly blameless for the accident, because I was driving too fast for the crowded condition of the road. So far as intent was concerned, it is foolish to assume that there could have been anything of that sort. I had my own neck to consider as well as those of my passengers.”

“How fast were you driving?”

“About thirty-five miles an hour, I should say.”

“What experience have you had in driving a car?”

“I have been driving an ambulance on the western front for many months, sir. Previously to coming overseas I had been driving for several years. I consider myself a fairly successful driver.”

“I understand that you have had accidents before this one?”

“Naturally, sir. One cannot drive an ambulance at the front in wartime without having more or less trouble, as you know, and I cannot understand why so much should have been made of this accident by my superior. It was an accident, I was driving fast, but I deny most emphatically that I was careless or that a slower rate of speed would have prevented the collision.”

“Others will be the judge of that, Mrs. Gray,” rebuked the officer. “Mrs. Smythe makes a further charge against you. She asserts that, after you all fell into the river, you handled her roughly. Not only that but that you tried to drown her.”

“Mrs. Smythe is in error.”

“You held my head under water!” cried the supervisor.

“I was trying to rescue you, Mrs. Smythe, but you fought me, and to save you I was obliged first to subdue you. The accusation is preposterous. I am not a Hun. Are there any other charges, Captain?”

“I believe not. Those already named are quite sufficient. Mrs. Smythe, is there anything you wish to add to the statement you have already made?” questioned the captain.

“Yes, there is. I demand that this woman be dismissed from the service. She is unfit for our purposes, and I refuse to have anything further to do with her,” declared the supervisor heatedly.

Grace smiled down on her superior, but made no comment.

“That I cannot do,” answered the captain. “The most that I am empowered to do is to request her organization to withdraw her from your service. I should say, however, that such a request had best come from you. However, I agree with you that Mrs. Gray should be punished for what verges on criminal carelessness.”

“I should say it was criminal carelessness,” muttered the angry woman.

“What I can do is to relieve her from duty until – ”

“Sir,” interjected Grace Harlowe in an even tone, “as I understand the military law in the case, you have no authority to do even that. You can recommend, but you have no authority to go further. I shall be obliged to stand on my rights. I say this in no spirit of insubordination, and with full knowledge that I am responsible to the military authorities for my conduct. If it is your belief that I should be relieved from duty, I hope you will make the recommendation to your superior, who, in turn, can pass the recommendation on to a higher authority. By the time these formalities have been observed we undoubtedly shall have arrived at the Rhine, where a more formal hearing may be more conveniently held. I hope I have made myself perfectly clear both as to meaning and intent, sir.”

“Perfectly,” observed the captain sarcastically. “I agree with you in your interpretation of your rights in the case, and I shall, as you suggest, make my recommendations to my superior officer.”

“Thank you.”

“My recommendation will be that you be dismissed from service with the Army of Occupation and returned to your organization in Paris. That is all, Mrs. Gray. In the meantime you will proceed with your work as before. A car will be turned over to you to-morrow morning. That’s all!”

CHAPTER IV

A TIMELY MEETING

“GRACE HARLOWE, I am proud of you,” glowed Elfreda as they left the headquarters of Captain Rowland.

“You may not be if Mrs. Smythe has her way. She plainly has more or less influence in high places. You saw how thoroughly against me the captain was, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but he agreed with the soundness of your argument.”

“He had to. He knew I was right. What pleases me most of all is that I shall have the pleasure of driving Madame to-morrow. Beyond that I cannot say.”

“My legal training tells me that we should make some overtures in high places ourselves. You surely will not stand by and let the supervisor have her way?”

“Why not?”

“Could we reach Tom, who is somewhere in line on this march to the Rhine, he would be able to assist us,” reflected Elfreda.

Grace shook her head.

“Having gotten into this mess I shall get out of it of my own self, so possess your soul in peace, J. Elfreda. Here we are at our suburban home. I wonder who left the fagots for us? We have enough left for our morning tea, no matter what else happens.”

