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Содержание

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CHAPTER I – UNCLE JABEZ IS EXCITED

"Oh! Not *Tom*?"

Ruth Fielding looked up from the box she was packing for the local Red Cross chapter, and, almost horrified, gazed into the black eyes of the girl who confronted her.

Helen Cameron's face was tragic in its expression. She had been crying. The closely written sheets of the letter in her hand were shaken, as were her shoulders, with the sobs she tried to suppress.

"It – it's written to father," Helen said. "He gave it to me to read. I wish Tom had never gone to Harvard. Those boys there are completely crazy! To think – at the end of his freshman year – to throw it all up and go to a training camp!"

"I guess Harvard isn't to blame," said Ruth practically. If she was deeply moved by what her chum had told her, she quickly recovered her self-control. "The boys are going from other colleges all over the land. Is Tom going to try for a commission?"

"Yes."

"What does your father say?"

"Why," cried the other girl as though that, too, had surprised and hurt her, "father cried 'Bully for Tom!' and then wiped his eyes on his handkerchief. What can men be made of, Ruth? He knows Tom may be killed, and yet he cheers for him."

Ruth Fielding smiled and suddenly hugged Helen. Ruth's smile was somewhat tremulous, but her chum did not observe this fact.

"I understand how your father feels, dear. Tom does not want to be drafted – "

"He wouldn't be drafted. He is not old enough. And even if they automatically draft the boys as they become of age, it would be months before they reached Tom, and the war will be over by that time. But here he is throwing himself away – "

"Oh, Helen! Not that!" cried Ruth. "Our soldiers will fight for us – for their country – for honor. And a man's life lost in such a cause is not thrown away."

"That's the way I feel," said Helen, more steadily. "Tom is my twin. You don't know what it means to have a twin brother, Ruth Fielding."

"That is true," sighed Ruth. "But I can imagine how you feel, dear. If you have hopes of the war's being over so quickly, then I should expect Tom back from training camp safe and sound, and with no chance of ever facing the enemy. Has he really gone?"

"Oh, yes," Helen told her despondently. "And lots of the boys who used to go to school with Tom at Seven Oaks. You know, all those jolly fellows who were at Snow Camp with us, and at Lighthouse Point, and on Cliff Island, and out West on Silver Ranch – and – and everywhere. Just to think! We may never see them again."

"Dear me, Helen," Ruth urged, "don't look upon the blackest side of the cloud. It's a long time before they go over there."

"We don't know how soon they will be in the trenches," said her friend hopelessly. "These boys going to war – "

"And I wish I was young enough to go with 'em!" ejaculated a harsh voice, as the door of the back kitchen opened and the speaker stamped into the room. "Got that box ready to nail up, Niece Ruth? Ben's hitching up the mules, and I want to get to Cheslow before dark."

"Oh! Almost ready, Uncle Jabez," cried the girl of the Red Mill, as the gray old man approached.

He was lean and wiry and the dust of his mill seemed to have been so ground into his very skin that he was a regular "dusty miller." His features were as harsh as his voice, and he was seldom as excited as he seemed to be now.

"Who's going to war now?" he asked, turning to Helen.

"Poor – poor Tom!" burst out the black-eyed girl, and began to dabble her eyes again.

"What's the matter o' him?" demanded the old miller.

"He'll – he'll be shot – I know he'll be killed, and mangled horribly!"

"Fiddle-de-dee!" grunted Uncle Jabez, but his tone of voice was not as harsh as his words sounded. "I never got shot, nor mangled none to speak of, and I was fightin' and marchin' three endurin' years."

"*You*, Uncle Jabez?" cried Ruth.

"Yep. And I wish they'd take me again. I can go a-soldierin' as good as the next one. I'm tough and I'm wiry. They talk about this war bein' a dreadful war. Shucks! All wars air dreadful. They won't never have a battle over there that'll be as bad as the Wilderness – believe me! They may have more battles, but I went through some of the wust a man could ever experience."

"And – and you weren't shot?" gasped Helen.

"Not a bit. Three years of campaigning and never was scratched. Don't you look for Tom Cameron to be killed fust thing just because he's going to the wars. If more men didn't come back from the wars than git killed in 'em how d'ye s'pose this old world would have gone on rolling? Shucks!"

"I never knew you were a soldier, Uncle Jabez," Ruth Fielding said.

"Wal, I was. Shucks! I was something of a sharpshooter, too. And we old fellers – course I was nothin' but a boy, *then*– we could shoot. We'd l'arn't to shoot on the farm. Powder an' shot was hard to git and we l'arn't to make every bullet count. My old Betsey – didn't ye ever see my Civil War rifle?" he demanded of Ruth.

"You mean the old brown gun that hangs over your bed and that Aunt Alvirah is so much afraid of?"

"That's old Betsey. Sharpe's rifle. In them days it was jest about the last thing in weepons. I brung it home after the Grand Army of the Potomac was disbanded. Know how I did it? Government claimed all the guns; but I took old Betsey apart and me an' my mates hid the pieces away in our clothes, and so got her home. Then I assembled her again," and Uncle Jabez broke into a chuckle that was actually almost startling to the girls, for the miller seldom laughed.

"Say!" he exclaimed, in his strange excitement. "I'll show her to ye."

He hurried out of the room, evidently in search of "Old Betsey." Helen said to the miller's niece:

"Goodness, Ruth! what has happened to your Uncle Jabez?"

"Just what has happened to Tom – and your father," returned the girl of the Red Mill. "I've seen it coming on. Uncle Jabez has been getting more and more excited ever since war was declared. You know, when we came home from college a month ago and decided to remain here and help in the Red Cross work instead of finishing our sophomore year at Ardmore, my decision was really the first one I ever made that Uncle Jabez seemed to approve of immediately.

"He is thoroughly patriotic. When I told him I could study later – when the war was over – but that I must work for the soldiers now, he said I was a good girl. What do you think of *that*?"

