

### CHAPTER III THE LIBERTY GIRLS

An hour later six girls met at the home of Alora Jones, who lived with her father in a fine mansion across the street from Colonel Hathaway's residence. These girls were prepared to work, and work diligently, under the leadership of Mary Louise, for they had been planning and discussing this event for several days, patiently awaiting the word to start their campaign.

"Some girls," said Mary Louise, "are knitting, and that's a good thing to do, in a way. Others are making pajamas and pillows for the Red Cross, and that's also an admirable thing to do. But our duty lies on a higher plane, for we're going to get money to enable Uncle Sam to take care of our soldier boys."

"Do--do you think we can make people buy bonds?" asked little Laura Hilton, with a trace of doubt in her voice.

Mary Louise gave her a severe look.

"We not only can, but we shall make people buy," she replied. "We shall ask them very prettily, and they cannot refuse us. We've all been loaded to the brim with arguments, if arguments are necessary, but we haven't time to gossip with folks. A whole lot of money must be raised, and there's a short time to do it in."

"Seems to me," remarked Edna Barlow, earnestly, "we're wasting time just now. Let's get busy."

"Well, get on your costumes, girls," suggested Alora Jones. "They are all here, in this big box, and the banners are standing in the hall. It's after nine, now, and by ten o'clock we must all be at work."

They proceeded to dress themselves in the striking costumes they had secretly prepared; a blue silk waist with white stars scattered over it, a red-and-white striped skirt, the stripes running from waistband to hem, a "Godess of Liberty" cap and white canvas shoes. Attired in this fashion, the "Liberty Girls," as they had dubbed themselves, presented a most attractive and patriotic appearance, and as they filed out through the hall each seized a handsome silken banner, gold fringed, which bore the words: "Buy Bonds of Dorfield's Liberty Girls."

"Now, then," said Mary Louise, "we have each been allotted a certain district in the business part of the city, for which we are individually responsible. Each one knows what she is expected to do. Let no one escape. If any man claims to have already bought bonds, make him buy more. And remember, we're all to meet at my house at one o'clock for luncheon, and to report progress."

A block away they secured seats in a streetcar and a few minutes thereafter reached the "Four Corners," the intersection of the two principal streets of Dorfield. But on the way they had sold old Jonathan Dodd, who happened to be in the car and was overawed by the display of red-white-and-blue, two hundred dollars' worth of bonds. As for old man Dodd, he realized he was trapped and bought his limit with a sigh of resignation.

As they separated at the Four Corners, each to follow her appointed route, many surprised, if not startled, citizens regarded the Liberty Girls with approving eyes. They were pretty girls, all of them, and their silken costumes were really becoming. The patriots gazed admiringly; the more selfish citizens gave a little shiver of dismay and scurried off to escape meeting these aggressive ones, whose gorgeous banners frankly proclaimed their errand.

Mary Louise entered the bank on the corner and made inquiry for Mr. Jaswell, the president.

"We're off at last, sir," she said, smiling at his bewildered looks, "and we girls are determined to make the Dorfield people do their full duty. May we depend upon your bank to fulfill your promises, and carry those bond buyers who wish to make time payments?"

"To be sure, my dear," replied the banker. "I'd no idea you young ladies were to wear uniforms. But you certainly look fascinating, if you're a fair sample of the others, and I don't see how anyone can refuse to back up our girls in their patriotic 'drive.' God bless you, Mary Louise, and help you to achieve your noble object."

There were many offices in the building, above the bank, and the girl visited every one of them. Her appearance, garbed in the national colors and bearing her banner, was a sign of conquest, for it seemed to these busy men as if Uncle Sam himself was backing this crusade and all their latent patriotism was stirred to the depths. So they surrendered at discretion and signed for the bonds.

Mary Louise was modest and sweet in demeanor; her pleas were as pleasant as they were persuasive; there was nothing virulent or dominant in her attitude. But when she said: "Really, Mr. So-and-so, you ought to take more bonds than that; you can afford it and our country needs the money," the argument was generally effective, and when she had smilingly pinned the bond button on a man's coat and passed on to interview others, she left him wondering why he had bought more bonds than he ever had intended to, or even provoked with himself that he had subscribed at all. These were the people who had generally resisted all former pleadings of the regular committee and had resolved to ignore the bond sale

altogether. But perhaps their chagrin was equalled by their satisfaction in having been won over by a pretty girl, whose manner and appearance were alike irresistible.