“Humph!” exclaimed Miss Briggs. “I should consider, were I in your place, that I had something of more importance to worry about. I’m going to bed. By the way, where did Madame get that wooden-faced maid of hers?”

Grace said she did not know, and would not even try to guess. The Overton girls soon were rolled in their blankets, and, despite the hard boards underneath them, went to sleep at once. They were used to hardships, and a little matter like a hard bed was not a thing to retard their sleep for many moments.

Grace was up at break of day next morning. After dressing she stepped out for a long breath of fresh, crisp air and a look about. There was activity all about her, and the smoke of rolling kitchens and the odor of cooking food was on the air. Glancing to the eastward and into the haze of the early morning, Grace Harlowe’s eyes dwelt momentarily on a little strip of forest about a quarter of a mile from her point of observation, then passed on.

A bird was rising from among the trees in the forest. She saw it circle and spiral, steadily rising higher and higher, finally setting out on a course to the eastward. Many times had the Overton girls seen pigeons bearing messages of great moment start out from the American lines, and what she had just witnessed was so much like the flight of a carrier pigeon that she could not believe it was not one. The difference that caused the doubt of her vision was that the pigeons she had seen in flight were always headed to the westward, while this one was flying east.

“There goes another!” exclaimed Grace. “This doesn’t look right.”

Three birds in all arose, circled and soared to the eastward while she stood watching. Grace wondered what it could mean, there now being no doubt in her mind that she had witnessed the flight of war pigeons. Returning to the cellar, she awakened Miss Briggs, told her to get up and make the tea, started the fire and went out with the mess kits to fetch their breakfast.

Breakfast was rather hurried, as Grace knew she would have to look for the car that she was to drive that morning, and that operation undoubtedly would consume some little time. It did. She was sent from officer to officer before she found the one who was to assign a car to her, and even then she had difficulty in obtaining possession of the vehicle. At last she succeeded in getting it, and lost no time in getting away with the machine before it should be grabbed by some one else.

Pulling up before their cellar she jumped out and ran down to assist in loading aboard their belongings.

“All aboard for the River Rhine, Elfreda,” she called cheerily. “We are going to enjoy this drive, I know. The air is fine.”

“I can’t say as much for the water in this neck of the woods. That water yesterday was beastly. Don’t you dare give me another such a bath, Grace Harlowe,” warned Elfreda.

“No, I’m determined to be good to-day and not do a thing to rile our supervisor. You shall see how nice I can be to her. Come, we must get ready.”

A few moments later they pulled up before Mrs. Smythe’s cellar and sat waiting for her to appear, after having given a few discreet honks on the horn. When the supervisor emerged with her maid and Miss O’Leary, her face wore a hard expression that had not been there before.

Grace, jumping out, opened the car door for her, slammed it shut after the passengers were in, and saluted snappily.

“Does not Miss Cahill ride with us to-day?” she questioned.

“Carry on as you are!” commanded Mrs. Smythe.

“Very good,” answered the Overton girl, climbing to her seat.

“Just a moment,” commanded the supervisor. “You are to drive slowly to-day. At the first indication of recklessness or the slightest disobedience of orders I shall call an officer to place you under arrest for insubordination. Do you get me clearly?”

“I get you quite clearly, Madame,” answered Grace smilingly. “What speed – three, five, ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty or forty miles?”

“You know what I mean. I ordered you to drive slowly.”

Grace swung into the highway and started off at a speed of about five miles an hour, but she had not gone far ere the rasping voice of her superior ordered her to drive, not creep.

The speed of the car was increased to ten miles an hour, but beyond this the Overton girl would not go, despite the insistent demands of Mrs. Smythe. Finally exasperated beyond measure, Grace stopped the car at the side of the road and faced her supervisor.

“Perhaps, Madame, you would prefer to have Miss Briggs drive the car?”

“No, thank you,” spoke up Elfreda.

“Are you a safe driver?” demanded Mrs. Smythe.

“Very, but I am not a skilled driver.”