"Cheslow is not doing its share," Helen said thoughtfully, her mind switched by Ruth's last words to the matter that had completely filled her own and her chum's thoughts for weeks. "The people are not awake. They do not know we are at war yet. They have not done half for the Red Cross that they should do."

"We'll make 'em!" declared Ruth Fielding. "We must get the women and girls to pull together."

"Say, Ruth! what do you think of that woman in black – you know, the widow, or whoever she is? Dresses in black altogether; but maybe it's because she thinks black becomes her," added Helen rather scornfully.

"Mrs. Mantel?" asked Ruth slowly. "I don't know what to think of her. She seems to be very anxious to help. Yet she does nothing really helpful – only talks."

"And some of her talk I'd rather not hear," said Helen sharply.

"I know what you mean," Ruth rejoined, nodding. "But so many people talk so doubtfully. They are unfamiliar with the history of the Red Cross and what it has done. Perhaps Mrs. Mantel means no harm."

At that moment Uncle Jabez reappeared with the heavy rifle in his hands. He was still chuckling.

"Calc'late I ain't heard Aunt Alvirah talk about this gun much of late. One spell – when fust she come here to the Red Mill to keep house for me – she didn't scurce dare to go into my room because of it. But, of course, 'twarn't ever loaded.

"I was some sharpshooter, gals," he added proudly, patting the stock of the heavy gun. "Here's a ca'tridge. I'm goin' to stick it in her an' you shall hear how she roars. Warn't no Maxim silencers, nor nothin' like that, when I used to pot the Johnny Rebs with Old Betsey."

He flung open the door into the back yard. He raised the rifle to his shoulder, having slipped in the greased cartridge.

"See that sassy jay atop o' that cherry tree? I bet I kin clutter him up a whole lot – an' he desarves it," said Uncle Jabez.

Just then the door into the other kitchen opened, and a little, crooked-backed old woman with a shawl around her shoulders and a cap atop of her thin hair appeared.

"Jabez Potter! What in creation you goin' to do with that awful gun?" she shrilled.

"I'm a-goin' to knock the topknot off'n that bluejay," chuckled Uncle Jabez.

"Stop! Don't! Gals!" cried the little old woman, hobbling down the two steps into the room. "Oh, my back! and oh, my bones! Gals! stop him! That gun can't shoot 'cause I went and plugged the barrel!"

At that moment Old Betsey went off with an awful roar.

CHAPTER II – THE CALL OF THE DRUM

There was a flash following the explosion, and Uncle Jabez staggered back from the doorway, his arm across his eyes, while the gun dropped with a crash to the porch. The girls, as well as Aunt Alvirah, shrieked.

"I vum!" ejaculated the miller. "Who done that? What's happened to Old Betsey?"

"Jabez Potter!" shrilled the little old woman, "didn't I tell you to git rid o' that gun long ago? Be you shot?"

"No," said the miller grimly. "I'm only scare't. Old Betsey never kicked like that afore."

Ruth was at his side patting his shoulder and looking at him anxiously.

"Shucks!" scoffed the miller. "I ain't dead yit. But what made that gun – "

He stooped and picked it up. First he looked at the twisted hammer, then he turned it around and looked into the muzzle.

"For the good land o' liberty!" he yelled. "What's the meanin' of this? Who – who's gone and stuck up this here gun bar'l this a-way? I vum! It's *ce*-ment – sure's I'm a foot high."

"What did you want to tetch that gun for, Jabez Potter?" demanded Aunt Alvirah, easing herself into a low rocker. "Oh, my back! and oh, my bones! I allus warned you 'twould do some harm some day. That's why I plugged it up."

"You – you plugged it up?" gasped the miller. "Wha – what for I want to know?"

"So, if 'twas loaded, no bullet would get out and hurt anybody," declared the little old woman promptly. "Now, you kin get mad and use bad language, Jabez Potter, if you've a mind to. But I'd ruther go back to the poorhouse to live than stay under this ruff with that gun all ready to shoot with."

The miller was so thunderstruck for a moment that he could not reply. Ruth feared he might fly into a temper, for he was not a patient man. But, oddly enough, he never raged at the little old housekeeper.

"I vum!" he said at last. "Don't that beat all? An' ain't it like a woman? Stickin' up the muzzle of the gun so's it couldn't shoot – but *would* explode. Shucks!" He suddenly flung up both hands. "Can you beat 'em? *You can't!*"

Now that it was all over, and the accident had not caused any fatality, the two girls felt like laughing – a hysterical feeling perhaps. They got Aunt Alvirah into the larger kitchen and left Uncle Jabez to nail up the box that he was going to ship for Ruth to Red Cross headquarters.

The girl of the Red Mill had been gathering the knitted wear and comfort kits from the neighbors around to send on to the Red Cross headquarters, and, in the immediate vicinity of the Red Mill, she knew that the women and girls were doing a better work for the cause than in Cheslow itself.

The mill and the rambling old house that adjoined and belonged to Uncle Jabez Potter stood upon the bank of the Lumano River, and was as beautiful a spot as one might find in that part of the state. Ruth Fielding had always loved it since the first day her eyes had spied it, when as a little girl she had come to live with her cross and crotchety Uncle Jabez.

The miller was a miserly man, and, at first, Ruth had had no pleasant time as a dependent on her uncle. Had it not been for Aunt Alvirah Boggs, who was nobody's relative but everybody's aunt, and whom Uncle Jabez had taken from the poorhouse to keep house for him, the lonely little orphan girl would have been quite heartbroken.

With Aunt Alvirah's help and the consolation of her philosophy, as well as with the aid of the friendship of Helen and Tom Cameron, who were neighbors, Ruth Fielding began to be happy. And really unhappy thereafter she never could be, for something was always happening to her, and the active person is seldom if ever in the doldrums.