The men of Dorfield are a fair sample of men everywhere. At this period the full meaning of the responsibilities we had assumed in this tremendous struggle was by no means fully realized. The war was too far away, and life at home was still running in its accustomed grooves. They could not take the European war to themselves, nor realize that it might sweep away their prosperity, their liberties--even their homes. Fear had not yet been aroused; pity for our suffering and hard-pressed allies was still lightly considered; the war had not struck home to the hearts of the people as it has since. I doubt if even Mary Louise fully realized the vital importance of the work she had undertaken.

When the Liberty Girls met at Colonel Hathaway's for a light luncheon, their eyes were sparkling with enthusiasm and their cheeks rosy from successful effort. Their individual sales varied, of course, for some were more tactful and winning than others, but all had substantial results to report. "We've taken Dorfield by storm!" was their exultant cry.

"Altogether," said Mary Louise, figuring up the amounts, "we've sold thirty-two thousand dollars' worth of bonds this morning. That's encouraging for three hours' work, but it's not enough to satisfy us. We must put in a busy afternoon and try to get a total of at least one hundred thousand by to-night. To-morrow we must do better than that. Work as late as you can, girls, and at eight o'clock we will meet again at Alora's house and compare results."

The girls needed no urging to resume their work, for already they had gained confidence in their ability and were inspired to renewed effort.

Mary Louise had optimistic plans for that afternoon's work. She first visited the big flour mill, where she secured an interview with Mr. Chisholme, the president and general manager.

"We can't buy bonds," he said peevishly. "Our business is being ruined by the high price of wheat and the absurd activities of Hoover. We stand to operate at a loss or else shut down altogether. The government ought to pay us compensation, instead of asking us to contribute to the war."

"However, if we fail to win the war," Mary Louise quietly replied, "your enormous investment here will become worthless. Isn't it better to lose a little now, for the sake of future winnings, than to sacrifice the past and future and be reduced to poverty? We are asking you to save yourself from threatened danger--the national calamity that would follow our defeat in this war."

He sat back in his chair and looked at the girl in amazement. She was rather young to have conceived such ideas.

"Well, there's time enough to consider all that," he said, less gruffly. "You'll have to excuse me now, Miss Burrows. I'm busy."

But Mary Louise kept her seat and redoubled her arguments, which were logical and straight to the point. Mr. Chisholme's attitude might have embarrassed her had she been pleading a personal favor, but she felt she was the mouthpiece of the President, of the Nation, of worldwide democracy, and would not allow herself to feel annoyed. She devoted three-quarters of an hour to Mr. Chisholme, who gradually thawed in her genial sunshine. She finally sold him fifty thousand dollars worth of Liberty Bonds and went on her way elated. The regular Bond Committee had labored for weeks with this stubborn man, who managed one of the largest enterprises in Dorfield, yet they had signally failed to convince him or to induce him to subscribe a dollar. The girl had succeeded in less than an hour, and sold him exactly the amount he should have bought.

The mill subscription was a powerful leverage with which to pry money from other reluctant ones. Stacks, Sellem & Stacks, the big department store heretofore resisting all appeals, bought from Mary Louise bonds to the amount of twenty-five thousand; the Denis Hardware Company took ten thousand. Then Mary Louise met her first serious rebuff. She went into Silas Herring's wholesale grocery establishment and told Mr. Herring she wanted to sell him bonds.

"This is outrageous!" cried Herring indignantly. "When the men can't rob us, or force us to back England in her selfish schemes, they set girls on us to wheedle us out of money we have honestly earned. This hold-up game won't work, I assure you, and I advise you to get into more respectable business. My money is mine; it doesn't belong to the Allies, and they won't get a cent of it." He was getting more angry as he proceeded in his harangue. "Moreover," he continued, "our weak administration can't use me to help it out of the hole it has foolishly stumbled into, or make America the cat's-paw to pull British chestnuts out of the fire. You ought to be ashamed, Miss Burrows, to lend yourself to such unpatriotic methods of bulldozing honest citizens!"

Mary Louise was distressed, but undaunted. The man was monstrously wrong, and she knew it. Sitting in Mr. Herring's private office at the time were Professor John Dyer, the superintendent of Dorfield's schools, and the Hon. Andrew Duncan, a leading politician, a former representative and now one of the county supervisors. The girl looked at Professor Dyer, whom she knew slightly, and said pleadingly:

"Won't you defend our administration and our country, Mr. Dyer?"

He smiled deprecatingly but did not speak. He was a tall, lean man, quite round-shouldered and of studious appearance. He wore double eyeglasses, underneath which his eyes were somewhat watery. The smile upon his thin features was a stationary one, not as if assumed, but molded with the features and lacking geniality.

It was the Hon. Andrew Duncan who answered the Liberty Girl.

"The difference between Mr. Herring and eighty percent of the American people," said he in stilted, pompous tones, "is that our friend Herring unwisely voices his protest, while the others merely think--and consider it the part of wisdom to say nothing."

