

CHAPTER XV SUSPENDERS FOR SALE

The two girls parted at the Liberty Shop. Mary Louise went in "to attend to business," while Josie O'Gorman strolled up the street and paused thoughtfully before the windows of Kasker's Clothing Emporium. At first she didn't notice that it was Kasker's; she looked in the windows at the array of men's wear just so she could think quietly, without attracting attention, for she was undecided as to her next move. But presently, realizing this was Kasker's place, she gave a little laugh and said to herself: "This is the fellow poor little Mary Louise suspected of being the arch traitor. I wonder if he knows anything at all, or if I could pump it out of him if he does? Guess I'll interview old Jake, if only to satisfy myself that he's the harmless fool I take him to be."

With this in mind she walked into the store. A clerk met her; other clerks were attending to a few scattered customers.

"Is Mr. Kasker in?" she asked the young man.

"In his office, miss; to the right, half way down."

He left her to greet another who entered and Josie walked down the aisle, as directed. The office was raised a step above the main floor and was railed in, with a small swinging gate to allow entrance. This was not the main business office but the proprietor's special den and his desk was placed so he could overlook the entire establishment, with one glance. Just at present Kasker was engaged in writing, or figuring, for his bushy head was bent low.

Josie opened the gate, walked in and took a chair that stood beside the desk.

"Good morning, Mr. Kasker," she said sweetly.

He looked up, swept her with a glance and replied:

"What's the matter? Can't one of the clerks attend to you? I'm busy."

"I'll wait," was Josie's quiet reply. "I'd rather deal with you than a clerk."

He hesitated, laid down his pen and turned his chair toward her. She knew the man, by sight, but if he had ever seen the girl he did not recall the fact. His tone was now direct and businesslike.

"Very well, miss; tell me what I can do for you."

It had only taken her an instant to formulate her speech.

"I'm interested in the poor children of Dorfield," she began, "having been sent here as the agent of an organization devoted to clothing our needy little ones. I find, since I have been soliciting subscriptions in Dorfield and investigating the requirements of the poor, that there are a lot of boys, especially, in this city who are in rags, and I want to purchase for them as many outfits as my money will allow. But on account of the war, and its demands on people formerly charitably inclined, I realize my subscription money is altogether too little to do what I wish. That's too bad, but it's true. Everywhere they talk war--war---war and its hardships. The war demands money for taxes, bonds, mess funds, the Red Cross and all sorts of things, and in consequence our poor are being sadly neglected."

He nodded, somewhat absently, but said nothing. Josie felt her clever bait had not been taken, as she had expected, so she resolved to be more audacious in her remarks.

"It seems a shame," she said with assumed indignation, "that the poor of the country must starve and be in want, while the money is all devoted to raising an army for the Germans to shoot and mangle."

He saw the point and answered with a broad smile:

"Is that the alternative, young lady? Must one or the other happen? Well--yes; the soldiers must be killed, God help 'em! But himmel! We don't let our kiddies freeze for lack of clothes, do we? See here; they're taking everything away from us merchants--our profits, our goods, everything!--but the little we got left the kiddies can have. The war is a robber; it destroys; it puts its hand in an honest man's pocket without asking his consent; all wars do that. The men who make wars have no souls--no mercy. But they make wars. Wars are desperate things and require desperate methods. There is always the price to pay, and the people always pay it. The autocrats of war do not say 'Please!' to us; they say 'Hold up your hands!' and so--what is there to do but hold up our hands?"

Josie was delighted; she was exultant; Jake Kasker was falling into her trap very swiftly.

"But the little ones," he continued, suddenly checking himself in his tirade, "must not be made to suffer like the grown-up folks. They, at least, are innocent of it all. Young lady, I'd do more for the kids than I'd do for the war--and I'll do it willingly, of my own accord. Tell me, then, how much money you got and I'll give you the boys' suits at cost price. I'll do more; for every five suits you buy from me at cost, I'll throw an extra one in, free--Jake Kasker's own contribution."

This offer startled and somewhat dismayed Josie. She had not expected the interview to take such a turn, and Kasker's generosity seriously involved her,

while, at the same time, it proved to her without a doubt that the man was a man. He was loud mouthed and foolish; that was all.

While she gathered her wits to escape from an unpleasant situation, a quick step sounded on the aisle and a man brusquely entered the office and exclaimed:

"Hello, Jake; I'm here again. How's the suspender stock?"

Kasker gave him a surly look.