In the first volume of the series, "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill," these and others of Ruth's friends were introduced, and the girl began to develop that sturdy and independent character which

has made her loved by so many. With Helen she went to Briarwood Hall to boarding school, and there her acquaintance rapidly widened. For some years her course is traced through several volumes, at school and during vacations at different places where exciting and most delightful adventures happen to Ruth and her friends.

In following volumes we meet Ruth Fielding at Snow Camp, at Lighthouse Point, at Silver Ranch, on Cliff Island, at Sunrise Farm, in a Gypsy camp, in Moving Pictures, down in Dixie, and, finally, she graduates from Briarwood Hall, and she and her chums enter Ardmore College. At the beginning of this, the thirteenth volume of the series, Ruth and Helen were quite grown up. Following their first year at Ardmore, Ruth had gone West to write and develop a moving picture for the Alectrion Film Corporation, in which she now owned an interest.

In "Ruth Fielding in the Saddle; or, College Girls in the Land of Gold," an account of this adventure is narrated, the trip occupying most of the first summer following Ruth's freshman year. Ruth's success as a writer of moving-picture scenarios of the better class had already become established. "The Forty-Niners" had become one of the most successful of the big scenarios shown during the winter just previous to the opening of our present story.

Ruth had made much money. Together with what she had made in selling a claim she had staked out at Freezeout, where the pictures were taken, her bank accounts and investments now ran well into five figures. She really did not want Uncle Jabez to know exactly how much she had made and had saved. Mr. Cameron, Helen's father, had her finances in charge, although the girl of the Red Mill was quite old enough, and quite wise enough, to attend to her own affairs.

Interest in Red Cross work had smitten Ruth and Helen and many of their associates at college. Not alone had the men's colleges become markedly empty during that previous winter; but the girls' schools and colleges were buzzing with excitement regarding the war and war work.

As soon as Congress declared a state of war with Germany, Ruth and Helen had hurried home. Cheslow, the nearest town, was an insular community, and many of the people in it were hard to awaken to the needs of the hour. Because of the peaceful and satisfied life the people led they could not understand what war really meant.

Cheslow and the vicinity of the Red Mill was not alone in this. Many, many communities were yet to be awakened.

Ruth bore these facts very much on her heart. She was doing all that she could to strike a note of alarm that should awaken Cheslow.

Despite Uncle Jabez Potter's patriotism, she would have been afraid to tell him just how much she had personally subscribed for the work of the Red Cross and for other war activities. And, likewise, in her heart was another secret – a longing to be doing something of moment for the cause. She wanted to really enlist for the war! She wished she might be "over there" in body, as well as in spirit.

Not only were the drums calling to Tom Cameron and his friends, and many, many other boys, but they were calling the girls to arms as well. Never before has war so soon and so suddenly offered womankind a chance to aid in an undying cause.

Yet Ruth did not neglect the small and seemingly unimportant duties right at hand. She was no dreamer or dallier. Having got off this big box of comforts for the boys at the front, the very next day she, with Helen, took up the effort already begun of a house-to-house campaign throughout Cheslow for Red Cross members, and to invite the feminine part of the community to aid in a big drive for knitted goods.

The Ladies' Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church was meeting that day with Mrs. Curtis, the wife of the railroad station agent and the mother of one of Ruth's friends at boarding school. Mercy Curtis, having quite outgrown her childish ills, welcomed the friends when they rang the bell.

"Do come in and help me bear the chatter of this flock of starlings," Mercy said. "Glad to see you, girlies!" and she kissed both Ruth and Helen.

"But I am afraid I want to join the starlings, as you call them," Ruth said demurely; "and even add to their chatter. I came here for just that purpose."

"For just what purpose?" Mercy demanded.

"To talk to them. I knew the crowd would be here, and so I thought I could kill two birds with one stone."

"Two birds, only?" sniffed Mercy. "Kill 'em all, for all I care! I'll run and find you some stones."

"My ammunition are hard words only," laughed Ruth. "I want to tell them that they are not doing their share for the Red Cross."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mercy. "Humph! Well, Ruthie, you have come at an unseasonable time, I fear. Mrs. Mantel is here."

"Mrs. Mantel!" murmured Ruth.

"The woman in black!" exclaimed Helen. "Well, Mercy, what has she been saying?"

"Enough, I think," the other girl replied. "At least, I have an idea that most of the women in the Ladies' Aid believe that it is better to go on with the usual sewing and foreign and domestic mission work, and let the Red Cross strictly alone."

CHAPTER III – THE WOMAN IN BLACK

"Do you mean to say," demanded Helen Cameron, with some anger, "that they have no interest in the war, or in our boys who will soon begin to go over there? Impossible!"

"I repeat that," said Ruth. "'Impossible,' indeed."

"Oh, each may knit for her own kin or for other organizations," Mercy said. "I am repeating what I have just heard, that is all. Girls! I am just boiling!"

"I can imagine it," Helen said. "I am beginning to simmer myself."

"Wait. Let us be calm," urged Ruth, smiling as she laid off her things, preparatory to going into the large front room where Mrs. Curtis was entertaining the Ladies' Aid Society.

"Is it all because of that woman in black?" demanded Helen.

"Well, she has been pointing out that the Red Cross is a great money-making scheme, and that it really doesn't need our small contributions."

"And she is a member herself!" snapped Helen.

"Well, she joined, of course, because she did not want anybody to think she wasn't patriotic," scoffed Mercy. "That is the way she puts it. But you ought to hear the stories she has been telling these poor, simple women."

"Did you ever!" cried Helen angrily.

"It is well we came here," Ruth said firmly. "Let me into the lions' den, Mercy."

"I am afraid they are another breed of cats. There is little noble or lionlike about some of them."

Ruth and Helen were quite used to Mercy Curtis' sharp tongue. It was well known. But it was evident, too, that the girl had been roused to fury by what she had heard at the meeting of the Ladies' Aid Society.

The ladies of the church society were, for the most part, very good people indeed. But at this time the war was by no means popular in Cheslow (as it was not in many places) and the plague of pacifism, if not actually downright pro-German propaganda, was active and malignant.

