TWENTY−THREE AND A HALF HOURS' LEAVE

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

Table of Contents

TWENTY−THREE AND A HALF HOURS' LEAVE

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.
http://www.blackmask.com

I

THE Headquarters Troop were preparing to leave camp and move towards the East, where at an Atlantic port they would take ship and the third step toward saving democracy. Now the Headquarters Troop are a cavalry organisation, their particular function being, so far as the lay mind can grasp it, to form a circle round the general and keep shells from falling on him. Not that this close affiliation gives them any right to friendly relations with that aloof and powerful personage.

"It just gives him a few more to yell at that can't yell back," grumbled the stable sergeant. He had been made stable sergeant because he had been a motorcycle racer. By the same process of careful selection the chief mechanic had once kept a livery stable.

The barracks hummed day and night. By day boxes were packed, containing the military equipment of horses and men in wartime. By night tired noncoms pored over pay rolls and lists, and wrote, between naps on the table, such thrilling literature as this:

"Sergeant Gray: fr. D. to Awol. 10 A. M., 6—1—'18.

"Sergeant Gray: fr. Awol. to arrest, pp. 2. Memo. Hdq. Camp 6—1—'18 to 6—2—'18."

Which means, interpreted, that Sergeant Gray was absent without leave from duty at ten A. M. on the first of June, 1918, and that on his return he was placed under arrest, said arrest lasting from the first to the second of June.

On the last night in camp, at a pine table in a tiny office cut off from the lower squad room, Sergeant Gray made the above record against his own fair name, and sitting back surveyed it grimly. It was two A. M. Across from him the second mess sergeant was dealing in cans and pounds and swearing about a missing cleaver.

"Did you ever think," reflected Sergeant Gray, leaning back in his chair and tastefully drawing a girl's face on his left thumb−nail, "that the time would come when you'd be planning bran muffins for the Old Man's breakfast? What's a bran muffin, anyhow?"

"Horse feed."

"Ever eat one?"

"No. Stop talking, won't you?"

Sergeant Gray leaned back and stretched his long arms high above his head.

"I've got to talk," he observed. "if I don't I'll go to sleep. Lay you two dollars to one I'm asleep before you are."

"Go to the devil," said the second mess sergeant peevishly.

"Never had breakfast with the Old Man, did you?" inquired Sergeant Gray, beginning on his forefinger with another girl's face.

There was no reply to his question. The second mess sergeant was completely immersed in beans.

"Think the Old Man likes me," went on Sergeant Gray meditatively. "It's about a week now since he told me I was a disgrace to the uniform. How'd I know I was going to sneeze in his horse's ear just as he was climbing on?"

"Suffering snakes!" cried the second mess sergeant. "Go to bed! You're delirious."

Sergeant Gray put a dimple in the girl's cheek and surveyed it critically.

"Yep. The old boy's crazy about me," he ruminated aloud. "Asked me the other day if I thought I'd fight the Germans as hard as I fought work."

"Probably be asking you to breakfast," observed the second mess sergeant, beginning on a new sheet. "He's in the habit of having noncoms to eat with him."

The subtlety of this passed over Sergeant Gray's head. He was carefully adding a small ear to his drawing, an ear which resembled an interrogation point. But a seed had been dropped on the fertile soil of his mind. He finished, yawned again and grinned.

"All right," he said. "C'est la guerre, as the old boy says. I'll lay you two dollars to one I eat breakfast with him within a month." His imagination grew with the thought. "Wait! I'll eat bran muffins with him at breakfast within a month. How's that?"

"It's simple damn foolishness," observed the second mess sergeant. "I'll take you if you'll go to bed and lemme alone."

"'Lemme,'" observed Sergeant Gray, "is probably Princeton. In Harvard we—."

But the second mess sergeant had picked up the inkwell and was fingering it purposefully.

"All right, dear old thing." said Sergeant Gray.

And he rose, stretching his more than six feet to the uttermost. Then he made his way through the rows of beds to the sergeant's corner, and removing his blouse, his breeches, his shoes and his puttees was ready for sleep. His last waking thought was of his wager.

"A bran muffin with the Old Man!" he chuckled. "A bran muffin! A—"

Something heavy landed on his chest with a great thump, and after turning round once or twice settled itself there for the remainder of the night. Lying on his back, so as to give his dog the only possible berth on the tiny bed, Sergeant Gray, all−American athlete and prime young devil of the Headquarters Troop, went fast asleep.

Reveille the next morning, however, found him grouchy. He kicked the dog off his legs, to which the animal had retired, and reaching under his pillow brought out his whistle. He blew a shrill blast on it. The lower squad room groaned, turned over, closed it eyes. He blew again.

"Roll out!" he yelled in stentorian tones. "R−r−roll out, you dirty horsemen!"

Then he closed his eyes again and went peacefully to sleep. He dreamed that the general was carrying a plate of bran muffins to his bedside, and behind him was a pretty girl with coffee and an ear like an interrogation point. He wakened to find breakfast over and the cook in a bad temper.

"Be a sport, Watt," he pleaded. "Just a cup of coffee, anyhow."

"I fed your dog for you. That's all you get."

"I can't eat the dog."

"Go on out," said the cook. "This ain't the Waldorf−Astoria. Nor Childs' neither."

"Some day, on the field of honor," said Sergeant Gray, "you will lie wounded, Watt. You will beg for a cup of water, and I shall refuse it, saying—"

"Give him something to get rid of him," the cook instructed his helper.

And Sergeant Gray was fed. As he drank his coffee he reflected as to his wager of the night before. It appealed to his sporting instinct but not to his reason. He had exactly as much chance to eat a bran muffin with the general as he had to sign peace terms with the Kaiser.

He drank his tepid coffee and surveyed his finger nails disconsolately. The faces had only partially disappeared during his morning ablution.

"This is the life, Watt!" he said to the cook. "Wine, women and song, eh?"

But the cook was cutting his finger nails, preparatory to morning inspection.

Now the ink pictures on Sergeants Gray's finger nails had a certain significance. They bore, to be exact, a certain faint resemblance to a young lady whose photograph was now concealed against inspection in the sergeant's condiment can. The young lady in question had three days before wired the sergeant to this effect:

"Married Bud Palmer yesterday. Please wish me happiness."

To which, concealing a deep hurt, the sergeant had replied: "Praying earnestly for you both."

He was, then, womanless. No one loved him. He was going to war, and no one would mourn him—except the family, of course. The effect of the tepid coffee on his empty stomach was merely to confirm his morning unhappiness. No one loved him and he had made a fool bet that by now was all over the troop.

At mess he knew what he stood committed to. "Please pass the bran muffins," came loudly to his ears. And scraps of conversation like this:

"But you see, dear old thing, I didn't know your horse was going to stick his head under my nose when I sneezed."

Or:

"But, my dear general, the weakness of the division lies in your staff. Now, if I were doing it—"

By one o'clock in the afternoon the troop were ready to move. And Sergeant Gray went into the town. There he tried on a new uniform—and the story of Sergeant Gray's new uniform is the story of the bran muffins.

It was really a beautiful uniform. Almost it took away the sting of that telegram: almost it obliterated the memory of the wager. It spread over his broad shoulders and hugged his slim waist. The breeches were full above and close below. For the first time he felt every inch a soldier.

He carried the old uniform back to camp and gave it to the cook.

"Here, Watt!" he said. "You've been grumbling about clothes. Cut the chevrons off it, and it's yours."

"Well, look who's here!" said Watt admiringly. "Thought you fellows had to wear issue stuff."

"Laws are for slaves, Watt."

"Keep it nice," observed the cook gracelessly. "You'll need it for that breakfast with the general."

"Wait and see," said Sergeant Gray jauntily, but with no hope in his heart.

The new uniform was the cause of much invidious comment. Most of it resembled the cook's. But Sergeant Gray was busy. To pass inspection he was obliged to borrow from the neighbouring beds, left unguarded, certain articles in which he was deficient, namely: Undershirt, cotton, one: socks, light wool, pairs, two; underbreeches, cotton, pairs, one.

Thus miscellaneously assembled he passed inspection. He drew a deep breath, however, when no notice was taken of the new and forbidden uniform and when the photograph of Mrs. Bud Palmer still lay rolled up and undiscovered in his condiment can.

During the afternoon he wandered over to the depot brigade and left his dog there with a lieutenant who had promised to look after him. The sense of depression and impending doom had overtaken him again. He stopped at the post exchange and bought a dozen doughnuts, which he carried with him in a paper bag.

"Might feed him one of these now and then," he suggested. "He's going to miss me like the devil. He's a nice mutt." His voice was a trifle husky.

"Not fond of bran muffins, I suppose?"

The lieutenant's voice was impersonal. Sergeant Gray eyed him suspiciously, but his eyes were on the dog.

"Don't know. Never tried them," he said, and walked off with great dignity.