"I don't believe that!" cried Mary Louise indignantly. "The American people are loyal to their President. There may be a few traitors; we're gradually discovering them; but--"

"I am busy," Herring interrupted her, scowling, and he swung his chair so that his back was toward her.

"You won't be busy long, if you keep talking that way," predicted the girl.

"Tut-tut!" said the Hon. Andrew, warningly. "Your threats, young lady, are as unwise as Mr. Herring's speech."

"But they carry more weight," she asserted stoutly. "Do you think any grocery man in Dorfield would buy goods of Mr. Herring if he knew him to be disloyal in this, our country's greatest crisis? And they're going to know it, if I have to visit each one and tell him myself what Mr. Herring has said."

A tense, if momentary silence, followed, broken by the Professor, who now said in his smooth, unctuous way:

"Mr. Herring's blunt expression of his sentiments was not intended for other ears than ours, I am sure. In confidence, one may say many things to friends which he would prefer to withhold from an indiscriminating public. We are well assured, indeed, that Mr. Herring is a loyal American, with America's best interests at heart, but he does not regard our present national activities as leniently as we do. I have been endeavoring, in my humble way, to change his attitude of mind," here Herring swung around and looked at the speaker stolidly, "and though I admit he is a bit obstinate, I venture to assure you, Miss Burrows, that Silas Herring will stand by the Stars and Stripes as long as there is a shred of our banner to wave in the breeze of freedom, justice and democracy."

A cynical smile gradually settled on the grocer's stern face. The Hon. Andrew was smiling with undisguised cheerfulness.

"We are all loyal--thoroughly loyal," said the latter. "I've bought some Liberty Bonds already, my girl, but you can put me down for a hundred dollars more. We must support our country in every possible way, with effort, with money, with our flesh and blood. I have no children, but my two nephews and a second cousin are now in France!"

"For my part," added Professor Dyer, "I have hesitated as to how much of my meagre salary I can afford to spend. But I think I can handle five hundred dollars' worth."

"Thank you," said Mary Louise, somewhat puzzled by these offers. "It isn't like risking the money; it's a solid investment in the best securities in the world."

"I know," returned the Professor, nodding gravely, "But I'm not thinking of that. I'm a poor man, as you probably know, but what I have is at my country's disposal, since it is evident that my country needs it."

"Doesn't that shame you, sir?" asked Mary Louise brightly, as she turned to Silas Herring. "You're a business man, and they say--although I confess I doubt it--that you're a loyal American. You can convince me of the fact by purchasing a liberal share of bonds. Then I can forget your dreadful words. Then I can carry to everyone the news that you've made a splendid investment in Liberty Bonds. Even if you honestly think the administration has been at fault, it won't do any good to grumble. We are in this war, sir, and we've got to win it, that you and every other American may enjoy prosperity and freedom. How much shall I say that you have subscribed, Mr. Herring?"

He studied her face, his expression never changing. Mary Louise wondered if he could read her suspicion and dislike of him, despite her efforts to smother those feelings in the cause of Liberty. Then Herring looked at Professor Dyer, who stood meekly, with downcast eyes. Next the grocer gazed at the supervisor, who smiled in a shrewd way and gave a brief nod.

Mr. Herring frowned. He drummed nervously with his fingers on his mahogany desk. Then he reached for his check-book and with grim deliberation wrote a check and handed it to Mary Louise.

"You've won, young lady," he admitted. "I'm too good an American to approve what has been done down at Washington, but I'll help keep our flag waving, as the Professor suggests. When we've won our war--and of course we shall win--

there will be a day of reckoning for every official who is judged by our citizens to have been disloyal, however high his station. Good afternoon!"

The first impulse of Mary Louise was to crumple up the check and throw it in the man's face, to show her resentment of his base insinuations. But as she glanced at the check she saw it was for ten thousand dollars, and that meant sinews of war--help for our soldiers and our allies. She couldn't thank the man, but she bowed coldly and left the private office. Professor Dyer accompanied her and at the outer door he said to the girl:

"Silas Herring's heart is in the right place, as you see by his generous check. Of course, he might have bought more bonds than that, as he is very wealthy, but he is an obstinate man and it is a triumph for our sacred cause that he was induced to buy at all. You are doing a noble work, my child, and I admire you for having undertaken the task. If I can be of service to you, pray command me."

"Urge everyone you meet to buy bonds," suggested Mary Louise. She did not care to discuss Silas Herring.

"I'll do that, indeed," promised the school superintendent. But as he watched her depart, there was a queer expression on his lean face that it was well Mary Louise did not see.