

CHAPTER II MARY LOUISE TAKES COMMAND

When Mary Louise entered the library the next morning she found her grandfather seated at the table, his head resting on his extended arms in an attitude of great depression. The young girl was startled.

"What is it, Gran'pa Jim?" she asked, going to his side and laying a hand lovingly on his shoulder.

The old gentleman looked up with a face drawn and gray.

"I'm nervous and restless, my dear," he said; "that's all. Go to breakfast, Mary Louise; I--I'll join you presently."

She sat down on the arm of his chair.

"Haven't you slept well, Gran'pa?" she asked anxiously, and then her eyes wandered through the open door to the next room and rested on the undisturbed bed. "Why, you haven't slept at all, dear!" she cried in distress. "What is wrong? Are you ill?"

"No, no, Mary Louise; don't worry. I--I shall be all right presently. But--I was terribly disappointed in last night's meeting, and--"

"I see. They didn't subscribe what they ought to. But you can't help that, Gran'pa Jim! You did all that was possible, and you mustn't take it so much to heart."

"It is so important, child; more important, I fear, than many of them guess. This will be a desperate war, and without the money to fight--"

"Oh, the money'll come, Gran'pa; I'm sure of that. If Dorfield doesn't do it's duty, the rest of the country will, so you mustn't feel badly about our failure. In fact, we haven't failed, as yet. How much did they subscribe last night?"

"In all, a hundred and thirty thousand. We have now secured barely a third of our allotment, and only five days more to get the balance!"

Mary Louise reflected, eyeing him seriously.

"Gran'pa," said she, "you've worn yourself out with work and worry. They ought not to have put you on this Liberty Bond Committee; you're too old, and you're not well or strong enough to endure all the anxiety and hard work."

"For the honor of--"

"Yes, I know, dear. Our country needs you, so you mustn't break down. Now come and drink a cup of coffee and I'll talk to you. I've a secret to tell you."

He smiled, rather wanly and hopelessly, but he permitted the girl to assist him to rise and to lead him to the breakfast room. There Mary Louise poured his coffee and attacked her own breakfast, although with indifferent appetite.

Gran'pa Jim was the only relative she had in all the world and she loved him devotedly. Their life in the pretty little town had been peaceful and happy until recently--until the war. But the old Colonel, loyal veteran that he was, promptly made it his war and was roused as Mary Louise had never seen him roused before. In his mind was no question of the justice of our country's participation in the world struggle; he was proud to be an American and gloried in America's sacrifice to the cause of humanity. Too old to fight on the battlefield, he felt honored at his appointment to the membership of the Liberty Bond Committee and threw all his energies into the task assigned him. So it is easy to understand that the coldness and reluctance to subscribe for bonds on the part of his fellow townsmen had well nigh broken his heart.

This the girl, his closest companion, fully appreciated.

"Gran'pa," she said, regarding him across the table after their old black mammy, Aunt Sally, had left them together, "I love my country, as you know; but I love you better."

"Oh, MaryLouise!"

"It's true; and it's right that I should. If I had to choose between letting the Germans capture the United States, or losing you, I'd let the Germans come! That's honest, and it's the way I feel. Love for one's country is a fine sentiment, but my love for you is deeper. I wouldn't whisper this to anyone else, for no one else could understand it, but you will understand it, Gran'pa Jim, and you know my love for you doesn't prevent my still being as good an American as the average. However," continued the young girl, in a lighter tone, "I've no desire to lose you or allow the Germans to whip us, if I can help it, so I've got two battles to fight. The truth is, Gran'pa, that you're used up with the hard work of the last few weeks, and another five days of begging for subscriptions would wreck you entirely. So you're to stop short--this very minute--and rest up and take it easy and not worry."

"But--my dear!"

"See here, Gran'pa Jim," with assumed sternness, "you've worked hard to secure Dorfield's quota, and you've failed. Why, the biggest subscribers for bonds in the

whole city are you and Jason Jones! There's plenty of wealth in Dorfield, and over at the mills and factories are thousands of workmen who can buy bonds; but you and your Committee don't know how to interest the people in your proposition. The people are loyal enough, but they don't understand, and you don't understand how to make them understand."

"No," he said, shaking his head dolefully, "they're a dense lot, and we can't make them understand."

"Well, I can," said Mary Louise, cheerfully.

"You, child?"

"Yes. You mustn't imagine I've tackled the problem this very morning; I've been considering it for some time, and I've talked and consulted with Alora and Irene and Laura and the other girls about the best way to redeem the situation. We knew the situation was desperate long before last night's meeting. So all our plans are made, and we believe we can sell all the bonds required. It was our policy to keep silent until we knew what the big mass-meeting last night would accomplish, but we suspected it would turn out just the way it did--a fizzle. So the job's up to us, and if you'll sit quiet, Gran'pa Jim, and let us girls do the work, we'll put Dorfield in the honor column by Saturday night."

"This is nonsense!" exclaimed the Colonel, but there was an accent of hope in his voice, nevertheless.

"We girls are thoroughly organized," said Mary Louise, "and we'll sell the bonds."

"Girls!"

"Why, just think of it, Gran'pa. Who would refuse a group of young girls--earnest and enthusiastic girls? The trouble with you men is that you accept all sorts of excuses. They tell you they're hard up and can't spare the money; there's a mortgage to pay, or taxes or notes to meet, and they can't afford it, anyway. But that kind of talk won't do when we girls get after them."

"What arguments can you use that we have disregarded?"

"First, we'll coax; then we'll appeal to their patriotism; then we'll threaten them with scorn and opprobrium, which they'll richly deserve if they hang on till it comes to that. If the threats don't make 'em buy, we'll cry--and every tear will sell a bond!"

The Colonel stirred his coffee thoughtfully.

"You might try it," he suggested. "I've read that in some cities the Boy Scouts have been successful in placing the bonds. It's an honorable undertaking, in any event, but--I hope you will meet with no insults."

"If that rank pro-German, Jake Kasker, will buy bonds, there isn't a man in Dorfield who can give a logical excuse for not doing likewise," declared Mary Louise. "I'm going to use Kasker to shame the rest of them. But, before I undertake this job, I shall make a condition, Gran'pa. You must stay quietly at home while we girls do the work."

"Oh, I could not do that, Mary Louise."

"You're not fit to leave the house. Will you try my plan for one day--just for to-day."

"I'll think it over, dear," he said, rising.

She assisted him to the library and then ran down the street to the doctor's office.

"Dr. McGruer," she said, "go over at once and see my grandfather. He's completely exhausted with the work of selling Liberty Bonds. Be sure you order him to keep at home and remain quiet--at least for to-day."