So that was it, eh? It was all over the division already. Well, he'd show them! He'd—

The general, on horseback and followed by his aids, went by. Sergeant Gray looked after him with bitterness in his heart. Just at that moment he hated the Army. He hated the general. Most of all he hated to the depths of his soul those smug young officers who were the general's aids−de−camp, and who ate with him, and swanked in and out of Headquarters, and ordered horses from the troop stables whenever they wanted them, and brought in their muddy automobiles to be cleaned, and sat with their feet on the general's desk in his absence and smoked his cigarettes.

However, he cheered somewhat during the evening. They were ready to move. No more drill on hot and dusty parade grounds. No more long hikes. No more digging and shoveling and pushing of wagon trains out of the mud. No more infantry range, where a chap in the pit waved a red flag every time dust in a fellow's eyes caused a miss, and the men round hissed "Raspberry!" No more bayonet school, where one jabbed a bunch of green branches representing the enemy, and asked breathlessly how it liked it. "War's hell, you know, old top," he had been wont to say, and had given the bunch another poke for luck.

Before, ahead, loomed the port of embarkation. The one imminent question of the barracks was—leave. Were they to have leave or were they not? To Sergeant Gray the matter was of grave importance. Leave meant a call on Mrs. Bud Palmer the faithless, in the new uniform, and the ceremonious returning to her of the photograph in the condiment can. Then it meant finding a nice girl—he was rather vague here—and going to the theatre and supper afterward, and perhaps to a roof garden still later.

"I'll show her," he muttered between his teeth. But the her was Mrs. Palmer.

In their preparations for departure the wager slipped from the minds of the troop. At two−thirty in the morning they went ostensibly on a hike, in full marching order, which meant extremely full—for a cavalry troop dismounted must carry their own equipment and a part that normally belongs on the horse. Went on a hike, not to return.

"Everything on me but the kitchen stove," grumbled Sergeant Gray, and edged gingerly through the doorway to join the line outside. With extreme caution, because only the entire balance of the division and the people in three near−by towns knew that they were moving, they made their way to a railway siding and there entrained.

It was dawn when the cars moved out. Sergeant Gray had secured a window seat, and kept it in spite of heroic efforts to oust him. All round was his equipment, packed tight, his saddlebags, his blanket roll, his rifle and bandoleer, a dozen oranges in a paper sack, as many doughnuts. Over and round him, leaning out of his window at the imminent danger of their lives, were the supply sergeant, the second mess sergeant, the stable sergeant and two corporals.

"Not crowded, are you, general?" asked the stable sergeant politely.

The title stuck. He was general to the entire troop after that: behind his back, to the enlisted men; to his face and very, very politely, to the other noncoms.

"Oh, go to hell!" they finally tortured out of him; and they retired, grinning, until some wit or other would walk down the aisle, salute gravely and say: "Wish to report that bran muffins are on the way, sir."

And as the train moved out the car took up that message of the artillery when a gun is fired. "On the way!" they yelled. "On the way! Bran muffin Number One on the way."

"Been pretty busy, haven't you?" he asked when at last the train had settled down to comparative quiet and the second mess sergeant was beside him.

"Not half as busy as you'll have to be if you're going to make good."

However, the troop's attention, fickle as the love of the mob, turned at last away from him and focused on the coloured porter. They insisted that he was of draft age, and that it was the custom anyhow to take the train crew to France with the troops it carried. They suggested craps, and on his protesting that he had no money they forced him to turn his pockets out, at the point of a revolver. And boylike, having bullied him until he was pale, they loaded him with cigarettes, candy, fruit and abuse.

The Headquarters Troop had a train of their own. Up behind the engine was the baggage car, turned into a kitchen with field ranges set up and the cooks already at work. Behind was the long line of tourist sleepers, each with its grinning but slightly apprehensive porter. And at the rear, where general officers of importance are always kept in war, was a Pullman containing the divisional staff.

When breakfast, served from the baggage car, was being carried down the aisles the train pulled into a tunnel and stopped. It was a very hot day, and in through the open windows rolled black and choking clouds of smoke. The troop coughed and cursed; but a moment later they burst into wild whoops of joy. The engine had pulled on a hundred yards or so, leaving the staff car in the tunnel.

The windows were full of jeering boys, eyes bent eagerly toward the rear. The end of the tunnel belched smoke like an iron furnace, and into it the joyous whoops of the troop penetrated like the maniacal yells of demons.

The general, who had just buttered a bran muffin, looked up and scowled. He took a bite of the muffin, but he was eating smoke.

"What the—" he sputtered. "Get this car moved on, somebody!" he shouted.

The staff sat still and pretended it was not present.

"Woof, woof!" said the general in a furious cough. "Listen to those—woof, woof!—young devils! Move this train on, somebody! What have I got a staff for anyhow?"

The train stood still and conversation languished. There are only two things to be done when a general is angry: One is to get behind the furniture and pretend one is not there; the other is to distract his mind. The general's ire growing and the car remaining in the tunnel, an aide whom the general called Tommy when no one was near ventured to speak.

"Rather an amusing story going round, sir," he said. "Woof! One of the sergeants in the Headquarters Troop has made a wager—woof!—woof, sir!—sir—that he—"

"I don't want to hear anything about the Headquarters Troop," snarled the general. "Woof! Bunch of second−story workers!"

The aide subsided. But somewhat later, when the car had moved on and the general was smoking an excellent cigar, the general said: "What was the wager, Tommy?"

"I believe, sir, it is to the effect that within a month this fellow will breakfast with you, sir. To be exact, will eat a bran muffin with you."

The general exhaled a large mouthful of smoke.

"C'est la guerre!" he said. He had been studying French for two weeks. "C'est la guerre, Tommy. Queer things happen these days. But I think it unlikely. Very, very unlikely."

II

SERGEANT GRAY was extremely contented. He sat back in his seat and alternately nibbled doughnuts and puffed at a cigarette. Before him, stretched as far as the limitations permitted, were two long and well−breeched legs, ending in tan shoes listed by the supply sergeant as "Shoes, field, pair, size 11 EE."

He had surreptitiously taken out Mrs. Bud Palmer's photograph and decided that her face was shallow. And after a moment's hesitation he had decided not to waste any part of his precious leave in returning it. So he had torn it into bits and thrown it out of the window. Then he had taken a piece of paper and, writing on it "This space to let," had placed it in the condiment can and put the can back in his saddlebags.

The reason of his content was that leave was now assured. At eleven o'clock that morning the general's field secretary had typed on a shaky field machine that stood on an equally unsteady tripod the order that at the port of embarkation twenty per cent of the men would be allowed each day some twenty−three and a half hours' leave.

Wild cheers in each car had followed the reading of the order. Wild cheers and wild plans. Sergeant Gray dreamed, doughnut in one hand and cigarette in the other. Twenty−three and a half hours! A lot could happen in twenty−three and a half hours. His dreams were general rather than concrete. Girls, theatres and food comprised them. No particular girl, no particular theatre, no particular food. He would call up some of the fellows from college, and they would have sisters. And when he had gone to the other side they would write to him.

He had no sentimental affiliations now. He had put all his eggs in one basket and the basket had been stolen.

"Lucky I'm not dependent on eggs for food!" he mused and, mistaking the hand in which he held the doughnut, bit vigorously into his cigarette.

Nevertheless his spirits grew lower as the day went on. It had occurred to him that all the fellows he had counted on for sisters would be in the Army, like himself. He cut off girls from his list, on that discovery; but food and theatres remained. He reflected rather defiantly that he could have a good time without girls; and then considered that a chap who lied to himself was in the class with a fellow who cheated at solitaire.

The day was hot. Kindly women at stations passed in sandwiches and coffee, and the troop, with the eternal appetite of twenty−odd, gorged themselves and cheered in overhanging pyramids from the windows. The corporals on guard between the cars slept on seats improvised of saddlebags, and between naps rolled cigarettes. And the noncoms in their corner inveigled the porter to a game of crap, and took from him his week's accumulation of tips.

At the end of the game Sergeant Gray took out his money and counted it.

"Looks like you'd be able to give the Old Man a right good breakfast," observed the stable sergeant.

"Oh, it's to be his breakfast," said Sergeant Gray recklessly.

"It is, is it?" The stable sergeant regarded him with admiration. "Want to bet on it?"

"Just as you like," was the cool answer.

"Look here," said the stable sergeant, aware of an audience. "I'll lay you five to one you don't breakfast with him at all; ten to one you don't do it on his invitation, and"—he hesitated for effect—"twenty to one you don't do it within a week."

"Good!" said Sergeant Gray, and laid some bills on his knee. "I'd wager I could pull the Crown Prince's nose at those odds. Then if I do breakfast with him within a week on his invitation you'll owe me a hundred and seventy−five dollars."

"I wish my money was as safe in the bank." But the stable sergeant was vaguely uncomfortable. Those college chaps had a way of putting things over. He went out on the platform and stared uneasily at the flying scenery.

Sergeant Gray folded his new uniform under the mattress of his berth that night. It was bad for the collar, but he did it lest worse befall it. He suspected the troop of jealous designs on it. But he could not fold himself away so easily, and lay diagonally, with two Number Eleven Double E feet in the aisle. At four in the morning he wakened, the cause being a dream that he had for some hours been walking in a puddle and needed to change his shoes.