When the door into the big front room was opened and the girls entered, Mrs. Curtis rose hastily to welcome Ruth and Helen warmly. The women were, for the most part, busily sewing. But, of course, that puts no brake upon the activities of the tongue. Indeed, the needle seems to be particularly helpful as an accompaniment to a "dish of gossip."

"I still think it is terrible," one woman was saying quite earnestly to another, who was one of the few idle women in the room, "if an organization like that cannot be trusted."

The idle woman was dressed plainly but elegantly in black, with just a touch of white at wrists and throat. She was a graceful woman, tall, not yet forty, and with a set smile on her face that might have been the outward sign of a sweet temperament, and then —

"Mrs. Mantel!" whispered Helen to Ruth. "I do not like her one bit. And nobody knows where she came from or who she is. Cheslow has only been her abiding place since we went to college last autumn."

"Sh!" whispered Ruth in return. "I am interested."

"Oh, I assure you, my dear Mrs. Crothers, that it may not be the organization's fault," purred the woman in black. "The objects of the Red Cross are very worthy. None more so. But in certain places – locally, you know – of course I don't mean here in Cheslow —

"Yet I could tell you of something that happened to me to-day. I was quite hurt – quite shocked, indeed. I saw on the street a sweater that I knitted myself last winter."

"Oh! On a soldier?" asked another of the women who heard. "How nice!"

"No, indeed. No soldier," said Mrs. Mantel quickly. "On a girl. Fancy! On a girl I had never seen before. And I gave that to the Red Cross with my own hands."

"Perhaps it belonged to the girl's brother," another of the women observed.

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Mantel was eager to say. "I asked her. Naturally I was curious – very curious. I said to her, 'Where did you get the sweater, my girl, if you will pardon my asking?' And she told me she bought it in a store here in Cheslow."

"Oh, my!" gasped another of the group.

"Do you mean to say the Red Cross sells the things people knit for them?" cried Mrs. Crothers.

"How horrid!" drawled another. "Well, you never can tell about these charitable organizations that are not connected with the church."

Ruth Fielding broke her silence and quite calmly asked:

"Will you tell me who the girl was and where she said she bought the sweater, Mrs. Mantel?"

"Oh, I never saw the girl before," said the lady in black.

"But she told you the name of the store where she said she purchased it?"

"No-o. What does it matter? I recognized my own sweater!" exclaimed the woman in black, with a toss of her head.

"Are you quite sure, Mrs. Mantel," pursued the girl of the Red Mill insistently but quite calmly, "that you could not have made a mistake?"

"Mistake? How?" snapped the other.

"Regarding the identity of the sweater."

"I tell you I recognized it. I know I knitted it. I certainly know my own work. And why should I be cross-questioned, please?"

"My name is Ruth Fielding," Ruth explained. "I happen to have at present a very deep interest in the Red Cross work – especially in our local chapter. Did you give your sweater to our local chapter?"

"Why – no. But what does that matter?" and the woman in black began to show anger. "Do you doubt my word?"

"You offer no corroborative evidence, and you make a very serious charge," Ruth said. "Don't be angry. If what you say is true, it is a terrible thing. Of course, there may be people using the name of the Red Cross who are neither patriotic nor honest. Let us run each of these seemingly wicked things down – if it is possible. Let us get at the truth."

"I have told you the truth, Miss Fielding. And I consider you insulting – most unladylike."

"Mrs. Mantel," said Ruth Fielding gravely, "whether I speak and act as a lady should make little material difference in the long run. But whether a great organization, which is working for the amelioration of suffering on the battle front and in our training camps, is maligned, is of very great moment, indeed.

"In my presence no such statement as you have just made can go unchallenged. You must help me prove, or disprove it. We must find the girl and discover just how she came by the sweater. If it had been stolen and given to her she would be very likely to tell you just what you say she did. But that does not prove the truth of her statement."

"Nor of mine, I suppose you would say!" cried Mrs. Mantel.

"Exactly. If you are fair-minded at all you will aid me in this investigation. For I purpose to take up every such calumny that I can and trace it to its source."

"Oh, Ruth, don't take it so seriously!" Mrs. Curtis murmured, and most of the women looked their displeasure. But Helen clapped her hands softly, saying:

"Bully for you, Ruthie!"

Mercy's eyes glowed with satisfaction.

Ruth became silent for a moment, for the woman in black evidently intended to give her no satisfaction. Mrs. Mantel continued to state, however, for all to hear:

"I certainly know my own knitting, and my own yarn. I have knitted enough of the sweaters according to the Red Cross pattern to sink a ship! I would know one of my sweaters half a block away at least."

Ruth had been watching the woman very keenly. Mrs. Mantel's hands were perfectly idle in her lap. They were very white and very well cared for. Ruth's vision came gradually to a focus upon those idle hands.

Then suddenly she turned to Mercy and whispered a question. Mercy nodded, but looked curiously at the girl of the Red Mill. When the latter explained further Mercy Curtis' eyes began to snap. She nodded again and went out of the room.

When she returned with a loosely wrapped bundle in her hands she moved around to where the woman in black was sitting. The conversation had now become general, and all were trying their best to get away from the previous topic of tart discussion.

"Mrs. Mantel," said Mercy very sweetly, "you must know a lot about knitting sweaters, you've made so many. Would you help me?"

"Help you do what, child?" asked the woman in black, rather startled.

"I am going to begin one," explained Mercy, "and I do wish, Mrs. Mantel, that you would show me how. I'm dreadfully ignorant about the whole thing, you know."

There was a sudden silence all over the room. Mrs. Mantel's ready tongue seemed stayed. The pallor of her face was apparent, as innocent-looking Mercy, with the yarn and needles held out to her, waited for an affirmative reply.

CHAPTER IV – "CAN A POILU LOVE A FAT GIRL?"