“Take the wheel. You can do no worse than the present driver.”

“I will settle with you for this later,” muttered J. Elfreda in a low voice to her companion. “I call this a low-down trick. I probably shall turn you all over in the ditch.”

“Go as far as you like,” answered Grace, getting out to enable Elfreda to take the driver’s seat. Miss Briggs fumbled, stalled the car, but after a few back-fires succeeded in getting under way, the passenger growing more and more irritable as the moments passed.

Elfreda shot ahead with a jolt that brought a torrent of abuse from the supervisor, and narrowly missed smashing into an officer’s car ahead. A few rods further on, in attempting to dodge an army truck, J. Elfreda Briggs came to grief. One of the rear wheels of the army automobile slipped from the road into a shallow ditch, the wheels sank into the soft mud and the car began to settle, threatening every second to turn over on its side. Grace snapped off the spark and silenced the motors, her quick action saving them from a bad spill. Elfreda had wholly lost her head.

“Drive out, drive out!” cried Mrs. Smythe.

“I – I can’t,” gasped Miss Briggs. “The wheels will go around but the car won’t move. What shall I do?”

“We must all get out,” directed Grace.

Just then a car slipped past them and brought up abruptly. Grace observed that it was an officer's car, but beyond that gave no heed. A second or so later she saw two men get out and walk back toward them.

"I thought I recognized you when we passed, Mrs. Gray," called a familiar voice. "Are you in need of assistance?"

"Why, Colonel Gordon – I mean General Gordon," corrected Grace, flushing. "I am glad to see you and glad of the opportunity to congratulate you on your promotion."

"You are no more delighted to see me than I am to meet you again. I believe this is Miss Briggs, isn't it? Mrs. Gray and Miss Briggs, meet Captain Boucher of the Intelligence Department."

The general and the captain shook hands cordially with both Overton girls, the general giving a quick, comprehensive glance at the occupants of the rear seats, and nodding ever so slightly. Grace did not offer to introduce either to the supervisor.

"Mrs. Gray is the young woman who saved my life in the Argonne, Captain. I could tell you a lot more about her, but I know it would embarrass her if I did. Miss Briggs, I did not know that you drove."

"I don't," answered J. Elfreda rather abruptly.

"Oh, yes she does," insisted Grace. "At least she has just driven us into a ditch. Miss Briggs learned to drive immediately after the armistice was signed, but in doing so she smashed up two army cars and ran over a major. She will soon be up to my record. My latest exploit, General, was trying conclusions with the concrete railing of a bridge yesterday. The bridge won and we all went into the river."

"Was that your car that I saw hanging over the edge of a bridge near Etain, Mrs. Gray?"

"Yes, sir, that was the car."

Mrs. Smythe who had been controlling her emotions with some success, now interjected herself into the conversation.

"General, I think I have met you. I am Mrs. Chadsey Smythe, in command of the welfare workers of –"

The general and the captain saluted, smiled and turned back to Grace.

"That was not the worst of it," resumed Grace. "I had with me my supervisor, a somewhat irritable person. She went into the river with the rest of us, and of course I went to her rescue and, with the assistance of some doughboys, got her out. My supervisor was not a grateful person – she accused me of trying to drown her."

The officers laughed heartily.

"That surely was a good joke, Mrs. Gray," observed the general, regarding her quizzically.

J. Elfreda Briggs had forgotten her own troubles in her delight at the trend of the conversation.

"Let us have the rest of the story. You will pardon us for reminiscing, Mrs. Smythe," begged the general, observing the angry look on the face of the supervisor. "Listen, Captain. The worst is yet to come. I know Mrs. Gray."

"There is not much more to relate," continued Grace smilingly. "I had been driving in a way that did not please my supervisor and she was thoroughly angry with me on that account, and not wholly without reason, for I was going too fast for the crowded condition of the road. Well, the result of all this was that she made complaint against me and I was called before an officer for a hearing."

"Eh? What's that?" demanded the general.