Still only half awake, he looked at his feet, to perceive that some wag had neatly blackened them with shoe polish from the porter's closet. He immediately reached under his pillow for his whistle and blew a shrill blast on

it, followed by a stentorian roar.

"Roll out, you dirty horsemen! R−r−roll out!" he yelled.

Still half asleep, they roused at the familiar sounds. Grunting and protesting they sat up. From the berth over him a corporal swung down two long bare legs and sat on the edge, yawning. Then somebody looked at a watch. There would have been a small riot, but the men were too sleepy and too relieved. They tumbled back, and Sergeant Gray lay on his pillow and grinned vindictively.

He did not go to sleep at once. He lay there and thought of his wager, and cursed himself for a fool. Then he dismissed that and thought of his twenty−three and a half hours' leave. If only there were a girl—a nice girl. He did not want the sort of girl a fellow picked up in the streets. He wanted a real girl, the sort a fellow could write to later on.

Little quickenings of romance stirred in his heart. A pretty girl, preferably small. He liked them little, with pointed chins. They had a way, the little girls with pointed chins, of looking up at a fellow −−

He wakened at seven. The troop were still sleeping, but from the baggage car ahead there floated back an odor of frying bacon, and on the platform of a station outside—for the train had stopped—the general was taking an airing.

Sergeant Gray blew his whistle. "R−r−roll out!" he yelled. "R−r−roll out, you blooming sons of guns!"

And, to emphasize his authority, he lifted a strong and muscular pair of legs and raised the upper berth, in which the corporal still slept. Smothered sounds from above convincing him that his efforts had been successful he dropped the upper berth with a jerk.

"R−r−roll out, up there!" he yelled; and whistle in hand he lay back to the succulent enjoyment of an orange.

Across from him the stable sergeant had turned on his back for another nap. Through the curtains, opened against the heat, Gray could see that young gentleman's broad chest rising and falling slowly. The temptation and destiny were too strong for him. He bounced an orange on it, only to see it rebound through the window and to hear a deafening roar. The stable sergeant sat up, a hand on his chest and fire in his eyes. He blinked into the distorted face of the general, outside the window. The general was holding a hand to his left ear.

"Who threw that orange?" demanded the general.

"Wh−what orange, sir?"

"Don't lie to me. It came out of this window."

"I was asleep, sir. Something struck me on the chest. I didn't see it, sir!"

Behind his curtains Sergeant Gray had been struggling into his trousers. He emerged now, slightly pale but determined.

"I threw it, sir," he explained. "I had no idea—it bounced, sir."

The general surveyed him grimly.

"It's a curious thing, sergeant," he said, "that when there is any deviltry going on in the Headquarters Troop I find you at the bottom of it. Report to me in my car at eight o'clock."

Then he stalked away.

Down the car a sonorous bass spoke from behind a curtain: "The commanding general presents his compliments to Sergeant Gray, and will Sergeant Gray breakfast with him in his private car at eight o'clock?"

Sergeant Gray dressed hastily. There was the bitterness of despair in his heart, for he knew what was coming. He would have no twenty−three and a half hours' leave, no theatres, no decent food, no girl. And over his head still that idiotic bet.

"Oh, hell!" he muttered, and started back.

The general was still in a very bad temper, and his left ear was swollen and purple. He lost no time in the attack—he believed in striking swiftly and hard—and he read off, from an excellent memory, the tale of Sergeant Gray's various sins of commission. But he did not go so far as he meant to go, at that. In the first place, Gray was an excellent noncom, and in the second place there was something in the boy's upstanding figure and clear if worried eyes that, coupled with another of the excellent cigars, inclined him to leniency.

"But remember this, Gray," he finished severely, "I don't usually meddle with these things. But I've got my eye on you. One more infraction of discipline, and you'll lose your stripes."

"Yes, sir," said Sergeant Gray.

He was intolerably virtuous all that day.

Late that afternoon they detrained two miles from the new camp, and marched along, singing lustily songs that sound better than they look in print, and joyously stretching legs too long confined. It mattered nothing to them that the temporary camp was untidy and badly drained; that the general passing in a limousine was reading an order that meant an emergency abroad, into which they were to be thrown at once; that a certain percentage of them would never come back; and that a certain other percentage would return, never again to tramp the open road or to see the blue sky overhead.

But a girl in a little car trailing in the dust behind the staff cars thought of those things, and almost ran over the company goat, Eloise, because of tears.

"Darned little idiot!" murmured Sergeant Gray, and gave his last doughnut to Eloise.

There was no thrill, no increase over the regular seventy−six beats a minute of his heart to tell him that love had just passed by in a pink hat.

Until eight−thirty that night Sergeant Gray was obnoxiously virtuous. He had met an English noncom in the camp, and was studiously endeavouring to copy that gentleman's carriage and dignity. And the attraction of the new surroundings had turned the attention of the troop from him and his wager to other things. A discovery, too, of certain conditions in the barracks distracted them.

"A week here," growled the second mess sergeant, "and we'll all have to be dipped."

"Might was well get used to it, old son," said Sergeant Gray, and hummed a little ditty to the effect that "They are wild, simply wild, over me."

But with the falling of darkness the high spirits of the crowd broke loose. That night there was a battle royal in the barracks. The lower squad room, which housed among others the N.C.O's, decided to raid the two upper squad rooms. Word of this having been passed up, the upper squad rooms were prepared. At the top of the stairs were stationed the fire buckets, filled to the top, and a pile of coal stolen from the kitchen and secretly conveyed to the upper floor by means of baskets, a window and a rope.

Twice the lower squad reached the top of the staircase, amid wild yells and much splashing of water. The hall and stairs were running small rivers. Coals, recklessly flung down, were salvaged like hand grenades by the attacking force and thrown back again.

The noise penetrated to august quarters, and the sentry at the door, placed there for just such an emergency, having been infected with the mad desire to fight, and being at that moment in the act of climbing the coal rope to attack the enemy from the rear, an officer with a flash was at the door before he was seen.

Followed instantaneous quiet with the only sound the dripping of water down the stairs. Followed the silent retreat of the warriors to beds, into which they crept fully dressed. The officer moved through the lower squad room. It was extremely quiet save for an occasional deep−throated snore. The officer smiled grimly and went away.

And in the darkness Sergeant Gray sat up and felt of his right eye.

In the early dawn, hearing the cook stirring, he went across to the mess hall, a strange figure in his undergarments, with one eye closed and a bruise on his forehead as big as an egg. The cook eyed him angrily, and addressed him without regard to his dignity as a sergeant.

"Some o' you fellows get busy and bring back that coal you took last night," he said. "I got something else to do."

"Look here, Watt," said Sergeant Gray appealingly, "I'll get the coal for you all right. But give me a piece of raw beefsteak, won't you? Look at this eye."

"Pleased to see it," said the cook with a vindictive glare.

"Forget it, Watt. I'll get your coal. See here, I've got leave to−morrow, and I want to go to the city."

"Well, you can go, for all of me."

"I want," said Sergeant Gray plaintively, "to get my picture taken. I want to send it to my mother."

Suddenly the cook laughed. He leaned over the big serving counter and laughed until he was weak.

"Picture!" he said. "My word! She'll think the Germans have had you! Say, give me one, will you?"

He went to the refrigerator, however, and brought out a piece of raw beef.

It should have warned Sergeant Gray, lying sulkily on his cot through that bright spring day, the beef over his eye and attracting a multitude of flies, that no one else had suffered visible injury. The boys came and went blithely, each intent on his own affairs. United action had cleaned up the hallway and the stairs. But Sergeant

Gray, picked out as Fate's victim, lay and dozed and struck at flies and—waited.

By night the swelling had gone, but a deep bluish shadow encircled the right eye. Frequent consultation of his shaving mirror told him that he would have the mark for days, but at least he could see. That was something. He got up after dusk and dressed in the new uniform. Then he wandered about the camp.

He felt very lonely. Most of his intimates were on leave. Round the camp the men lounged negligently. Some one with a mandolin was strumming it, and from the theatre, where a movie show was going on, came the rattle of clapping hands. Sergeant Gray hesitated at the door, then he moved on.

What he wanted was some one to talk to, a girl preferably. He wandered past division headquarters, where the chief of staff stood inside a window rolling a cigarette; past the bull pen, surrounded by its fifteen feet of barbed wire and its military police.

At the edge of the camp he halted. From there one could see a brilliance reflected in the sky—the lights of the port of embarkation, ten miles away.

Sergeant Gray sighed and sat down on the road near an automobile. And somebody spoke to him.

"Can I take you anywhere?" asked the voice.

It was young and feminine. Something that had been aching in Sergeant Gray's deep chest suddenly stopped aching and leaped.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm not going anywhere in particular."

"I just thought"—explained the voice—"I'm waiting for the—for a relative and I might as well be taking people to the street−car line. The taxis have stopped."

