

CHAPTER VI. TO HELP WIN THE WAR

The activities of the Liberty Girls of Dorfield did not cease with their successful Liberty Bond "drive." Indeed, this success and the approbation of their fellow townspeople spurred the young girls on to further patriotic endeavor, in which they felt sure of enthusiastic encouragement.

"As long as Uncle Sam needs his soldiers," said Peter Conant, the lawyer, "he'll need his Liberty Girls, for they can help win the war."

When Mary Louise first conceived the idea of banding her closest companions to support the government in all possible ways, she was a bit doubtful if their efforts would prove of substantial value, although she realized that all her friends were earnestly determined to "do their bit," whatever the bit might chance to be. The local Red Cross chapter had already usurped many fields of feminine usefulness and with a thorough organization, which included many of the older women, was accomplishing a 'vast deal of good. Of course the Liberty Girls could not hope to rival the RedCross.

Mary Louise was only seventeen and the ages of the other Liberty Girls ranged from fourteen to eighteen, so they had been somewhat ignored by those who were older and more competent, through experience, to undertake important measures of war relief. The sensational bond sale, however, had made the youngsters heroines--for the moment, at least-- and greatly stimulated their confidence in themselves and their ambition to accomplish more.

Mary Louise Burrows was an orphan; her only relative, indeed, was Colonel James Hathaway, her mother's father, whose love for his granddaughter was thoroughly returned by the young girl. They were good comrades, these two, and held many interests in common despite the discrepancy in their ages. The old colonel was "well-to-do," and although he could scarcely be called wealthy in these days of huge fortunes, his resources were ample beyond their needs. The Hathaway home was one of the most attractive in Dorfield, and Mary Louise and her grandfather were popular and highly respected. Their servants consisted of an aged pair of negroes named "Aunt Sally" and "Uncle Eben," who considered themselves family possessions and were devoted to "de ole mar'se an' young missy."

Alora Jones, who lived in the handsomest and most imposing house in the little city, was an heiress and considered the richest girl in Dorfield, having been left several millions by her mother. Her father, Jason Jones, although he handled Alora's fortune and surrounded his motherless daughter with every luxury, was

by profession an artist--a kindly man who encouraged the girl to be generous and charitable to a degree. They did not advertise their good deeds and only the poor knew how much they owed to the practical sympathy of Alora Jones and her father. Alora, however, was rather reserved and inclined to make few friends, her worst fault being a suspicion of all strangers, due to some unfortunate experiences she had formerly encountered. The little band of Liberty Girls included all of Alora's accepted chums, for they were the chums of Mary Louise, whom Alora adored. Their companionship had done much to soften the girl's distrustful nature.

The other Liberty Girls were Laura Hilton, petite and pretty and bubbling with energy, whose father was a prominent real estate broker; Lucile Neal, whose father and three brothers owned and operated the Neal Automobile Factory, and whose intelligent zeal and knowledge of war conditions had been of great service to Mary Louise; Edna Barlow, a widowed dressmaker's only child, whose sweet disposition had made her a favorite with her girl friends, and Jane Donovan, the daughter of the Mayor of Dorfield and the youngest of the group here described.

These were the six girls who had entered the bond campaign and assisted to complete Dorfield's quota of subscriptions, but there was one other Liberty Girl who had been unable to join them in this active work. This was Irene Macfarlane, the niece of Peter Conant. She had been a cripple since childhood and was confined to the limits of a wheeled chair. Far from being gloomy or depressed, however, Irene had the sunniest nature imaginable, and was always more bright and cheerful than the average girl of her age. "From my knees down," she would say confidentially, "I'm no good; but from my knees up I'm as good as anybody." She was an excellent musician and sang very sweetly; she was especially deft with her needle; she managed her chair so admirably that little assistance was ever required. Mrs. Conant called her "the light of the house," and to hear her merry laughter and sparkling conversation, you would speedily be tempted to forget that fate had been unkind to her and decreed that for life she must be wedded to a wheeled chair.

If Irene resented this decree, she never allowed anyone to suspect it, and her glad disposition warded off the words of sympathy that might have pained her.

While unable to sally forth in the Liberty Bond drive, Irene was none the less an important member of the band of Liberty Girls. "She's our inspiration," said Mary Louise with simple conviction. Teeming with patriotism and never doubting her ability to do something helpful in defeating her country's foes, Irene had many valuable suggestions to make to her companions and one of these she broached a few days after the bond sale ended so triumphantly. On this occasion the Liberty

Girls had met with Irene at Peter Conant's cosy home, next door to the residence of Colonel Hathaway, for consultation as to their future endeavors.

"Everyone is knitting for the soldiers and sailors," said Irene, "and while that is a noble work, I believe that we ought to do something different from the others. Such an important organization ought to render unusual and individual service on behalf of our beloved country. Is it not so?"

"It's all very well, Irene, to back our beloved country," remarked Laura, "but the whole nation is doing that and I really hanker to help our soldier boys."

"So do I," spoke up Lucile. "The government is equal to the country's needs, I'm sure, but the government has never taken any too good care of its soldiers and they'll lack a lot of things besides knitted goods when they get to the front."

"Exactly," agreed Mary Louise. "Seems to me it's the girls' chief duty to look after the boys, and a lot of the drafted ones are marching away from Dorfield each day, looking pretty glum, even if loyally submitting to the inevitable. I tell you, girls, these young and green soldiers need encouraging, so they'll become enthusiastic and make the best sort of fighters, and we ought to bend our efforts to cheering them up."