"Yes, sir. I was accused of reckless driving and with intent to drown my superior officer."

"The woman accused you of that?"

"Yes, sir."

The two officers laughed heartily.

"Ridiculous!" exclaimed the general. "Was the woman suffering from shell shock or was it a chronic condition with her?"

“I’m sure I don’t know, sir,” answered Grace meekly. “As I have already said, I was called before a captain, who among other things questioned me sharply about the decorations I wore, the intimation being that I had no right to them. Of course I do not know who suggested the thought to him. I declined to discuss the matter, taking the liberty of saying to him that General Gordon was familiar with the circumstances of at least one of my decorations.”

“I should say so. Who was the officer?”

“Captain Rowland of the Forty-Ninth, sir.”

“Ah! Please proceed.”

“The captain was of the opinion that I should be punished and was for dismissing me from the army and sending me back to Paris, until I took the liberty of pointing out to him that he had no authority to do so, that he could make recommendations, but had not the power to enforce in this instance.”

“You were right. What were his recommendations?”

“That I be dismissed and sent back to my organization.”

“Thank you. I am glad you told me the story. It is most interesting, I assure you. Mrs. Gray, it was on my urgent recommendation that you were directed to join this march and go with us to the Rhine. Having done so I shall make it my business to see to it that a crazy woman and a misinformed officer do not interfere with my plans. I will discuss this matter with you further later on. Captain, do you mind ordering some men to place this car back in the road?”

CHAPTER V

GRACE WINS AND IS SORRY

THE general saluted and stepped away, and in a moment or so a squad of soldiers ran to the car. "All hands out, please," called Grace. "No need to have them lift us with the car."

Up to this time J. Elfreda had not dared permit herself to catch Grace's eye, knowing very well that were she to do so she would laugh. Perhaps "Captain" Grace was of the same opinion regarding her own emotions, so she avoided Elfreda's eyes. The men quickly boosted the car back into the road.

"Take the wheel and make a fresh start, Elfreda," directed Grace, after thanking the doughboys.

"I beg most respectfully to be excused. Mrs. Smythe, I ask to be relieved from driving. An empty road and a wide one is the only safe place for me to experiment. May I turn the wheel over to Mrs. Gray?"

The supervisor half nodded. She was dazed, at least she appeared to be so, and had not a word to say. At least two of her companions in the car found themselves wondering what her thoughts were at that moment. After a little Elfreda ventured to speak.

"How wide and expansive the morning is," she observed.

"Very," agreed Grace. "I don't know what you are talking about, but I agree with you."

A great silence hovered over the army automobile, so far as the rear seat was concerned, though eventually Grace and Elfreda fell to discussing army matters of a general nature. At noon they halted for mess, then proceeded on at slow speed, for they were close up to the engineers, who were following the advance column to examine roads for mines and repair them where necessary.

Thus far not a gun had been fired, though at any moment a blast was looked for by every one in the Third Army. Airplanes were constantly buzzing overhead, observation balloons were continuously on watch in the skies, and every precaution was being taken to guard against a surprise. That night their bedroom again was in a cellar, and once more Won Lue brought them fagots and water.

They had left Mrs. Chadsey Smythe at the cellar that had been assigned to her. Miss Cahill arrived at about the same time on an army truck and shared the cellar with Madame, Miss O'Leary and the maid, Marie Debussy.

"Grace Harlowe, I take off my hat to you," Elfreda exclaimed, throwing off her cap and blouse. "Chad got her deserts that time, but, woman, look out for her. Revenge is as sweet to her as it is to you."

"Revenge is not sweet to me," objected Grace. "I am so sorry that I turned the tables on her as I did, but it was an opportunity that I could not miss. At least it served one useful purpose; Madame did not speak to me all the rest of the day. What a heavenly relief. Do you suppose the general knew who she was?"

"He may have known who she was, but I do not believe he understood that she was the woman to whom you referred. I hope the general doesn't find out that he was abusing the woman to her face," Elfreda chuckled.