A car leaving the camp threw its lights on her. She was small and young and had a pointed chin. Sergeant Gray got up.

"It's awfully good of you," he said. "If it isn't too much trouble I'll go to the end of the line."

"Get in," she said briefly.

Sergeant Gray sat back in the little car and drew a long breath.

"It's rather small for you, isn't it?" asked the girl, throwing in the clutch. "My brother has to fold up too. He's in France," she added. "That's why I like to do things for the soldiers here. It's like doing something for him."

Sergeant Gray pondered this. He considered it rather an unusual thing for a girl to have thought of. He considered that she was as nice as she was pretty. He also considered that she drove well. Sergeant Gray, who in his leisure hours practiced running a motorcycle with the side car in the air, paid her tribute of approval.

"We'll be over soon," he said with a touch of pride.

"You'd better not tell anybody that."

"Why? I rather think our being here tells the story."

"Well, a lot of people would like to know just when you're going. They hang round the men and offer them rides in cars, and the men get to talking, and pretty soon they've told all they know."

"They'd better not try it on me."

"You almost told me a moment ago."

Sergeant Gray sat quiet and a trifle hurt.

"I am only warning you," said the girl. "There are spies simply everywhere. I can't do much, and that's my way of doing something. That and being a sort of taxi," she added.

They were in a town now, and by the lamps he saw just how pretty she was.

"Thanks awfully for warning me," he said rather humbly. "A fellow gets to think that all this spy talk is—just talk."

"Well, it isn't," said the girl briefly but with the air of one who knew.

The sergeant eyed her askance.

"That sounds as though you knew something."

"Perhaps I do. Though of course one doesn't really know these things. One suspects."

"Naturally one does."

She glanced at him, but his face was grave.

"What I would like to know," he proceeded, "is what one does when one suspects."

"I am afraid you are trying to be funny," she observed coldly, and brought the car to a standstill. "Here's your car line."

He hesitated. Then he made a wild resolve.

"I see it," he said agreeably. "Thanks awfully for bringing me. We can go back now."

She stared at him.

"You are not going anywhere?"

"Why, no," he said, trying not to look conscious. "I said that I'd like to go to the end of the car line."

"You're there."

"I only wanted to look at it."

"Very well. Get out and look at it. I don't think you'll find it unusual in any way."

"Look here," he said humbly. "I'm awfully sorry. I was just hungry to talk to some one, and when you offered—"

"I have done exactly as I offered. You will please get out!"

He got out slowly. He was overcome with wretchedness and guilt, but her pointed chin was held high and her face was obstinate.

"Thank you very much," said Sergeant Gray, and turning drearily commenced his lonely walk back to camp.

He could hear her behind him backing and turning in the narrow street. He plodded on, cursing himself. If he had had any sense and had got out and let her think he was going somewhere—

The lights of the car were close behind him now. When they were abreast he heard the grinding of the brakes as it stopped.

"I don't want to be disagreeable," said the girl, beside him. "I suppose you did want some one to talk to. I'll take you back if you like."

"I'd better not bother you any more."

Suddenly she laughed. In the light from a street lamp she had caught her first real glimpse of his face.

"Wherever did you get that eye?" she demanded.

"Fighting," he said shortly. "We had a roughhouse at the barracks last night."

"I should think you were going to have enough trouble soon without getting beaten up like that," she said with a touch of severity. "Well, are you going to get in?"

He got in. She had been rather reserved coming down, but now she was more talkative. His little remark about being hungry for some one to talk to had struck home. Her brother had said something like that once. They must get hungry for girls, nice girls.

So now she chattered and she drew from the tall boy beside her something about himself. It was not particularly hard to do. Sergeant Gray opened up like a flower in the sun. He explained, for instance, that he was to have a commission when he was twenty−one.

"Unless," he admitted, "I'm in too bad with the Old Man."

"The Old Man?"

"The general," explained Sergeant Gray, unaware that the young lady was sitting very straight. "He's hell—he's strong for discipline, and all that. And—well, every now and then I slip up on something, and he gets me. It's always me he gets," he finished plaintively and ungrammatically.

"But you shouldn't do things that are wrong."

Sergeant Gray pondered this amazing statement.

"Perhaps you're right," he acknowledged. "I hadn't thought of that."

"You might try being terribly well behaved for—well, for twenty−four hours."

"Do you want me to?"

"It's entirely a matter of your own good," she said rather coldly.

"I'll do it!" said Sergeant Gray rashly. "Not a misstep for twenty−four hours. How's that?"

"It sounds well."

"The truth is," confided Sergeant Gray, "I've got to be good. He's watching. He told me so."

"And if you're not—"

"Shot against a brick wall probably." He grinned cheerfully. "Think of that hanging over a fellow, and twenty−three and a half hours' leave to−morrow."

"I hope," she said in the motherly tone she assumed now and then, "that you are going to be awfully careful to−morrow."

"Did you ever see a cat crossing a wet gutter? Well, that's me to−morrow. This is no time to take any chances."

At which probably those particular gods that had Sergeant Gray in their keeping laughed behind their hands.

The girl stopped the car at the camp, and the plaything of destiny descended.

"Thank you, awfully," observed the said plaything with a considerable amount of warmth in his voice. "I—perhaps I shall not see you again."

"I was just thinking—at what time does your leave commence to−morrow?"

"At ten−thirty"—hopefully.

"I might pick you up then and take you to the trolley."

"Honestly, would you?" he asked delightedly. "You know, I—really, I can't tell you how grateful I would be."

"I love to make the taxi men wriggle," was her rather unsatisfactory reply. "I'll be here, then. Good night."

Sergeant Gray saluted and went away. To all appearances he was a rather overgrown young man trudging through the mud of a not too−tidy camp to a barracks that needed carbolising. Actually he was a sublimated being favoured of heaven and floating in a rosy cloud of dreams.

"Halt!" said a guard, and threw his rifle to port arms. "Who's there?"

"Sergeant of the Headquarters Troop," said the superman.

"Where's your pass?"

The superman presented it, and the guard inspected it closely—the attitude of the M.P. being that all men are Germans unless proved otherwise.

"Thoroughly satisfactory?" inquired the superman.

The M.P. grunted.

The sergeant approached him and lowered his voice confidentially.

"Tell you something," he volunteered: "I'm not the same chap who went out on that pass."

"What d'you mean you're not?"

"It's like this, old son. But first of all let me ask you something." He glanced about cautiously. "Man to man, old son—do you believe in love at first sight?"

"Last fellow who tried being funny round here," said the guard grimly, "had a chance to laugh himself to death in the bull pen."

"No heart!" sighed the sergeant, moving on, still on air. "No soul! No imagination! Good night, my sad and lonely friend. Good night!"

He moved on, singing in a very deep bass:

"Oh, promise me that some day you and I
May take our love te tum, te tum, te tum."

The chief of staff, who had also discovered that his quarters needed fumigation, raised from an uneasy pillow and groaned disgustedly.

"Stop that noise out there!" he bawled through the window beside him.

The superman recognised neither the voice nor the new quarters of the staff.

"Minion," he said, halting and addressing the window, "hast never loved?"

Then he moved on, still in a roseate cloud the exact shade of a certain pink hat.

"That we may take our love and faith renew,
And find the hollows where those violets grew−w−w—"

His voice died away, swallowed up in distance and the night.

When he went into the lower squad room a sort of chant greeted him from the beds: "Where, oh where's the sergeant been?"

And the reply shouted lustily: "Out getting measured for a shave."

He undressed quietly, and salvaging the piece of beefsteak from under his pillow got into bed and placed it carefully over his eye.

III

BUT tragedy had marked Sergeant Gray for its own. At reveille he rolled over, yawned and without lifting himself reached up to the pocket of his blouse and retrieved his whistle.

He blew it and shouted as usual: "R−r−roll out, you dirty horsemen! R−r−roll out!"

Then, arms under his head, he lay and dreamed. Round the day to come he wove little fantasies of the new uniform, and money in his pocket, and twenty−three and a half hours' leave, and—the girl in the little car. His pass he had already secured through the top sergeant. It had been, with others on the pass list, O.K'd by the captain and re−O.K'd by the military police. At ten−thirty that morning Sergeant Gray would be a free man.

He made a huge breakfast, and careful inspection showed the eye greatly improved. And he whistled blithely while laying out his things for the official inspection, comparing his belongings carefully with a list in his hand. Nothing was to go wrong that day, nothing mar the perfection of it or curtail his leave.

But he failed to count the camp quartermaster, and that Destiny, which had taken him in hand forty−eight hours ago, was making of him her toy.