The shocked silence continued for no more than a minute. Mrs. Mantel was a quick-witted woman, if she was nothing else commendable. But every member of the Ladies' Aid Society knew what Mercy Curtis' question meant.

"My dear child," said the woman in black, smiling her set smile but rising promptly, "I shall have to do that for you another day. Really I haven't the time just now to help you start any knitting. But later —

"I am sure you will forgive me for running away so early, Mrs. Curtis; but I have another engagement. And," she shot a malignant glance at Ruth Fielding, "I am not used to being taken to task upon any subject by these college-chits!"

She went out of the room in a manner that, had she been thirty years younger, could have been called "flounced" – head tossing and skirts swishing with resentment. Several of the women looked at the girl of the Red Mill askance, although they dared not criticize Mercy Curtis, for they knew her sharp tongue too well.

"Mrs. Pubsby," Ruth said quietly to the pleasant-faced, Quakerish-looking president of the society, "may I say a word to the ladies?"

"Of course you may, Ruthie," said the good woman comfortably. "I have known you ever since you came to Jabez Potter's, and I never knew you to say a dishonest or unkind word. You just get it off your mind. It'll do you good, child – and maybe do some of us good. I don't know but we're – just a mite – getting religiously selfish."

"I have no idea of trying to urge you ladies to give up any of your regular charities, or trying to undermine your interest in them. I merely hope you will broaden your interests enough to include the Red Cross work before it is too late."

"How too late?" asked Mrs. Crothers, rather snappishly. She had evidently been both disturbed and influenced by the woman in black.

"So that our boys – some of them your sons and relatives – will not get over to France before the Red Cross is ready to supply them with the comforts they may need next winter. It is not impossible that boys right from Cheslow will be over there before cold weather."

"The war will be over long before then, Ruthie," said Mrs. Pubsby complacently.

"I've heard Dr. Cummings, the pastor, say that he is told once in about so often that the devil is dead," Ruth said smiling. "But he is never going to believe it until he can personally help bury him. Our Government is going about this war as though it might last five years. Are we so much wiser than the men at the head of the nation – even if we have the vote?" she added, slyly.

"It does not matter whether the war will be ended in a few weeks, or in ten years. We should do our part in preparing for it. And the Red Cross is doing great and good work – and has been doing it for years and years. When people like the lady who has just gone out repeat and invent slanders against the Red Cross I must stand up and deny them. At least, such scandal-mongers should be made to prove their statements."

"Oh, Ruth Fielding! That is not a kind word," said Mrs. Crothers.

"Will you supply me with one that will satisfactorily take its place?" asked Ruth sweetly. "I do not wish to accuse Mrs. Mantel of actually prevaricating; but I do claim the right of asking her to prove her statements, and that she seems to decline to do.

"And I shall challenge every person I meet who utters such false and ridiculous stories about the Red Cross. It is an out-and-out pro-German propaganda."

"Why, Mrs. Mantel is a member of the Red Cross herself," said Mrs. Crothers sharply.

"She evidently is not loyal to her pledge then," Ruth replied with bluntness. "The lady is not a member of our local chapter, and I have failed yet to hear of her being engaged in any activity for the Red Cross.

"But I want you ladies – all of you – to take the Red Cross work to heart and to learn what the insignia stands for."

With that the earnest girl entered upon a brief but moving appeal for members to the local chapter, for funds, and for workers. As Helen said afterward, Ruth's "mouth was opened and she spake with the tongues of angels!"

At least, her words did not go for naught. Several dollar memberships were secured right there and then. And Mrs. Brooks and Mary Lardner promised a certain sum for the cause – both generous gifts. Best of all, Mrs. Pubsby said:

"I don't know about this being shown our duty by this wisp of a girl. But, ladies, she's right – I can feel it. And I always go by my feelings, whether it's in protracted meetings or in my rheumatic knee. I feel we must do our part.

"This gray woolen sock I'm knitting was for my Ezekiel. But my Ezey has got plenty socks. From now on I'm going to knit 'em for those poor soldiers who will like enough get their feet wet ditching over there in France, and will want plenty changes of socks."

So Ruth started something that afternoon, and she went on doing more and more. Cheslow began to awake slowly. The local chapter rooms began to hum with life for several hours every day and away into the evening.

In the Cameron car, which Helen drove so that a chauffeur could be relieved to go into the army, the two girls drove all about the countryside, interesting the scattered families in war work and picking up the knitted goods made in the farmhouses and villages.

In many places they had to combat the same sort of talk that the woman in black was giving forth. Ruth was patient, but very insistent that the Red Cross deserved no such criticism.

"Come into Cheslow and see what we are doing there at our local headquarters. I will take you in and bring you back. I'll take you to the county headquarters at Robinsburg. You will there hear men and women speak who know much more than I do about the work."

This was the way she pleaded for fairness and public interest, and a ride in a fine automobile was a temptation to many of the women and girls. An afternoon in the rooms of a live Red Cross chapter usually convinced and converted most of these "Doubting Thomasines," as Helen called them.

Working with wool and other goods was all right. But money was needed. A country-wide drive was organized, and Ruth was proud that she was appointed on the committee to conduct it. Mr. Cameron, who was a wealthy department store owner in the city, was made chairman of this special committee, and he put much faith in the ability of the girl of the Red Mill and his own daughter to assist materially in the campaign for funds.

"Get hold of every hardshell farmer in the county," he told the girls. "Begin with your Uncle Jabez, Ruthie. If he leads with a goodly sum many another old fellow who keeps his surplus cash in a stocking or in the broken teapot on the top cupboard shelf will come to time.

"The reason it is so hard to get contributions out of men like Jabez Potter," said Mr. Cameron with a chuckle, "is because nine times out of ten it means the giving up of actual money. They have their cash hid away. It isn't making them a penny, but they like to hoard it, and some of 'em actually worship it.