"He will learn it the first time I see him. I feel that I did an inexcusable thing in drawing him into the muss as I did. I am always doing the wrong thing at the wrong time."

"It is war," reminded Elfreda. "Ah! Here comes our friend the Chinaman. Good evening, Won. What is it?"

"Plenty fine apple," he answered, emptying out full two quarts of red apples from a gas mask bag.

"Oh, isn't that fine," glowed Elfreda. "I haven't had an apple since I left America. Grace, what do you think of that?"

“I think Won must have found an orchard in a cellar somewhere. Thank you ever so much. Why do you do so many nice things for us?”

“Nicee lady, a-la. Missie see nicee birdie fly fly away?” Won accompanied the words with a wink and knowing smirk.

“What do you mean?” demanded Grace, regarding him narrowly.

For answer Won formed a spiral in the air with one hand, raising the hand a little higher with each circle, then sending the hand flitting through the air in imitation of a bird’s flight.

Grace caught the meaning instantly.

“Oh, you mean a bird?”

“Les. Plidgin bird. Him fly, a-la. Missie see plidgin fly.”

“Did you see it, Won?”

“Me savvy. Me see.”

“Do you know where they came from, where they were going or who sent them? Understand me?”

“Not know. Plenty blad man. Mebby Chinaman blad man.”

“Why do you tell me, then?”

“Missie no like blad man, no likee plidgin go so,” pointing to the east.

“Thank you. I understand. You must keep watch, Won, and let me know who is making the ‘plidgin fly-fly.’”

Won nodded and chuckled, then shaking hands with himself, trotted away without another word.

“What was that wild heathen talking about?” demanded Elfreda. “You appeared to understand perfectly what he was getting at, but I couldn’t make a single thing out of it.”

“He was trying to convey to me that something bad is going on in the Third Army.”

“What is the something?”

“Perhaps I shall be able to tell you about that later. Won is a wise Chinaman. He knew that I knew something was going on and wished to let me know he was on our side. I don’t believe many of the Orientals in the labor battalion are in the same class with our friend. To change the subject, do you know I feel sorry for that poor little Marie Debussy. The half dumb way she looks at you is almost heart-breaking. Mrs. Smythe must make her life miserable. When we get to the Rhine we must try to do something for the girl. Did you observe that Miss Cahill came through on a camion to-day?”

“Yes, I observed it.”

“Mrs. Smythe evidently did not propose to be so crowded.”

“No, she wished to be free to jump if you hit another bridge,” declared Elfreda.

Supper was attended with the same smoke-screen as had happened at the meal of the previous evening, but they enjoyed their mess and chatted and teased each other until it was time to turn in.

Grace was up at daybreak again, but did not awaken her companion. The morning was very chill, but the air was clear, and Grace with her binoculars surveyed the surrounding country as well as she could in the half light of the early morning, appearing to be especially interested in every clump of trees within the range of her vision.

Day was just dawning when she discovered that of which she was in search, a pigeon rising into the air from a field quite a distance to the southward. As on the previous occasion the pigeon flew east, and was followed at regular intervals by two others.

There could be no doubt about it now. War pigeons were being sent toward the enemy country, though Grace was not at all certain that it was enemy agents who were doing the sending. In any event it was a matter that should be reported, which the Overton girl determined to do that very day.

Without saying anything to her companion of what she had observed, Grace ate her breakfast, and asking Elfreda to clean up and pack up, set out for Mrs. Smythe’s headquarters. The supervisor

was just eating her breakfast. Her face flushed as she saw who her visitor was, but she spoke no word, merely stared.

“I have come, Mrs. Smythe, for two reasons; first, to ask what your orders are for the day; secondly, to tell you I am sorry that I gave way to my inclinations yesterday and related the story of our trouble to the general. I ordinarily fight my own battles. You must admit, however, that I had very excellent reasons for feeling as I did toward you.”

“You insulted and humiliated me!” cried the supervisor, suddenly finding speech.