Now camp quartermasters are but human. They have their good days and their bad, and sometimes it rather gets on their nerves, the eternal examining and determining, for instance, that every man of perhaps thirty thousand possesses in perfect condition:

```
2 breeches, O. D. wool, prs.

2 coats, O. D. wool.

1 overcoat, O. D. wool.

1 slicker.

1 hat.

1 cord (cavalry, infantry, artillery)

3 undershirts, cotton.

3 underbreeches, cotton, prs.

5 socks, light wool, prs.

5 shirts, flannel, O. D.

2 shoes, field, prs.
```

Sergeant Gray's Destiny, working by devious ways, had given the camp inspector a headache, a bad breakfast, a shirt lost by the laundry and a wigging by somebody or other. Into the bargain it was a fine day for golf and here he was looking over breeches, O. D. wool, pairs, two; and so on.

Into the barracks then came fate in the shape of the camp inspector, military of figure and militant of disposition, to count the pins for shelter halves, for instance, and generally to do anything but swing a golf club, as his heart desired. The men lined up by their equipment and the inspector went down the line. And he opened, by evil chance, Sergeant Gray's condiment can and found the space−to−let notice inside.

He looked at it, and then he looked at the tall sergeant. Now to save all he could of his twenty−three and a half hours' leave Sergeant Gray had put on his new uniform, which was against the rules. He had obeyed the regulations exactly as to his hat cord, whistle, collar insignia, buttons and shoes. Otherwise from his healthy skin to his putties he wore not a single issue article.

The second mess sergeant eying him before inspection had warned him.

"You'll get into trouble with that outfit, Gray," he had said. And Gray had replied that if he did it would be his trouble.

"Possibly," had been the second mess sergeant's comment. "But if you put him in a bad humour and get him started—there'll be hell to pay."

And now there was to be hell to pay. And the inspector, who might have been expected to walk in one door and out another but did not, stood off and surveyed him coldly.

"Issue uniform?" he demanded.

"N−no, sir."

"Take it off!"

Sergeant Gray obeyed. Once off, the full extent of his iniquity, as to his undershirt, underbreeches and socks, was revealed.

"Scrap the clothing this man is wearing," ordered the inspector. And to Sergeant Gray. "Show me your issue uniforms."

Now the sergeant was hard on clothing, and particularly on breeches. Also he had given one uniform to Watt, the cook. The single one he was able to produce was badly worn; so badly, indeed, that the camp inspector with his two hands tore the breeches apart, at a vital spot, and flung them on the floor. Something in Sergeant Gray's breast seemed to tear also and sink to the floor.

"Scrap this one also," ordered the camp inspector.

"Sir—" ventured Sergeant Gray desperately.

But the camp inspector had discovered something, namely: That the issue uniforms of the Headquarters Troop of the —th Division were of poor material. Slowly and carefully he went through the lot. Sharply and decisively, at the end, he gave his orders.

"Scrap every uniform in the troop," he said, "and send this order to the camp quartermaster."

In ten minutes one hundred and ninety−five men stood to attention in their undergarments, and in the center of each squad room lay a great heap of discarded khaki.

"Leaving us rather stripped, sir," ventured the captain.

"They've got their slickers," curtly observed fate; "and the quartermaster will fix you up all right."

He went out. Jove, what a day for golf!

"Sergeant!" called the captain.

He avoided the baleful eyes of his men and looked out of a window. He was rather young and terribly afraid he would laugh.

The supply sergeant, thus called, came forward and saluted. He was a queer figure in his woolens, and the captain coughed to recover his voice.

"Put—put on your slicker," he said, "and carry this order to the camp quartermaster. And hurry!"

Now all the balance of this story rests on that order to hurry, for it came about that the supply sergeant, running, put his toe under the edge of a board and fell heavily, and a military policeman, discovering thus that the sergeant wore no breeches, placed him immediately under arrest.

"Oh, very well," said the supply sergeant politely; and put the order in his slicker pocket. If they chose to arrest a man for a thing he couldn't help let them do it. He didn't absolutely know what was in the order and if he could sit in the bull pen the troop could sit in its underwear. It was nothing whatever to him.

He grinned malevolently, however, when he saw the captain and the two lieutenants of the troop leaving camp in a machine in the direction of the city.

"All right," he said to himself. "We'll see something later, that's all. The old boy will be crazy about this."

The old boy being the general.

In the barracks black despair was in Sergeant Gray's heart. He made a wild effort to retrieve his new uniform from the heap which was to be carried out and burned, but the troop were a unit against him.

"Aw, keep still!" they said in effect. "You got us into this, and you'll stick it out with us."

"I've got leave, fellows," he appealed to the other noncoms. "I've got an engagement too."

"We know. To breakfast with the general," sneered the stable sergeant. "Well, you'd better send your regrets."

At ten−fifteen the troop, having waited an hour, were growing uneasy, and Sergeant Gray was stationed at a

window, watching three men in slickers tending a fire of mammoth proportions. At ten−thirty, going to a window in one of the two upper squad rooms, he made out a small car down the road, and a girl with a pink hat in it. There was no supply sergeant in sight.

At ten forty−five a scout patrol in slickers having been sent out reported the supply sergeant not in the camp quartermaster's office, as observed through a window, and the troop officers as having gone for the day.

Black despair, then, in a hundred and ninety−five hearts, but in no one of them such agony as in Sergeant Gray's. Clad in an army slicker he made a dozen abortive attempts to borrow a uniform from tall men in other companies, but inspection was on, and had commenced with the Headquarters Troop. Not a man dared to be found with less than "breeches, O. D. wool, prs., two." And blouses the same.

At eleven o'clock with the glare of frenzy in his eyes Sergeant Gray put on a slicker, put his pass in his pocket and left the barracks. Outside the door he hesitated. The sun was gleaming from a hot sky, and there was no wind. The absence of wind, he felt, was in his favour. During his hurried walk toward the little car he was feeling in his mind for some excuse for the slicker, but he found himself beside the car before he had found anything to satisfy him.

"You are late," said the girl severely.

"Awfully busy morning," he explained. "Inspection and—er—all that. There's a lot to get ready," he added mysteriously.

He was aware of her careful scrutiny, and he flushed guiltily. As for the girl, she seemed satisfied with what she saw. He was a gentleman, clearly. But a slicker!

"You'd better take that raincoat back," she observed. "You won't need it. It's going to be clear and hot."

"I guess I'll take it, anyhow."

"You'll be checking it somewhere, and then forgetting to get it again."

He was frightfully uneasy. She was the sort of girl who seemed bent on getting her own way. So he muttered something about having a cold, and she countered with a flat statement that he would get more if he dressed too warmly.

They had reached what amounted to an impasse when a small boy flung a card into the car.

"Don't bother about it," said the girl as he stooped to get it. "I have one in my pocket for you."

"Thanks, awfully," said the sergeant, rather surprised. "What is it? A theatre ticket?"

She did not reply at once. He saw that they were passing the end of the trolley line and going on. He had a little thrill of mingled delight and uneasiness. He had had no plans particularly, except to see her again. His only program had been destroyed in the bonfire.

Suddenly she drew the little car up beside the road.

"Have you anything you want particularly to do to−day?" she asked.

"I was just going to play round."

"Would you like to do a real service? A national service?"

"I seem to be doing it most of the time," he observed with some bitterness.

"You said yesterday you were going to have your picture taken."

Good heavens, was this marvel, this creature from another world, going to ask for his photograph?

"I would, but this eye—"

"See here," she said briskly. "I want you to get your picture taken. I want it for a special reason. And I want you to go"—she felt in her pocket and pulled out a card—"I want you to go to this man."

"I see," he said, and took the card. "Friend of yours?"

"Certainly not!"

"Does he take good photographs?"

"I don't know. You might read the card."

He read it carefully. It merely stated that J. M. Booth of a certain number on Twenty−Second Street made excellent photographs very cheap, filled rush orders for soldiers, and gave them a special discount. He even turned it over, but the other side was blank.

"I don't get it, I guess," he said at last. "What's the answer?"

"The more I see of army men the less imagination I find," was her surprising reply. "I took that card last night to the—to an officer I know, and he was just like you. I hope you put more intelligence into your fighting than

you do into other things. How many soldiers do you suppose have gone to that man?"

"Well, I'll be one, anyhow."

He rose gallantly to the occasion.

"A good many hundred, probably. As each division comes in and gets leave they all run to get their pictures taken, don't they? And they want them by a certain time? Why? Because they're going to sail, of course."

"There's no argument on my part."

"But suppose that man's name isn't Booth? Suppose I told you he'd once been the court photographer at Vienna?"

Sergeant Gray whistled.

"Are you telling me that?"

"I am. My dressmaker is in the same building. She told me. He showed her a lot of photographs of the royal family."

Every boy has longed at some period of his life to be a detective. Sergeant Gray suddenly felt the fine frenzy of the sleuth. But there was disappointment too.

"So that's why you picked me up last night?"

"Not at all. But it's why I came for you this morning."

"Would you mind explaining that?"

"Not at all. I picked you up because I carry all the boys I can to the street car. But after we had talked I felt you would understand. Some of them wouldn't."

Sergeant Gray at once put on the expression of one who understood perfectly. But happening to glance down, the better to reflect, he saw that the slicker had slid back an inch or so, revealing that amount of a knee that was not covered with khaki. He blushed furiously, but the girl's eyes were on the road ahead."