"And not to be wondered at. It comes hard. Their backs are bent and their fingers knotted from the toil of acquiring hard cash, dollar by dollar and cent by cent. It is much easier to write a check for a hundred dollars to give to a good cause than it is to dig right down into one's jeans and haul out a ten-dollar note."

Ruth knew just how hard this was going to be – to interest the purses of the farming community in the Red Cross drive. The farmers' wives and daughters were making their needles fly, but the

men merely considered the work something like the usual yearly attempt to get funds out of them for foreign missions.

"I tell ye what, Niece Ruth, I got my doubts," grumbled Uncle Jabez, when she broached the subject of his giving generously to the cause. "I dunno about so much money being needed for what you're callin' the 'waste of war'!"

"If you read those statistics, compiled under the eyes of Government agents," she told him, "you must be convinced that it is already proved by what has happened in France and Belgium – and in other countries – during the three years of war, that all this money will be needed, and more."

"I dunno. Millions! Them is a power of dollars, Niece Ruth. You and lots of other folks air too willing to spend money that other folks have airned by the sweat of their brows."

He offered her a sum that she was really ashamed to put down at the top of her subscription paper. She went about her task in the hope that Uncle Jabez's purse and heart would both be opened for the cause.

Not that he was not patriotic. He was willing – indeed anxious – to go to the front and give his body for the cause of liberty. But Uncle Jabez seemed to love his dollars better than he did his body.

"Give him time, dearie, give him time," murmured Aunt Alvirah, rocking back and forth in her low chair. "The idea of giving up a dollar to Jabez Potter's mind is bigger than the shooting of a thousand men. Poor boys! Poor boys! How many of them may lack comforts and hospitals while the niggard people like Jabez Potter air wakin' up?"

Ruth's heart was very sore about the going over of the American expeditionary forces at this time, too. She said little to Helen about it, but the fact that Tom Cameron – her very oldest friend about the Red Mill and Cheslow – looked forward to going at the first moment possible, brought the war very close to the girl.

The feeling within her that she should go across to France and actually help in some way grew stronger and stronger as the days went by. Then came a letter from Jennie Stone.

"Heavy," as she had always been called in school and even in college, was such a fun-loving, light-hearted girl that it quite shocked both Ruth and Helen when they learned that she was already in real work for the poor poilus and was then about to sail for France.

Jennie Stone's people were wealthy, and her social acquaintances were, many of them, idle women and girls. But the war had awakened these drones, and with them the plump girl. An association for the establishment and upkeep of a convalescent home in France had been formed in Jennie's neighborhood, and Jennie, who had always been fond of cooking – both in the making of the dishes and the assimilation of the same – was actually going to work in the diet kitchen.

"And who knows," the letter ended in Heavy's characteristic way, "but that I shall fall in love with one of the *blessés*. What a sweet name for a wounded soldier! And, just tell me! Do you think it possible? Can a poilu love a fat girl?"

CHAPTER V – "THE BOYS OF THE DRAFT"

"My goodness, Ruth Fielding!" demanded Helen, after reading the characteristic letter from Jennie Stone, "if she can go to France why can't we?"

Helen's changed attitude did not surprise her chum much. Ruth was quite used to Helen's vagaries. The latter was very apt to declare against a course of action, for herself or her friends, and then change over night.

The thought of her twin brother going to war had at first shocked and startled Helen. Now she added:

"For you know very well, Ruth Fielding, that Tom Cameron should not be allowed to go over there to France all alone."

"Goodness, Helen!" gasped the girl of the Red Mill, "you don't suppose that Tom is going to constitute an Army of Invasion in his own person, and attempt to whip the whole of Germany before the rest of Uncle Sam's boys jump in?"

"You may laugh!" cried Helen. "He's only a boy – and boys can't get along without somebody to look out for them. He never would change his flannels at the right time, or keep his feet dry."

"I know you have always felt the overwhelming responsibility of Tom's upbringing, even when he was at Seven Oaks and you and I were at Briarwood."

"Every boy needs the oversight of some feminine eye. And I expect he'll fall in love with the first French girl he meets over there unless I'm on the spot to warn him," Helen went on.

"They are most attractive, I believe," laughed Ruth cheerfully.

"'Chic,' as Madame Picolet used to say. You remember her, our French teacher at Briarwood?" Helen said.

"Poor little Picolet!" Ruth returned with some gravity. "Do you know she has been writing me?"

"Madame Picolet? You never said a word about it!"

"But you knew she returned to France soon after the war began?"

"Oh, yes. I knew that. But – but, to tell the truth, I hadn't thought of her at all for a long time. Why does she write to you?"

"For help," said Ruth quietly. "She has a work among soldiers' widows and orphans – a very worthy charity, indeed. I looked it up."

"And sent her money, I bet!" cried the vigorous Helen.

"Why – yes – what I felt I could spare," Ruth admitted.

"And never told any of us girls about it. Think! All the Briarwood girls who knew little Picolet!" Helen said with some heat. "Why shouldn't we have had a part in helping her, too?"

"My dear," said her chum seriously, "do you realize how little interest any of us felt in the war until this last winter? And now our own dear country is in it and we must think of our own boys who are going, rather than of the needs of the French, or the British, or even the Belgians."

"Oh, Ruth!" cried Helen suddenly, "perhaps Madame Picolet might help us to get over there."

"Over to France?"

"I mean to get into some work in France. She knows us. She may have some influence," said the eager Helen.

But Ruth slowly shook her head. "No," she said. "If I go over there it must be to work for our own boys. They are going. They will need us. I want to do my all for Uncle Sam – for these United States – and," she added, pointing to Uncle Jabez's flag upon the pole in front of the Red Mill farmhouse, "for the blessed old flag. I am sorry for the wounded of our allies; but the time has come now for us to think of the needs of our own soldiers first. They are going over. First our regular army and the guard; then the boys of the draft."

"Ah, yes! The boys of the draft," sighed Helen.