“And you also have insulted and humiliated me,” replied Grace. “It is my feeling that you were well entitled to all that you received, but my regret is that I permitted myself to be the instrument of the rebuke. You are my superior. I am at all times ready to take and obey any reasonable orders that you may give me. However, we must understand each other. My self-respect will not permit me to remain silent under such tongue-lashings as you have been indulging in. It must cease, Mrs. Smythe!”

“You – you are telling me, your commanding officer, what I must do?” demanded the woman, exercising more than ordinary self-restraint.

“No, not that, Mrs. Smythe. What I am seeking to do is to convince you that it will not be advisable for the peace of mind of either of us for you to continue your unkind treatment of me.”

“And, in the event that I decide to do as I please in all matters relating to your official duties, what then?”

Grace shrugged her shoulders.

“Attention!”

Grace smiled sweetly.

“The regulations do not require me to salute a superior when that superior is seated, without head covering and with blouse unbuttoned. Neither do the regulations require that I shall come to attention in such circumstances. This is not an official call and I do not expect you to receive me as such, therefore you must expect no more of me. I am here as woman to woman to ask that you treat me like a human being, and then to ask your forgiveness for my questionable revenge of to-day. Even the Huns have signed an armistice and agreed to cease fighting. Surely you and I as good Americans should be able to settle our differences by declaring an armistice; and you may rest assured that I shall do my part toward preserving the peace. What are your feelings on the matter and your orders for the day, please?”

“Driver, my feelings are my own. You came here with the deliberate intention of further insulting me.”

“I am sincerely sorry that you look at it in that light. I know you will not feel that way after you have thought over what I have said.”

“Have you anything further to say, driver? If so, say it and have done, for it will be your last opportunity.”

“Only to ask again for orders, Mrs. Smythe,” replied Grace sweetly.

“My orders are that you get out of my sight instantly!” The supervisor rose, buttoned her blouse to the throat and put on her cap. “Go!” she commanded, pointing to the cellar opening.

Grace Harlowe clicked her heels together and snapped into a salute, then executing a right-about, marched from the cellar and back to her own headquarters under a ruined cottage.

CHAPTER VI

MESSING WITH A BRIGADIER

“THE car has gone?”

“Yes, Mrs. Gray. One of our men drivers took it out under orders this morning,” the sergeant informed her.

“Whose orders?”

“Captain Grant’s.”

“No provision then has been made for a car for me?” questioned Grace.

“Not that I am aware of. Sorry, but I can’t help it. It’s orders.”

“I understand, Sergeant. I think a hike will do myself and my friend good.”

“Would you ride on a truck?”

“Of course if necessary, but I think we prefer to walk, thank you. I always did enjoy hiking. You don’t know whether or not the car has gone on?”

“It went on less than five minutes before you came out. Four women in it, the same ones you carried before.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. May I offer you a package of cigarettes?”

He said she might, and thanked her, a broad grin on his face.

“The old party hasn’t passed out a thing since we started,” he informed her.

“I know it. She informs me that none will be distributed from the canteen until we reach the Rhine. Thank you very much for your kindness.” Grace returned to their cellar, where she found Elfreda awaiting her with more or less impatience. Their mess kits and other supplies were packed.

“Where is the car? I didn’t hear you drive up,” questioned Miss Briggs.

“Mrs. Chadsey Smythe took the car and a soldier driver, and went on, I am informed.”

“What?”

“You and I are going to enjoy a lovely twelve-mile walk this morning, and I know it will do us a world of good. We have been riding too much since we came over here.”

“I call that an outrage!” expostulated J. Elfreda. “What about all this stuff?”

“We will carry our own kits. Our bags and what little government property we have here we will try to get on a truck. The rest will be easy. I had an interview with Madame in her cellar this morning. I tried to come to an amicable settlement of our difficulties, but she threatened me and drove me out. It is quite evident that General Gordon has not taken action, as he said he would. However, I feel that we are going to be all right and that we shall arrive at the Rhine flying high.”