"I do hope you'll help me out," she was saying. "It wouldn't be of any use for me to go, you know. But I'll go with you. I'll be your sister if you don't mind."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say that there were other relationships he would prefer, but he did not. She was not that sort of a girl. And he was uneasily aware, too, that her interest in him was purely academic. Not that he put it that way, of course.

"The one thing you mustn't do," she warned him, "is to tell when you actually sail. I thought you might say that the submarine trouble has held up all sailings, and you're not going for a month."

"All right," he agreed.

"Just when do you sail?" she asked suddenly.

He was exceedingly troubled. He had no finesse, and here was a point−blank question. He answered it bluntly.

"Sorry. I can't tell you."

"You're a good boy," she said with approval. "I know anyhow, so it doesn't matter. I just wondered if you would tell."

"You know a lot of things," was his admiring comment.

Half an hour later he was following the girl into a dingy elevator. He was suffering the pangs of bitter disappointment, for on his observing that if the fellow tried to find out when the division was sailing he would throw him out of the window the girl had turned on him sharply.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," she said. "You'll tell him what we've agreed on, and that's all."

"All?" he had protested. "And let him get away with it?"

"We'll decide what to do later," she had answered cryptically. And somehow he had felt that he had fallen in her estimation.

In the elevator she said out of a clear sky: "You'll have to take that raincoat off, of course."

He swallowed nervously.

"Sure I will," he replied. "But—look here, you don't mind if I ask you to stay out while I'm being done, do you? I—I'm funny about pictures. I don't like any one round. Queer thing," he went on desperately, seeing her face. "Always been like that. I—"

"I didn't come here to see you have a photograph taken," she replied coldly.

For the next half hour he did not see her. He was extremely busy.

J. M. Booth proved to be a slow worker. Sergeant Gray, who had been recently mixing with all races in the

Army, was quick to see that he spoke fluent English with a slight burr.

"French, aren't you?" he asked genially while Mr. Booth shifted the scenery.

"Alsatian," corroborated Mr. Booth. "But this is my country. I have even taken an American name. Now if you will remove the raincoat—"

Sergeant Gray moved a step nearer to him.

"Can't," he explained in a low tone. "Nothing under it. You'll have to shoot as I am."

"No uniform?"

"No uniform. What d'you think of a country that will send fellows to fight like that, eh?"

Mr. Booth's small black eyes peered at him suspiciously.

"Is it possible?" he demanded. "This great country, so rich, and—no uniforms."

"Uniforms!" continued Sergeant Gray, beginning to enjoy himself hugely. "Why, say, we haven't anything! No guns worth the name, not enough shoes. Why, a fellow in my company's wearing two rights at this minute. And as for uniforms—why, I'll tell you this—my whole company's going round to−day like this, slickers and nothing else."

"Amazing!" commented Mr. Booth unctuously. "We hear of so much money being spent, and yet nothing to show for it."

"Graft!" explained the sergeant in a very deep bass. "Graft, that's what it is."

Mr. Booth seemed temporarily to forget that he was there to take a picture.

"But you—we will come out all right," he observed, watching the sergeant closely. "We have so much. The Browning gun, now—do you know about that? It is wonderful, not so?"

"Wonderful?" queried the sergeant, feeling happier than he had for some time. "Well, I'm a machine gunner; and if we're to get anywhere we've got to do better than the Browning." He had a second's uneasiness then, until he remembered that he wore no insignia. "It heats. It jams. It—" Here ended his knowledge of machine guns. "It's rotten, that's all."

Mr. Booth was moistening his lips.

"It's sad news," he observed. "I—but this Liberty motor—I understand it's a success."

"You'd better not ask me about that," said the sergeant gravely. "Ever since my brother went down—"

"Went down? Fell?"

"Aviation. Engine too heavy for the wings. Got up a hundred feet—first plane, you know, testing it out. And—"

He drew a long breath.

"I wonder," said Mr. Booth, "if you would care for a little drink? I keep some here for the boys. The city's a dry place for soldiers. It'll cheer you up."

"I'm off liquor." It was the first truth he had spoken for some time, and it sounded strange to his ears. "Rotten food and all that. Can't drink. That's straight."

It had not been lost on him that Mr. Booth was endeavoring to conceal a vast cheerfulness; also that his refusal to drink was unexpected.

"Better have the picture, old top," he observed. "Better get this eye on the off side, hadn't you?"

For some five minutes Mr. Booth alternately disappeared under a black cloth and reappeared again. The sergeant felt that under a pretence of focusing he was being subjected to a close scrutiny, and bore himself carefully and well.

When at last it was over Mr. Booth put a question. "Want there in a hurry, I suppose?"

"Hurry? Why?"

"Most of the boys are just about to sail. They come in here and give me two days, three days. It is not enough."

"Well, I can give you a month if you want it."

"You're not going soon, then?"

"I should say not! Do you think Uncle Sam's going to trust any transports out with these German submarines about? I guess not!"

There was no question as to Mr. Booth's excitement now. His round face fairly twitched.

"But you cannot know that, " he said. "That is camp talk, eh?"

"Not on your life!" said the sergeant, and went closer to him. "I got a cousin in headquarters; and he saw the order from Washington."

"What was the order? You remember it, eh?"

"All orders for troops to sail during month of June canceled," lied the sergeant glibly. "Not likely to forget that, old top, with a month to play round in your dear old town."

He was filled with admiration of himself. And under that admiration was swelling and growing a great loathing for the creature before him. He would fill him with lies as full as he would hold. And then he would get him. But he would consult the girl about that. She had forbidden violence, but when she knew the facts—

He gave his name and put down a deposit.

"You are sure you are in no hurry?" asked Mr. Booth, scrutinising him carefully.

"I wish I was as sure of a uniform."

The girl was waiting, and together they went down to the street. Though her eyes were eager she asked no questions. She preceded Sergeant Gray to the little car and got in. And suddenly a chill struck to the sergeant's heart.

On the pavement, eyeing him with cold and glittering eyes, were the stable sergeant, the troop mess sergeant, the second mess sergeant and two corporals. Like himself they wore slickers to cover certain deficiencies, and unlike him they wore an expression of cold and calculating deviltry.

"Hello!" they said, and surrounded him. "Having a good time?"

He cast an agonised glance at the car. The girl was looking ahead.

"Pretty fair," he replied; and calculated the distance to the car.

"We've been keeping an eye open for you," said the stable sergeant, stepping between him and the car. "We want to have a word with you."

"I'll meet you somewhere." There was pleading in his voice. "Anywhere you say, in an hour." Their faces were cold and unrelenting. "In a half hour, then."

"What we've got to do won't wait," observed the stable sergeant. "How do you think we like going about like this anyhow? Our only chance to have a time, and going round like a lot of lunatics. We warned you, didn't we? We—"

Sergeant Gray knew what was coming. He had known it with deadly certainty from the moment he saw that menacing group, cold of eye but hot of face. And strong as he was he was no match for five of them, hardened with months of training and infuriated with outrage.

"I'm with a young lady, fellows," he pleaded. "Don't make a row here. If you'll only wait—"

"Oh, there won't be any row," observed the stable sergeant. "You take off that slicker, that's all."

"Not here! For heaven's sake, fellows, not on the street! I tell you I've got a girl with me. A nice girl. A—"

The stable sergeant hesitated and glanced toward the car.

"All right," he said. "But we're going to take that slicker back to camp. We promised the troop. You can step inside that door. I guess that's satisfactory?"

He glanced at the group, which nodded grimly.

For an instant Sergeant Gray was tempted to run and chance it, but the girl had turned her head and was watching them curiously. Hope died in him. He could neither run nor fight. And the group closed in on him.

"'Bout face—march!" said the stable sergeant.

And he marched.

Inside the hallway, behind the elevator, however, he turned loose with his fists. He fought desperately, using his long arms with accuracy and precision. One of the corporals went down first. The second mess sergeant followed him. But the result was inevitable. Inside of three minutes the girl saw the little group returning to the street. One corporal held a handkerchief to his lip, and the first mess sergeant was holding together a slicker which had no longer any clasps. The stable sergeant, however, was calm and happy. He carried a slicker over his arm.

"Sergeant Gray's compliments, miss," he said, saluting. Then, as an afterthought of particular fiendishness; "And he will be engaged for some time. If you would take charge of this slicker he'll be much obliged to you."

He saluted again, and the group swaggered down the street.

The girl sat in the car and looked after them. Then she glanced at the slicker, and a little frown gathered

between her eyes. Had he, against her orders, gone back to deal with Mr. Booth alone? She was mystified and not a little indignant, and when she started the car again it was with a jerk of irritation.

Inside the hallway, behind the elevator, cursed and raged Sergeant Gray. At every step in the doorway he shook with apprehension. Behind him stretched a wooden staircase, toward which he cast agonised eyes. The elevator came down, discharged its passengers, filled again and went up. Outside in the brilliant street thousands of feet passed, carrying people fully clothed and entitled to a place in the sun. Momentarily he expected the climax of his wretchedness—that the girl would tire of waiting and come into the building. He plucked up courage after a time to peer round the corner of the elevator. The car was gone.

