

CHAPTER XII JOSIE BUYS A DESK

The "Liberty Girls' Shop" was proving a veritable mint. Expenses were practically nothing, so all the money received could be considered clear profit. It was amusing to observe the people who frequented the shop, critically examining the jumble of wares displayed, wondering who had donated this or that and meantime searching for something that could be secured at a "bargain." Most of the shrewd women had an idea that these young girls would be quite ignorant of values and might mark the articles at prices far below their worth, but the "values" of such goods could only be conjectural, and therefore the judgment of the older women was no more reliable than that of the girls. They might think they were getting bargains, and perhaps were, but that was problematic.

The one outstanding fact was that people were buying a lot of things they had no use for, merely because they felt they were getting them cheaply and that their money would be devoted to a good cause.

Mrs. Brown, who had given the Shop a lot of discarded articles, purchased several discarded articles donated by Mrs. Smith, her neighbor, while Mrs. Smith eagerly bought the cast-off wares of Mrs. Brown. Either would have sneered at the bare idea of taking "truck" which the other had abandoned, had the medium of exchange not been the popular Liberty Girls' Shop. For it was a popular shop; the "best families" patronized it; society women met there to chat and exchange gossip; it was considered a mark of distinction and highly patriotic to say: "Oh, yes; I've given the dear girls many really valuable things to sell. They're doing such noble work, you know."

Even the eminent Mrs. Charleworth, premier aristocrat of Dorfield, condescended to visit the Shop, not once but many times. She would sit in one of the chairs in the rear of the long room and hold open court, while her sycophants grouped around her, hanging on her words. For Mrs. Charleworth's status was that of social leader; she was a middle-aged widow, very handsome, wore wonderful creations in dress, was of charming personality, was exceedingly wealthy and much traveled. When she visited New York the metropolitan journals took care to relate the interesting fact. Mrs. Charleworth was quite at home in London, Paris, Berlin and Vienna; she was visiting friends in Dresden when the European war began, and by advice of Herr Zimmerman, of the German Foreign Office, who was in some way a relative, had come straight home to avoid embarrassment. This much was generally known.

It had been a matter of public information in the little town for a generation that Dick Charleworth had met the lady in Paris, when she was at the height of her

social glory, and had won the hand of the beautiful girl and brought her to Dorfield as his wife. But the wealthy young manufacturer did not long survive his marriage. On his death, his widow inherited his fortune and continued to reside in the handsome residence he had built, although, until the war disrupted European society, she passed much time abroad.

The slight taint of German blood in Mrs. Charleworth's veins was not regarded seriously in Dorfield. Her mother had been a Russian court beauty; she spoke several languages fluently; she was discreet in speech and negative in sympathy concerning the merits of the war. This lasted, however, only while the United States preserved neutrality. As soon as we cast our fortunes with the Allies, Mrs. Charleworth organized the "Daughters of Helpfulness," an organization designed to aid our national aims, but a society cult as well. Under its auspices two private theatrical entertainments had been given at the Opera House and the proceeds turned over to the Red Cross. A grand charity ball had been announced for a future date.

It may easily be understood that when Mrs. Charleworth became a patroness of the Liberty Girls' Shop, and was known to have made sundry purchases there, the high standing of that unique enterprise was assured. Some folks perhaps frequented the place to obtain a glimpse of the great Mrs. Charleworth herself, but of course these were without the pale of her aristocratic circle.

Their social triumph, however, was but one reason for the girls' success; the youngsters were enticing in themselves, and they proved to be clever in making sales. The first stock soon melted away and was replaced by new contributions, which the girls took turns in soliciting. The best residences in Dorfield were first canvassed, then those of people in moderate circumstances. The merchants were not overlooked and Mary Louise took the regular stores personally in charge.

"Anything you have that you can't sell, we will take," was her slogan, and most of the merchants found such articles and good-naturedly contributed them to the Shop.

"Sooner or later we shall come to the end of our resources," predicted Alora Jones. "We've ransacked about every house in town for contributions."

"Let's make a second canvas then," suggested Lucile. "And especially, let us make a second appeal to those who did not give us anything on our first round. Our scheme wasn't thoroughly understood at first, you know, but now folks regard it an honor to contribute to our stock."