“Tell me about it,” urged Elfreda.

Grace did so, her companion listening with narrowed eyes.

“This passes all comprehension, Grace. I can’t believe that the woman is so bad as she would have us think her. You must admit that she is a good American else she would not be here, suffering all the discomforts of army life.”

“That is the way I have reasoned it out, Elfreda, and that is why I went to see her this morning, hoping that after yesterday she might have seen a light – instead she saw red,” added Grace, smiling up at her companion. “Let’s get our luggage out and I will look up one of our unit’s wagons. Perhaps we may arrange our day’s journey quite satisfactorily.”

They were fortunate in finding one of their own camions that was just starting out, and the driver was more than willing to take their belongings and asked them to ride through with him, but Grace said they preferred to walk, now that their car had gone on without them.

The Overton girls set out bravely, falling in behind the regiment with which they had been billeted. There were many offers of a ride on wagons of their train, and doughboys frequently urged them to turn over their kits, to all of which Grace gave a smiling “Thank you” and shook her head.

They were two weary girls when they arrived at their objective, and while Elfreda was in search of a cellar, Grace looked up the driver who had their belongings and carried them to the side of the street to a point where Elfreda was to meet her.

“I have a whole house for us,” cried Miss Briggs, running up to Grace nearly half an hour later. “It is what is left of a peasant cottage. Part of the roof is shot away, but what is left of it will cover us very nicely. There is a fireplace where we can make our tea, and enough pieces of board about to make a roaring fire and keep us warm.”

“Fine. Help me carry the things in, then I will report our location to Company A’s commander. I don’t suppose you chance to know where Mrs. Smythe’s billet is?”

“Neither know nor care, Grace Harlowe. I have troubles of my own, the principal one being a pair of feet that weigh several pounds above normal. Let’s go!”

Grace was delighted with their quarters, and the two girls promptly set about arranging their belongings. “Captain” Grace then reported their billet to a lieutenant of Company A, which was according to orders.

When she returned to the cottage a car was standing before it, and Elfreda was at the door of the house watching for her.

“What is it?”

“General Gordon’s car,” said Elfreda. “He has sent it for us, requesting that we mess with him. It strikes me that this is moving some. I hope Chad doesn’t hear of it, or she will have us drawn and quartered at sunrise.”

Grace stepped out to the driver.

“Can you wait fifteen minutes, Buddy? We simply must slick up before we go.”

“Yes, Mrs. Gray. Take your time.”

The girls changed their clothes, brushed their hair and put on clean boots, and came out fit for the most rigid inspection.

The general’s driver was not a slow driver, and ten minutes later they halted before a cottage that appeared to be whole. It was about the only one in town that escaped the deluge of Hun steel that had been hurled on the little French village. The general met the Overton girls at the door and led them in. Captain Boucher was there, and a Major Colt, who was a member of the balloon corps, and to whom he introduced both women.

A cheerful fire was blazing in the wide fireplace, and a table was set for five, while a Chinaman was cooking the supper over the fire.

“How cheerful,” exclaimed Grace. “We too have a cottage and fireplace, but we lack a roof, and what heat doesn’t go up the chimney goes through the place where the roof once was.”

“How is your superior behaving to-day?” questioned the general quizzically.

“I don’t know, not having seen her since early morning, sir. I wish to make a confession to you, and now is the proper time to do so. I feel that I took an inexcusable advantage of you yesterday in telling you of my supervisor’s shortcomings in her presence. Mrs. Chadsey Smythe was the woman I referred to, and she was in the car when I told you the story. She also, of course, heard you express your opinion of her. I owe you an apology, General, but do not see how you can overlook what I did.”

General Gordon laughed heartily.

“No apology is necessary. I knew that it was she to whom you referred. Even had I not known it, her face would have told me. I expressed myself as I did, partly for her own good. I take it that she hasn’t been driving with you to-day?”

“No, sir. She preferred to drive with some one else. When do we reach the Rhine, if I may ask, sir?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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