"What'll she think of me?" he groaned.

Wild schemes of revenge surged in him. Murder with torture was among them. And always while he cursed and planned his eyes were on the staircase behind him.

Came a time, however, when the elevator descended empty, and the elderly man on the stool inside prepared to read a newspaper. He was startled by a husky whisper just beneath his left ear.

"Say, come here a minute, will you?"

He turned. Through the grille beside him a desperate face with one black eye was staring at him.

"Come here yourself," he returned uneasily.

With a wild rush the owner of the face catapulted into the elevator and closed the grating. Then he turned and faced him.

"Run me up, quick!"

"Good God!" said the elevator man.

There were steps in the entrance. With a frenzied gesture Sergeant Gray, of the Headquarters Troop of the —th Division, gave a pull at the lever. The car descended with a jerk.

"Leggo that thing." said the elevator man, now wildly terrified. "Want to shoot down into the subway?"

Thoroughly frenzied, Sergeant Gray pulled the lever the other way. The car stopped, trembled, ascended. For a moment two stenographers waiting on the ground floor had a vision of a strange figure in undershirt, cotton, one, and nether garments to match, surmounted by a distorted face, passing on its way to the upper floors.

Sergeant Gray surrendered the lever, and ran a trembling hand across his forehead.

"You've got to hide me somewhere," he shouted. "Look at me!"

"I see you," said the elevator man. "Y'ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"You've got to hide me," insisted Sergeant Gray; "and then you've got to go out and buy me some clothes."

They had reached the top floor, and the car had stopped.

"I'll tell you later. You can get me a pair of pants somewhere, can't you?"

There was pleading in his voice. Almost tears. But the tears were of rage.

"I'll lose my job if I leave this car," observed the elevator man. He had recovered from his fright, and besides he had recognised the boy's service hat.

"Soldier, aren't you?"

"Yes. Look here, old man, I'm in a devil of a mess. Lot of our fellows, met them outside—it's a joke. I'll joke them!" he added vindictively.

"Some fellows got a queer idea of humour," observed the elevator man. "I might send out for you. Got any money?"

The full depth of his helplessness struck Sergeant Gray then and turned him cold. His money, thirty−nine dollars and sixteen cents, was in the slicker.

"They took my money, too."

The elevator man's face grew not less interested but more suspicious.

"Why don't you get a good story while you're at it?" he demanded. "Looks like you're running away from something."

"Great heavens, I should think I am!"

"You fellows," observed the elevator man, "think you can come to this town and raise hell and then pull some soldier stuff and get out of it. Well, you haven't any effect on me."

The buzzer in the cage had been ringing insistently.

"I'll have to go down. Crawl out, son."

"Crawl out! Where to?"

"Don't know. Can't let you in an office. You may find some place." He threw open the door. "Out with you!" he commanded. "I'll look you up later."

"Run me to the cellar," gasped Sergeant Gray.

"Tailor's shop there. Full of girls."

With a hoarse imprecation Sergeant Gray left the elevator and scuttled down the hallway. To his maddened ears the place was full of sounds, of voices inside doorways and about to emerge, of footsteps, of hideous laughter. He had wild visions of finding a window and a roof, even of jumping off it. Then—he saw on a door the name of J. M. Booth, Photographer; and hope leaped in his heart.

He opened the door cautiously and peered within. All was silent. On the table in the reception room lay still open the album with which the girl had amused herself while she waited, and over a couch—oh, joy supreme!—there was flung an Indian blanket. He caught it up and wrapped it about him; and the madness left him. Such as it was, he was clothed.

Still cautiously, however, he advanced to the studio. All was quiet there, but beyond he could hear water running, and the careful handling of photographers' plates. Mr. Booth, erstwhile of Vienna, was within and busy. It irked the sergeant profoundly that to such unworthy refuge he was driven for shelter, but he squared his shoulders and advanced. Then suddenly he heard footsteps in the outer room, footsteps that advanced deliberately and relentlessly.

Wild fear shook him again. He looked round him frantically, and then sought refuge. In a corner behind a piece of scenery which was intended to show the sitter in an Italian garden, Sergeant Gray of the —th Division sought shameful sanctuary.

Somewhat later in the day the general, having a broiled squab and mushrooms under glass in a window at the best restaurant in the city, put on his glasses and looked out over the surging tide in the brilliant sunlight of the street. Just opposite him, moving sedately, was a group of soldiers.

"I wish you'd tell me," said the general testily to the aide−de−camp whose particular joy it was to lunch with him, "what the deuce those fellows are doing in slickers on a day like this."

"No accounting for the vagaries of enlisted men, sir," returned the aide, ordering a demi−tasse.

IV

AT that exact moment the elevator man, having a moment's leisure after the lunch rush, made his way back along the corridor where he had left a wild−eyed refugee. All was quiet. In the office of the National Asphalt Company the clicking of typewriters showed that no fleeing soldier, seeking sanctuary and a pair of trousers, had upset the day's pavements. Dolls and Wigs was calm. Coat Fronts remained inadequate and still.

He wandered back, his face twisted in a dry grin. Then suddenly from Booth, Photographer, he heard a wild yell. This was followed by the crash of a heavy body, a number of smothered oaths and a steady softish thud that sounded extremely like the impact of fists on flesh.

The elevator man opened the door of Booth, Photographer's, anteroom and stuck his head in. The studio beyond showed something on the floor that stirred in the wrapping of an Indian blanket, while stepping across it and on it a mad thing in undergarments and a service hat was delivering blows at something unseen.

The elevator man carefully reached a hand inside the door and took out the key. Then as stealthily he closed the door, locked it from the outside, and moved back swiftly to his cage, where the buzzer showed that the carpet cleaning company which occupied the fourth floor was in a hurry and didn't care who knew it.

At the end of twenty minutes two roundsmen went up in the cage. Going up they learned of the preliminaries.

"Crazy, I guess," finished the elevator man. "He looked crazy, now I think about it. Probably killed the lot by this time. Where do you fellows hide, anyhow?"

Back in Booth, Photographer, there was a complete and awful silence. Revolvers ready, the door was opened and the roundsmen sprang in. It looked like the worst. The Indian blanket nor moved nor quivered. A chair, overturned, lay on top of it, and against that there leaned tipsily a photographer's screen, on which was painted, in grays and whites, an Italian garden.

"I'm glad to see you," called a cheery voice. "I'm glad to see you!"

Standing in the doorway of the dressing room was a tall young man. He held a brush in his hand and was still slicking down his hair.

"How are you, anyhow?" demanded the tall young man, and proceeded to shake down the leg of a pair of black trousers. "A trifle short, aren't they?" he observed. "But they're a darn sight better than nothing!"

"Get him, Joe," said one of the officers casually, and walked toward the inner room.

"Oh, I'll go along all right," said Sergeant Gray blithely. "It's worth the price. I'm only sorry you didn't see it. I—"

"Joe!" called the other officer from the inner room. "Come here, will you?"

"Mind if I go along?" asked Sergeant Gray. "I'd like to look at 'em again. I want to remember how they look all the rest of my life."

Joe nodded, and Sergeant Gray led the way to the studio. In a corner, roped tightly to a chair, sat Booth, Photographer. He was bleeding profusely from a cut on the lip and another over the eye, his head was bobbing weakly on his shoulders, and he wore, to be exact, one union suit minus two buttons on the chest and held together by a safety pin.

Joe stumbling over the Indian blanket heard it groan beneath him, and uncovered a stout gentleman in a cutaway coat and with his collar torn off.

"Pretty good, eh?" demanded Sergeant Gray. "Sorry about the collar, though. Booth's is too small for me."

"Want an ambulance?" inquired the elevator man with unholy joy in his eyes.

"Yes. Better have one." And to the wreckage: "You gentlemen will be all right," said Joe. "How'd this happen, anyhow?"

"I'll tell you," volunteered the sergeant. "They're spies, that's what they are. German spies. D'you get it? And I—"

"Aw, shut up!" said the first roundsman, wearily. "Take him along, Joe. Now, how d'you feel, Mr. Booth?"

"But I tell you—"

"You don't tell me anything. You go. That's all."

"Oh, very well," said Sergeant Gray cheerfully. "You'll be sorry. That's all. Come on, Joe." He raised his voice

in song.

"Where do we go from here, Joe, where do we go from here?" he sang in a very deep bass.

At the centre table he stopped, however, with Joe's revolver very close to him, and consulted Mr. Booth's watch which, with all of his money but car fare back to camp, lay in a heap there.

"You might hurry a bit, Joe," he suggested "I've only got twenty−three and a half hours' leave, and time's flying. You'll observe," he added, "that old Booth's money and watch are here." He glanced significantly toward the elevator man. "Eight dollars and ninety cents, Joe," he said. "The old boy'll need it for a doctor."