Suddenly Ruth seized her chum's wrist. "I've got it, Helen! That is it! '*The boys of the draft.*'"

"Goodness! What's the matter with you now?" demanded Helen, wide-eyed.

"We will screen it. It will be great!" cried Ruth. "I'll go and see Mr. Hammond at once. I can write the scenario in a few days, and it will not take long to film it. The story of the draft, and what the Red Cross can and will do for the boys over there. Put it on the screen and show it wherever a Red Cross drive is made during the next few months. We'll do it, Helen!"

"Oh! Yes! We'll – do – it!" gasped her chum breathlessly. "You mean that you will do it and that I haven't the first idea of what it is you mean to do."

"Of course you have. A big film called 'The Boys of the Draft,' taking a green squad right through their training from the very first day they are in camp. Fake the French and war scenes, of course, but show the spectators just what may and will happen over there and what the Red Cross will do for the brave hearts who fight for the country."

Ruth was excited. No doubt of that. Her cheeks burned. Her eyes shone. She gestured vigorously.

"I know you don't see it as I do, honey," she added. "I can visualize the whole thing right now. And Helen!"

"Goodness, yes!" gasped Helen. "What now?"

"I'm going to make Uncle Jabez see it! You just see if I don't."

CHAPTER VI – THE PATRIOTISM OF THE PURSE

While she was yet at boarding school at Briarwood Hall Ruth had been successful in writing a scenario for the Alectrion Film Corporation. This is told of in “Ruth Fielding in Moving Pictures.” Its production had been a matter to arouse both the interest and amazement of her friends. Mr. Hammond, the president of the film-producing company, considered her a genius in screen matters, and it was a fact that she had gained a very practical grasp of the whole moving picture business.

“The Heart of a Schoolgirl,” which Ruth had written under spur of a great need at Briarwood Hall, had practically rebuilt one of the dormitories which had been destroyed by fire at a time when the insurance on that particular building had run out.

One of her romantic scenarios had been screened at the Red Mill and on the picturesque Lumano and along its banks. Then, less than a year before, “The Forty-Niners” had been made; and during the succeeding winter this picture had been shown all over the country and, as the theatrical people say, “had played to big business.”

Ruth had bought stock in the corporation and was sometimes actually consulted now by Mr. Hammond and the heads of departments as to the policies of the concern. As the president of the corporation had already written her, the time was about ripe for another “big” film.

Ruth Fielding was expected to suggest the idea, at least, although the working out of the story would probably be left to the director in the field. He knew his people, his properties, and his locations. The bare skeleton of the story was what Mr. Hammond wanted.

Ruth’s success in making virile “The Forty-Niners” urged Mr. Hammond to hope for something as good from her now. And, like most composers of every kind, the real inspiration for the new reel wonder had leaped to life on the instant in her brain.

The idea of “The Boys of the Draft” came from her talk with her chum, Helen Cameron. Helen had a limited amount of pride in Ruth’s success on this occasion for, as she said, she had blunderingly “sicked Ruth on.” But, oddly enough, Ruth Fielding’s first interest in the success of the new picture was in what effect it might have upon Uncle Jabez Potter’s purse.

The drive for Red Cross contributions was on now all over the country. That effort confined to the county in which Cheslow and the Red Mill were located had begun early; but it had gone stumblingly. Indeed, as Helen said, if it was a drive, it was about like driving home the cows!

Mr. Cameron had expected much of Ruth and his own daughter among the farming people; but they were actually behind the collectors who worked in the towns. It was at a time in the year when the men of the scattered communities were working hard out of doors; and it is difficult to interest farmers in anything but their crops during the growing season. Indeed, it is absolutely necessary that they should give their main attention to those crops if a good harvest is to be secured.

But Ruth felt that she was failing in this work for the Red Cross just because she could not interest her uncle, the old miller, sufficiently in the matter. If she could not get him enthused, how could she expect to obtain large contributions from strangers?

After seeing a screen production of Ruth’s play of the old West Uncle Jabez had for the first time realized what a really wonderful thing the filming of such pictures was. He admitted that Ruth’s time was not being thrown away.

Then, he respected the ability of anybody who could make money, and he saw this girl, whom he had “taken in out of charity” as he had more than once said, making more money in a given time – and making it more easily – than he did in his mill and through his mortgages and mining investments.

If Uncle Jabez did not actually bow down to the Golden Calf, he surely did think highly of financial success. And he had begun to realize that all this education Ruth had been getting (quite unnecessary he had first believed) had led her into a position where she was “making good.”

Through this slant in Uncle Jabez's mind the girl began to hope that she might encourage him to do much more for the cause her heart was so set on than he seemed willing to do. Uncle Jabez was patriotic, but his patriotism had not as yet affected his pocket.

As soon as Uncle Jabez knew that Ruth contemplated helping to make another picture he showed interest. He wanted to know about it, and he figured with Aunt Alvirah "how much that gal might make out'n her idees."

"For goodness' sake, Jabez Potter!" exclaimed the little old woman, "ain't you got airy idee in your head 'cept money making?"

"I calc'late," said the miller grimly, "that it's my idees about money in the past has give me what I've got."

"But our Ruthie is going to git up a big, patriotic picture – somethin' to stir the hearts of the people when they think the boys air actually going over to help them French folks win the war."

"I wish," cried the old woman shrilly, "that I warn't too old and too crooked, to do something myself for the soldiers. But my back an' my bones won't let me, Jabez. And I ain't got no bank account. All I can do is to pray."

The miller looked at her with his usual grim smile. Perhaps it was a little quizzical on this occasion.

"Do you calc'late to do any prayin' about this here filum Ruth is going to make, 'The Boys of the Draft'?" he asked.

"I sartinly be – for her success and the good it may do."

"By gum! she'll make money, then," declared Uncle Jabez, who had unbounded faith in the religion Aunt Alvirah professed – but he did not.

Ruth, hearing this, developed another of her inspirational ideas. Uncle Jabez fell into a trap she laid for him, after having taken Mr. Hammond into her confidence regarding what she proposed doing.