"Yes," said Jane Donovan, "I had to laugh when Mrs. Charleworth asked Mrs. Dyer yesterday what she had given us, and Mrs. Dyer stammered and flushed

and said that when we called on her the Dyers were only renting the house and furniture, which belonged to the Dudley-Markhams, who are in South America; but, Mrs. Dyer added, they have now bought the place--old furniture and all--and perhaps she would yet find some items she can spare."

"Very good," said Edna Barlow; "the Dyers are in my district and I'll call upon them at once."

"Have the Dyers really bought the Dudley-Markham place?" asked Mary Louise.

"So it seems," replied Jane.

"But--'it must have cost a lot of money."

"Isn't the Professor rich?" inquired Josie O'Gorman, who was present and had listened quietly to the conversation.

"I-don't-know," answered Mary Louise, and the other girls forbore to answer more definitely.

That evening, however, Josie approached the subject when she and Mary Louise were sitting quietly at home and the conversation more confidential.

"The Dyers," explained her friend, "were not very prosperous until the Professor got the appointment as superintendent of schools. He was a teacher in a boys' school for years, on a small salary, and everyone was surprised when he secured the appointment."

"How did it happen?" asked Josie.

Mary Louise looked across at her grandfather.

"How did it happen, Gran'pa Jim?" she repeated.

The old colonel lowered his book.

"We haven't been residents of Dorfield many years," said he, "so I am not well acquainted with the town's former history. But I remember to have heard that the Herring political ring, which elected our Board of Education, proposed John Dyer for the position of school superintendent--and the Board promptly gave him the appointment."

"Was he properly qualified?" Josie asked.

"I think so. A superintendent is a sort of business manager. He doesn't teach, you know. But I understand the Professor received his education abroad--at

Heidelburg--and is well versed in modern educational methods. Our schools seem to be conducted very well."

Josie was thoughtful for a time, and after the colonel had resumed his book, she asked Mary Louise:

"Who was Mrs. Dyer, before her marriage?"

"That is ancient history, as far as I am concerned, but I heard the girls talking about her, just the other day. Her family, it seems, was respectable but unimportant; yet Mrs. Dyer is very well liked. She's not brilliant, but kindly. When we first came here, the Dyers lived in a little cottage on Juniper street, and it is only lately that they moved to the big house they've just bought. Mrs. Dyer is now trying hard for social recognition, but seems to meet with little encouragement. Mrs. Charleworth speaks to her, you know, but doesn't invite Mrs. Dyer to her affairs."

Next day Edna Barlow, after a morning's quest of contributions, returned to the Shop in triumph.

"There's almost a truck-load of stuff outside, to be unloaded," she announced, "and a good half of it is from Mrs. Dyer--a lot of the old Dudley-Markham rubbish, you know. It has class to it, girls, and when it has been freshened up, we're sure to get good prices for the lot."

"I'm surprised that Mrs. Dyer was so liberal," said Mary Louise.

"Well, at first she said the Professor had gone to Chicago on business, and so she couldn't do anything for us," replied Edna; "but I insisted that we needed goods right now, so she finally said we could go up in the attic, and rummage around, and take whatever we could find. My, what a lot of useless stuff there was! That attic has more smashed and battered and broken-legged furniture in it than would furnish six houses--provided it was in shape. The accumulation of ages. But a lot of it is antique, girls, and worth fixing up. I've made the best haul of our career, I verily believe."

Then Laura Hilton, who had accompanied Edna, added:

"When Mrs. Dyer saw our men carrying all that stuff down, she looked as if she regretted her act and would like to stop us. But she didn't--was ashamed to, probably--so we lugged it off. Never having been used to antique furniture, the poor woman couldn't realize the value of it."

"This seems to me almost like robbery," remarked Lucile, doubtfully. "Do you think it right for us to take advantage of the woman's ignorance?"

"Remember the Cause for which we fight!" admonished Irene, from her chair. "If the things people are not using, and do not want, can provide comforts for our soldier boys, we ought to secure them--if we have to take them by force."