"You come pretty often, Abe Kauffman," he muttered. "Suspenders? Bah! I only buy 'em once a year, and you come around ev'ry month or so. I don't think it pays you to keep pesterin' merchants."

Abe Kauffman laughed--a big laugh--and sat down in a chair.

"One time you buy, Jake, and other times I come to Dorfield somebody else buys. How do I know you don't get a run on suspenders some time? And if I don't visit all my customers, whether they buy or not, they think I neglect 'em. Who's this, Jake? Your daughter?"

He turned his bland smile on Josie. He was a short, thickset man with a German cast of countenance. He spoke with a stronger German accent than did Kasker. Though his face persistently smiled, his eyes were half closed and shrewd. When he looked at her, Josie gave a little shudder and slightly drew back.

"Ah, that's a wrong guess," said Mr. Kauffman quickly. "I must beg your pardon, my girl. But I meant a compliment to you both. Accept my card, please," and he drew it from his pocket and handed it to her with a bow.

Josie glanced at it:

"KAUFFMAN SUSPENDER COMPANY, Chicago. Abe Kauffman, President."

"My business does not interest ladies," he went on in a light tone meant to be jovial. "But with the men--ah!--with the men it's a hold-up game. Ha, ha, hee! One of our trade jokes. It's an elastic business; Kauffman's suspenders keep their wearers in suspense. Ha, ha; pretty good, eh?"

"Do you ever sell any?" asked Josie curiously.

"Do I? Do I, Jake? Ha, ha! But not so many now; the war has ruined the suspender business, like everything else. Kasker can tell you that, miss."

"Kasker won't, though," asserted Jake in a surly tone. The girl, however, was now on another scent.

"Don't you like the war, then?" Josie asked the salesman.

"Like it?" the eyes half opened with a flash. "Who likes war, then? Does humanity, which bears the burden? For me--myself--I'll say war is a good thing, but I won't tell you why or how I profit by it; I'll only say war is a curse to humanity and if I had the power I'd stop it tomorrow--to-day--this very hour! And, at that, I'd lose by it."

His voice shook with a passion almost uncontrollable. He half rose from his chair, with clinched fists. But, suddenly remembering himself, or reading the expression on the girl's face, he sank back again, passed his hand over his face and forced another bland, unmirthful smile.

"I'd hate to be the man who commits his country to war," he said in mild, regretful tones.

But here, Kasker, who had been frowning darkly on the suspender man, broke in.

"See here, Abe; I don't allow that kind of talk in my store," he growled.

"You? You're like me; you hate the war, Jake."

"I did once, Abe, but I don't now. I ain't got time to hate it. It's here, and I can't help it. We're in the war and we're going ahead to win it, 'cause there ain't no hope in backing down. Stop it? Why, man, we can't stop it. It's like a man who is pushed off a high bank into a river; he's got to swim to a landing on the other side, or else--sink. We Americans ain't goin' to sink, Abe Kauffman; we'll swim over, and land safe. It's got to be; so it will be."

"All right. I said, didn't I, that it won't hurt my pocket? But it hurts my heart." (Josie was amazed that he claimed a heart.) "But it's funny to hear you talk for the war, Jake, when you always hated it."

"Well, I've quit kickin' till we're out of the woods. I'm an American, Abe, and the American flag is flying in France. If our boys can't hold it in the face of the enemy, Jake Kasker will go do it himself!"

Kauffman stood up, casting a glance of scorn on his customer.

"You talk like a fool, Jake; you talk like you was talking for the papers--not honest, but as if someone had scared you."

"Yes; it's the fellows like you that scare me," retorted the clothing merchant. "Ev'ry time you curse the war you're keeping us from winning the war as quick as we ought to; you're tripping the soldiers, the government, the President--the whole machine. I'll admit I don't like the war, but I'm for it, just the same. Can

you figure that out, Abe Kauffman? Once I had more sense than you have, but now I got a better way of thinking. It ain't for me to say whether the war's right or not; my country's honor is at stake, so I'll back my country to the last ditch."

Kauffman turned away.

"I guess you don't need any suspenders," he said, and walked out of the store.

Kasker gave a sigh of relief and sat down again.

"Now, young lady," he began, "we'll talk about--"

"Excuse me," said Josie hastily. "I'm going, now; but I'll be back. I want to see you again, Mr. Kasker."

She ran down the aisle to the door, looked up and down the street and saw the thick-set form of the suspender salesman just disappearing around the corner to the south. Instantly she stepped out. Josie was an expert in the art of shadowing.