Irene laughed merrily.

"Good!" she cried; "you're like a flock of sheep: all you need is a hint to trail away in the very direction I wanted to lead you. There are a lot of things we can do to add to our soldiers' comfort. They need chocolate--sweets are good for them--and 'comfort-kits' of the real sort, not those useless, dowdy ones so many well-intentioned women are wasting time and money to send them; and they'll be grateful for lots and lots of cigarettes, and--"

"Oh, Irene! Do you think that would be right?" from Edna Barlow.

"Of course it would. The government approves cigarettes and the French girls are supplying our boys across the pond with them even now. Surely we can do as much for our own brave laddies who are still learning the art of war. Not all smoke, of course, and some prefer pipes and tobacco, which we can also send them. Another thing, nearly every soldier needs a good pocket knife, and a razor, and they need games of all sorts, such as dominoes and checkers and cribbage-boards; and good honest trench mirrors, and--"

"Goodness me, Irene," interrupted Jane Donovan, "how do you think we could supply all those things? To equip a regiment with the articles you mention would

cost a mint of money, and where's the money coming from, and how are we to get it?"

"There you go again, helping me out!" smiled Irene. "In your question, my dear, lies the crux of my suggestion. We Liberty Girls must raise the money."

"How, Irene?"

"I object to begging."

"The people are tired of subscribing to all sorts of schemes."

"We certainly are not female Croesuses!"

"Perhaps you expect us to turn bandits and sandbag the good citizens on dark nights."

Irene's smile did not fade; she simply glowed with glee at these characteristic protestations.

"I can't blame you, girls, for you haven't thought the thing out, and I have," she stated. "My scheme isn't entirely original, for I read the other day of a similar plan being tried in another city, with good success. A plan similar, in some ways, but quite different in others. Yet it gave me the idea."

"Shoot us the idea, then," said Jane, who was inclined to favor slang.

"In order to raise money," said Irene, slowly and more seriously than she had before spoken, "it is necessary for us to go into business. The other day, when I was riding with Alora, I noticed that the store between the post-office and the Citizens' Bank is vacant, and a sign in the window said 'Apply to Peter Conant, Agent.' Peter Conant being my uncle, I applied to him that evening after dinner, on behalf of the Liberty Girls. It's one of the best locations in town and right in the heart of the business district. The store has commanded a big rental, but in these times it is not in demand and it has been vacant for the last six months, with no prospect of its being rented. Girls, Peter Conant will allow us to use this store room without charge until someone is willing to pay the proper rent for it, and so the first big problem is solved. Three cheers for Uncle Peter!"

They stared at her rather suspiciously, not yet understanding her idea.

"So far, so good, my dear," said Mary Louise. "We can trust dear old Peter Conant to be generous and patriotic. But what good is a store without stock, and how are we going to get a stock to sell--and sell it at a profit that will allow us to do all the things we long to do for the soldiers?"

"Explain that, and I'm with you," announced Alora.

"Explain that, and we're all with you!" declared Lucile Neal.

"All I need is the opportunity," protested Irene. "You're such chatterboxes that you won't let me talk! Now--listen. I'm not much of an executioner, girls, but I can plan and you can execute, and in that way I get my finger in the pie. Now, I believe I've a practical idea that will work out beautifully. Dorfield is an ancient city and has been inhabited for generations. Almost every house contains a lot of articles that are not in use--are put aside and forgotten--or are not in any way necessary to the comfort and happiness of the owners, yet would be highly prized by some other family which does not possess such articles. For instance, a baby-carriage or crib, stored away in some attic, could be sold at a bargain to some young woman needing such an article; or some old brass candlesticks, considered valueless by their owner, would be eagerly bought by someone who did not possess such things and had a love for antiques.

"My proposition is simply this: that you visit all the substantial homes in Dorfield and ask to be given whatever the folks care to dispense with, such items to be sold at 'The Liberty Girls' Shop' and the money applied to our War Fund to help the soldier boys. Lucile's brother, Joe Neal, will furnish us a truck to cart all the things from the houses to our store, and I'm sure we can get a whole lot of goods that will sell readily. The people will be glad to give all that they don't want so good a cause, and what one doesn't want, another is sure to want. Whatever money we take in will be all to the good, and with it we can supply the boys with many genuine comforts. Now, then, how does my idea strike you?"

Approval--even the dawn of enthusiasm--was written on every countenance. They canvassed all the pros and cons of the proposition at length, and the more they considered it the more practical it seemed.

"The only doubtful thing," said Mary Louise, finally, "is whether the people will donate the goods they don't need or care for, but that can be easily determined by asking them. We ought to pair off, and each couple take a residence street and make a careful canvass, taking time to explain our plan. One day will show us whether we're to be successful or not, and the whole idea hinges on the success of our appeal."

"Not entirely," objected Alora. "We may secure the goods, but be unable to sell them."

"Nonsense," said little Laura Hilton; "nothing in the world sells so readily as second-hand truck. Just think how the people flock to auctions and the like. And we girls should prove good 'salesladies,' too, for we can do a lot of coaxing and get

better prices than an auctioneer. All we need do is appeal to the patriotism of the prospective buyers."

"Anyhow," asserted Edna, "it seems worth a trial, and we must admit the idea is attractive and unique--at least a novelty in Dorfield."

So they planned their method of canvassing and agreed to put in the next day soliciting articles to sell at the Liberty Girls' Shop.