The general breakfasted rather late the next morning—at seven o'clock. His ordinary hour was six−thirty. He had eaten three fried eggs, some fried potatoes, a bran muffin, drunk a cup of coffee, and was trying to remember if he had made any indiscreet remarks at a dinner party the night before about Pershing or the General Staff, when an aide came in with a report. The general read it slowly, then looked up.

"You mean to say," he inquired, "that those fellows haven't had any clothes since yesterday morning?"

"No uniforms, sir."

"The entire troop?"

"All except those who were on duty here yesterday, sir. I believe"—the aide hesitated—"I believe some of them went to town anyhow, sir."

"The devil you say!" roared the general.

"I rather fancy that the men we saw in slickers, sir—"

Suddenly the general laughed. The aide laughed also. Aides always laugh when the general does. It is etiquette. When the general had stopped laughing he became very military again and swore.

"We'll look into it, Tommy," he said. "It's a damned shame. Somebody's going to pay for it through the nose."

This is a little−used phrase, but the general had read it somewhere and adopted it. It means copiously.

He was not aware, naturally, that Sergeant Gray was already paying for it, copiously.

It was at that precise moment that a little car drew up outside his quarters. The general smiled and rolled himself a cigarette.

"Bring me another cup of coffee," he ordered, "and get another chair, Tommy."

The girl came in. She kissed the general on his right cheek, and then on his chin, and then stood back and looked at him.

"I'm in trouble, Uncle Jimmy," she said. "If a man from the Headquarters Troop overstays his leave what happens to him?"

"Court−martialed; maybe shot," replied the general with a glance at Tommy, who did not see it as he was looking at the girl.

"But if it is my fault—"

"Then you'll be shot," said the general cheerily. "Now see here, Peggy, if you don't let my young men alone—What's that you're carrying?"

"It's a slicker!" said Peggy.

The general looked at Tommy, and Tommy looked back.

Peggy told her story, and showed, toward the end, an alarming disposition to cry.

"He knew something," she said. "That—that man Booth was a spy, Uncle Jimmy. I could hear him asking all sorts of questions, and when the sergeant came out his face was—"

"Sergeant, eh?" interrupted Uncle Jimmy. "Any sergeants from the Headquarters Troop on leave, Tommy?"

"I'll find out, sir."

Tommy went away.

"I had got into the car, and he was coming, when three or four other soldiers came along. They all went back into the building, and I—I thought they were going to get Mr. Booth. But pretty soon they came out without him, and one of them gave me this slicker; and—and they all went away."

"Good Lord!" said the general suddenly. "The young devils! The—the young scamps! So that was it. Now look here, Peggy," he said, bending forward with a twinkle. "I—well, I understand, I can't explain, but it was just mischief. Your young man's all right, though where he's hiding—"

He broke off and chuckled.

"He is not at all the hiding sort."

"Under certain circumstances, Peggy," observed the general, "any man will hide—and should."

Some time later, at approximately the hour when Sergeant Gray's twenty−three and a half hours' leave was up, the little car started for the city. It contained one anxious young lady, one general who rolled constant cigarettes and chuckled, and one aide on the folding seat in the back, rather resentful because there was no adequate place for his legs.

"I'm going along, Tommy," the general had said. "It promises to be rather good, and I need cheering. Besides, under the circumstances, a member of Miss Peggy's family—"

At the building on Twenty−second Street the general got out, leaving Peggy discreetly in the car. He was a large and very military figure, and he summoned the elevator man with a single commanding gesture.

"I want to know," said the general fixing him with a cold eye, "whether you happened, yesterday afternoon, to have seen about here an enlisted man without a uniform?"

"I did," said the elevator man unctuously.

"You did—what?"

"I did see him."

"Say, 'sir'," prompted the aide.

"I did—sir." It plainly hurt to say it.

"When and where did you see him last?"

"At one−thirty, getting into a police wagon—sir."

"Exactly," said the general. "You of course provided him with clothing before the—er—arrest."

"I did not," said the elevator man, who had by now decided that no man could bully him, even if he did wear two stars. "He stole a suit. And before he did that he like to killed two men. Mr. Booth, he's in the hospital now; and as for the other gentleman, he was took away in a taxi last night. If he was one of your men, all I got to say is—"

"Of no importance whatever," finished the general coldly. "Find out where he was taken," he added to Tommy and stalked out. The elevator man followed him with resentful eyes.

"You tell Pershing, or the Secretary of War, or whatever that is," he said venomously, "that his pet wild cat is in the central police station. I expect he's in a padded cell. Good−by."

An hour later the little car stopped in front of the best restaurant in town and the general assisted his niece to get out. From the folding seat behind, two pairs of legs, one in khaki and one in black rather too short, disentangled themselves and followed. The best restaurants in town in the morning present a dishabille appearance of sweepers, waiters without coats and general dreariness; but the general took the place by storm.

"Table for four," he said. Now that he was doing the thing he was minded to do it magnificently. "Sit down, sergeant. Tommy, run and telephone, as I told you, to the Department of Justice. Got to nail those fellows quick."

As one newly awakened from sleep Sergeant sat down beside Peggy. He presented, up to the neck, the appearance of a Mr. Booth suddenly elongated as to legs and arms. From the neck up he was a young man who had found one hundred and seventy−five dollars and the only girl in the world.

The general ordered breakfast for four. Then he glanced up from the menu.

"Suit you all right, Gray?"

"Splendidly, sir—unless—" He hesitated.

"Go ahead," said the general. "You've earned the right to choose what you like."

"I was going to suggest, sir, that I ordinarily have a bran muffin—"

The general put down the menu and stared at him. Then he chuckled.

"Might have known it would be you!" he observed. "But c'est la guerre, Gray. C'est la guerre! We'll have them."

V

EARLY that afternoon the stable sergeant of the Headquarters Troop coming out of divisional headquarters saw the general approaching in a car much too small for him. Beside him sat an aide, who drove wisely but not too well. On the rumble seat were a girl, and a youth in civilian clothes and a service hat. They were in deep, absorbing conversation.

The stable sergeant came stiffly to the salute, and remained at it, the general giving no evidence of seeing him and returning it. Then—the stable sergeant went pale under his tan, for the civilian emerging from the rear of the machine, and strangely but sufficiently clad, was one Sergeant Gray of the Headquarters Troop.

As if this had not been enough he watched the same Sergeant Gray assist to alight the young lady of yesterday, and it gave no peace to the stable sergeant's turbulent soul to behold that young lady giving the general a patronising pat and then a kiss.

"Great Scott!" said the stable sergeant feebly.

But there was more to come, for Sergeant Gray had spied his enemy and was minded to have official confirmation of a certain fact. Before the stable sergeant's incredulous eyes he beheld Gray, of the undergarments, gauze, et cetera, advance to the general and salute, and then remark in a very distinct tone:

"It was very kind of you, sir, to ask me to breakfast."

The general looked about under his grey eyebrows and perceived a situation.

"Not at all," he replied in an equally distinct voice. "Glad you liked my bran muffins."

The stable sergeant, who was carrying a saddle, dropped it. Had he not been stooping he would have observed something very like a wink on the most military countenance in America. It was directed at Tommy.

"Good−by, Sergeant Gray," said the pretty girl, holding out her hand. "I—I think you are the bravest person! And you will write, won't you?"

"I wish I was as sure of my commission."

The stable sergeant swallowed hard.

"But you'll get that now, of course. I'll go right in and tell Uncle Jimmy."

"Oh, I say!" protested Sergeant Gray. "You—you mustn't do that, you know."

"Aw, rats!" muttered the stable sergeant; and clutching the saddle furiously moved away. Up the road he met a military policeman, and stopped him.

"Better grab that fellow." He indicated Sergeant Gray behind him, now shamelessly holding the hand of the general's niece.

"Why?"

"Awol," replied the stable sergeant darkly—being military brevity for absent without leave. "And you might observe," he added, "that he isn't in uniform."

The girl got into the little car. Hat in hand, eyes full of many things he dared not put into words, Sergeant Gray of the Headquarters Troop of the —th Division watched her start the car, smile into his eyes and move away. He came to at a touch on his arm.

"What're you doing in that outfit" demanded the M. P. sharply.

"Having an acute attack of heart trouble, if you want to know," said the sergeant, staring after the little car.

"Have to arrest you."

"Oh, go to it!" said the sergeant blithely. "I'm used to it now. Look here," he added, "your name's not Joe, by any chance?"

"You know my name," said the M. P. sourly.

"Sorry," reflected the sergeant. "Don't mind if I call you Joe, do you? Always like the men who arrest me to be called Joe. It's lucky."

He stopped and looked back; the little car was almost out of sight.

"All right, Joe, old top!" he said blithely. And he sang in a deep bass

"Where do we go from here, boys?
Where do we go from here?

All the way from Broadway to the Jersey City pier."

His voice died away. In his eyes there was suddenly that curious blend of hope and sadness which shines from the faces of those who love and, loving, must go away to war.

"Wait a minute, Joe," he said.

And, turning, looked back again. The little car was still in sight, and the girl, standing up in it, waved her hand.