"I reckon you'll make a mint of money out'n this draft story," the miller said one evening, when the actual work on the photographing of the film was well under way.

"I hope so," admitted Ruth slowly. "But I am afraid some parts of it will have to be cut or changed because it would cost more than Mr. Hammond cares to put into it at this time. You know, the Alectrion Corporation is in the field with several big things, and it takes a lot of money."

"Why don't he borry it?" demanded the miller sharply.

"He never does that. The only way in which he accepts outside capital is to let moneyed men buy into a picture he is making, taking their chance along with the rest of us that the picture will be a success."

"Yep. An' if it ain't a success?" asked the miller shrewdly.

"Then their money is lost."

"Ahem! That's a hard sayin'," muttered the old man. "But if it does make a hit – like that Forty-Niner story of yourn, Niece Ruth – then the feller that buys in makes a nice little pile?"

"Our successes," Ruth said with pride, "have run from fifty to two hundred per cent profit."

"My soul! Two hunderd! Ain't that perfec'ly scand'lous?" muttered Uncle Jabez. "An' here jest last week I let Amos Blodgett have a thousand dollars on his farm at five an' a ha'f per cent."

"But that investment is perfectly safe," Ruth said slyly.

"My soul! Yes. Blodgett's lower forty's wuth more'n the mortgage. But sech winnin's as you speak of – ! Niece Ruth how much is needed to make this picture the kind of a picture you want it to be?"

She told him – as she and Mr. Hammond had already agreed. The idea was to divide the cost in three parts and let Uncle Jabez invest to the amount of one of the shares if he would.

"But, you see, Uncle Jabez, Mr. Hammond does not feel as confident as I do about 'The Boys of the Draft,' nor has he the same deep interest in the picture. I want it to be a success – and I believe it will be – because of the good it will do the Red Cross campaign for funds."

"Humph!" grunted the miller. "I'm bankin' on your winnin' anyway." And perhaps his belief in the efficacy of Aunt Alvirah Boggs' prayers had something to do with his "buying into" the new picture.

The screening of the great film was rushed. A campaign of advertising was entered into and the fact that a share of the profits from the film was to be devoted to Red Cross work made it popular at once. But Uncle Jabez showed some chagrin.

"What's the meanin' of it?" he demanded. "Who's goin' to give his share of the profits to any Red Cross? Not me!"

"But I am, Uncle Jabez," Ruth said lightly. "That was my intention from the first. But, of course, that has nothing to do with you."

"I sh'd say not! I sh'd say not!" grumbled the miller. "I ain't likely to git into a good thing an' then throw the profit away. I sh'd say not!"

The film was shown in New York, in several other big cities, and in Cheslow simultaneously. Ruth arranged for this first production with the proprietor of the best movie house in the local town, because she was anxious to see it and could not spare the time to go to New York.

Mr. Hammond, as though inspired by Ruth's example, telegraphed on the day of the first exhibition of the film that he would donate his share of the profits as well to the Red Cross.

"'Nother dern fool!" sputtered Uncle Jabez. "Never see the beat. Wal! if you'n he both want to give 'way a small fortune, it's your own business, I suppose. All the less need of me givin' any of my share."

He went with Ruth to see the production of the film. Indeed, he would not have missed that "first night" for the world. The pretty picture house was crowded. It had got so that when anything from the pen of the girl of the Red Mill was produced the neighbors made a gala day of it.

Ruth Fielding was proud of her success. And she had nothing on this occasion to be sorry for, the film being a splendid piece of work.

But, aside from this fact, "The Boys of the Draft" was opportune, and the audience was more than usually sensitive. The very next day the first quota of the drafted boys from Cheslow would march away to the training camp.

The hearts of the people were stirred. They saw a faithful reproduction of what the boys would go through in training, what they might endure in the trenches, and particularly what the Red Cross was doing for soldiers under similar conditions elsewhere.

As though spellbound, Uncle Jabez sat through the long reel. The appeal at the end, with the Red Cross nurse in the hospital ward, the dying soldier's head pillowed upon her breast while she whispered the comfort into his dulling ear that his mother would have whispered —

Ah, it brought the audience to its feet at the "fadeout" – and in tears! It was so human, so real, so touching, that there was little audible comment as they filed out to the soft playing of the organ.

But Uncle Jabez burst out helplessly when they were in the street. He wiped the tears from the hard wrinkles of his old face with frankness and his voice was husky as he declared:

"Niece Ruth! I'm converted to your Red Cross. Dern it all! you kin have ev'ry cent of my share of the profit on that picter – ev'ry cent!"

CHAPTER VII – ON THE WAY

Tom Cameron came home on a furlough from the officers' training camp the day that the boys of the first draft departed from Cheslow. It stabbed the hearts of many mothers and fathers with a quick pain to see him march through the street so jaunty and debonair.

"Why, Tommy!" his sister cried. "You're a *man!*"

"Lay off! Lay off!" begged her twin, not at all pleased. "You might have awakened to the fact that I was out of rompers some years ago. Your eyesight has been bad."

Indeed, he was rather inclined to ignore her and "flock with his father," as Helen put it to Ruth. The father and son had something in common now that the girl could not altogether understand. They sat before the cold grate in the library, their chairs drawn near to each other, and smoked sometimes for an hour without saying a word.

"But, Ruthie," Helen said, her eyes big and moist, "each seems to know just what the other is thinking about. Sometimes papa says a word, and sometimes Tom; and the other nods and there is perfect understanding. It – it's almost uncanny."

"I think I know what you mean," said the more observant girl of the Red Mill. "We grew up some time ago, Helen. And you know we have rather thought of Tom as a boy, still.

"But he is a man now. There is a difference in the sexes in their attitude to this war which should establish in all our minds that we are not equal."

"Who aren't equal?" demanded Helen, almost wrathfully, for she was a militant feminist.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.