The attic of the old house had really turned out a number of interesting articles. There were tables, stands, settees, chairs, and a quaint old desk, set on a square pedestal with a base of carved lions' feet. This last interested Josie as soon as it was carried into the shop. The top part was somewhat dilapidated, the cover of the desk being broken off and some of the "pigeonhole" compartments smashed. But there was an odd lot of tiny drawers, located in every conceivable place, all pretty well preserved, and the square pedestal and the base were in excellent condition.

Josie open drawer after drawer and looked the old cabinet-desk over thoroughly, quite unobserved because the others in the shop were admiring a Chippendale chair or waiting upon their customers. Presently Josie approached Mary Louise and asked:

"What will you take for the pedestal-desk--just as it stands?"

"Why, I'll let Irene put a price on it," was the reply. "She knows values better than the rest of us."

"If it's fixed up, it will be worth twenty dollars," said Irene, after wheeling her chair to the desk for a critical examination of it.

"Well, what will it cost to fix it up?" demanded Josie.

"Perhaps five dollars."

"Then I'll give you fifteen for it, just as it stands," proposed Josie. "You?

What could you do with the clumsy thing?"

"Ship it home to Washington," was the prompt reply. "It would tickle Daddy immensely to own such an unusual article, so I want to make him a present of it on his birthday."

"Hand over the fifteen dollars, please," decided Irene.

Josie paid the money. She caught the drayman who had unloaded the furniture and hired him to take the desk at once to the Hathaway residence. She even rode with the man, on the truck, and saw the battered piece of furniture placed in her own room. Leaving it there, she locked her door and went back to the Shop.

The girls were much amused when they learned they had made so important a sale to one of themselves.

"If we had asked Mrs. Dyer to give us fifteen dollars, cold cash," remarked Laura, "she would have snubbed us properly; but the first article from her attic which we sold has netted us that sum and I really believe we will get from fifty to seventy-five dollars more out of the rest of the stuff."

Mrs. Charleworth dropped in during the afternoon and immediately became interested in the Dudley-Markham furniture. The family to whom it had formerly belonged she knew had been one of the very oldest and most important in Dorfield. The Dudley-Markhams had large interests in Argentine and would make their future home there, but here were the possessions of their grandmothers and great-grandmothers, rescued from their ancient dust, and Mrs. Charleworth was a person who loved antiques and knew their sentimental and intrinsic values.

"The Dyers were foolish to part with these things," she asserted. "Of course, Mary Dyer isn't supposed to know antiques, but the professor has lived abroad and is well educated."

"The professor wasn't at home," explained Edna. "Perhaps that was lucky for us. He is in Chicago, and we pleaded so hard that Mrs. Dyer let us go into the attic and help ourselves."

"Well, that proves she has a generous heart," said the grand lady, with a peculiar, sphinx-like smile. "I will buy these two chairs, at your price, when you are ready to sell them."

"We will hold them for you," replied Edna. "They're to be revarnished and properly 'restored,' you know, and we've a man in our employ who knows just how to do it."

When Mary Louise told Colonel Hathaway, jokingly, at dinner that evening, of Josie's extravagant purchase, her girl friend accepted the chaffing composedly and even with a twinkle in her baby-blue eyes. She made no comment and led Mary Louise to discourse on other subjects.

That night Josie sat up late, locked in her own room, with only the pedestal-desk for company. First she dropped to her knees, pushed up a panel in the square base, and disclosed the fact that in this inappropriate place were several cleverly constructed secret compartments, two of which were well filled with papers. The papers were not those of the Dudley-Markhams; they were not yellowed with age; they were quite fresh.

"There!" whispered the girl, triumphantly; "the traitor is in my toils. Is it just luck, I wonder, or has fate taken a hand in the game? How the Kaiser would frown, if he knew what I am doing to-night; and how Daddy would laugh! But--let's see!--perhaps this is just a wedge, and I'll need a sledge-hammer to crack open the whole conspiracy."

The reason Josie stayed up so late was because she carefully examined every paper and copied most of those she had found. But toward morning she finished her self-imposed task, replaced the papers, slid the secret panel into place and then dragged the rather heavy piece of furniture into the far end of the deep closet that opened off her bedroom. Before the desk she hung several dresses, quite masking it from observation. Then she went to bed and was asleep in two minutes.