

CHAPTER VII THE LIBERTY SHOP

Mary Louise said to her grandfather that night, after explaining Irene's novel scheme to raise money: "We haven't been housekeeping many years in Dorfield and I'm not sure I can find among our household possessions anything to give the Liberty Shop. But I've some jewelry and knickknacks that I never wear and, if you don't mind, Gran'pa Jim, I'll donate that to our shop."

The Colonel was really enthusiastic over the plan and not only approved his granddaughter's proposition to give her surplus jewelry but went over the house with her and selected quite an imposing lot of odds and ends which were not in use and could readily be spared. Eager to assist the girls, the old colonel next morning went to town and ordered a big sign painted, to be placed over the store entrance, and he also induced the editors of the two newspapers to give the Liberty Girls' latest venture publicity in their columns, inviting the cooperation of the public.

Peter Conant turned over the keys of the big store to the girls and the first load of goods to be delivered was that from the Hathaway residence.

The Liberty Girls were astonished at the success of their solicitations. From almost every house they visited they secured donations of more or less value. It may have seemed "rubbish" to some of the donors, but the variety of goods that soon accumulated in the store room presented an interesting collection and the girls arranged their wares enticingly and polished up the brass and copper ornaments and utensils until they seemed of considerable value.

They did not open their doors to the public for ten days, and Joe Neal began to grumble because one of his trucks was kept constantly running from house to house, gathering up the articles contributed to the Liberty Girls' Shop. But the girls induced other trucks to help Joe and the enthusiasm kept growing. Curiosity was spurred by the big sign over the closed doors, and every woman who donated was anxious to know what others had given to the shop. It was evident there would be a crowd at the formal "opening," for much was expected from the unique enterprise.

Meantime, the girls were busily occupied. Each day one group solicited donations while another stayed at the store to arrange the goods. Many articles of furniture, more or less decrepit, were received, and a man was hired to varnish and patch and put the chairs, stands, tables, desks and whatnots into the best condition possible. Alora Jones thought the stock needed "brightening," so she induced her father to make purchases of several new articles, which she presented the girls as

her share of the donations. And Peter Conant, finding many small pieces of jewelry, silverware and bric-a-brac among the accumulation, rented a big showcase for the girls, in which such wares were properly displayed.

During these ten days of unflagging zeal the Liberty Girls were annoyed to discover that another traitorous circular had been issued. A large contingent of the selective draft boys had just been ordered away to the cantonment and the day before they left all their parents received a circular saying that the draft was unconstitutional and that their sons were being sacrificed by autocratic methods to further the political schemes of the administration. "Mr. Wilson," it ended, "is trying to make for himself a place in history, at the expense of the flesh and blood of his countrymen."

This vile and despicable screed was printed from the same queer type as the former circulars denouncing the Liberty Bond sale and evidently emanated from the same source. Mary Louise was the first to secure one of the papers and its envelope, mailed through the local post-office, and her indignation was only equalled by her desire to punish the offender. She realized, however, her limitations, and that she had neither the time nor the talent to unmask the traitor. She could only hope that the proper authorities would investigate the matter.

That afternoon, with the circular still in her handbag, she visited the clothing store of Jacob Kasker and asked the proprietor if he had any goods he would contribute to the Liberty Girls' Shop.

Kasker was a stolid, florid-faced man, born in America of naturalized German parents, and therefore his citizenship could not be assailed. He had been quite successful as a merchant and was reputed to be the wealthiest clothing dealer in Dorfield.

"No," said Kasker, shortly, in answer to the request. Mary Louise was annoyed by the tone.

"You mean that you won't help us, I suppose?" she said impatiently.

He turned from his desk and regarded her with a slight frown. Usually his expression was stupidly genial.

"Why should I give something for nothing?" he asked. "It isn't my war; I didn't make it, and I don't like it. Say, I got a boy--one son. Do you know they've drafted him--took him from his work without his consent, or mine, and marched him off to a war that there's no good excuse for?"

"Well," returned Mary Louise, "your boy is one of those we're trying to help."

"You won't help make him a free American again; you'll just help give him knickknacks so he won't rebel against his slavery."

The girl's eyes flashed.

"Mr. Kasker," she said sternly, "I consider that speech disloyal and traitorous. Men are being jailed every day for less!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I believe that is true, and it proves what a free country this is--does it not? Mr. Wilson's democracy is the kind that won't allow people to express their opinions, unless they agree with him. If I say I will stand by the American constitution, they will put me in jail."

Mary Louise fairly gasped. She devoutly wished she had never approached this dreadful man. She felt ashamed to breathe the same air with him. But she hated to retreat without a definite display of her disgust at his perfidious utterances. Drawing the circular from her bag she spread it before him on his desk and said:

"Read that!"

He just glanced at it, proving he knew well its wording. Mary Louise was watching him closely.

"Well, what about it?" he asked brusquely.

"It expresses your sentiments, I believe."

He turned upon her suspiciously.

"You think I wrote it?" he demanded.

"My thoughts are my own," retorted Mary Louise.

Kasker's frown deepened.

"Your thoughts may get you into trouble, my girl," he said slowly. "Let me tell you this: However much I hate this war, I'm not fighting it publicly. To you I have spoken in private--just a private conversation. The trouble with me is, I talk too much; I don't know enough to keep my mouth shut. I guess I'll never learn that. I ain't a hypocrite, and I ain't a pacifist. I say the United States must win this war because it has started the job, and right or wrong, must finish it. I guess we could beat the whole world, if we had to. But I ain't fool enough to say that all they do down at Washington is right, 'cause I know it ain't. But I'm standing by

the flag. My boy is standing by the flag, and he'll fight as well as any in the whole army to keep the flag flying over this great republic. By and by we'll get better congressmen; the ones we got now are accidents. But in spite of all accidents--and they're mostly our own fault--I'm for America first, last and all the time. That's Jake Kasker. I don't like the Germans and I don't like the English, for Jake Kasker is a George Washington American. What are you doing, girl?" he suddenly asked with a change of tone.

"I'm putting down that speech in shorthand in my notebook," said Mary Louise, "and I think I've got every word of it." She slipped the book in her bag and picked up the circular. "Good afternoon, Mr. Kasker!"

The German seemed bewildered; he ran his fingers through his bushy hair as if trying to remember what he had said.

"Wait!" he cried, as she turned away. "I've changed my mind about those goods; I'll send some over to your shop to be sold."

"Don't do it," she replied, "for we won't accept them. Only those whose patriotism rings true are allowed to help us."

Then she marched out of the big store, the proprietor at the desk staring at her fixedly until she had disappeared.

"That's it, Jake," he said to himself, turning to his papers; "you talk too much. If a man prints a thing, and nobody knows who printed it, he's safe."