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WAR GIRLS



A COLLECTION OF FIRST WORLD WAR STORIES THROUGH THE EYES OF YOUNG WOMEN

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ANDERSEN PRESS

LONDON

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Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781448187478

www.randomhouse.co.uk

First published in 2014 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 060 3

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Shadow and Light

by Theresa Breslin

This story is for Bridget

Shadow and Light

'Wicked child!'

The governess's screech brought the housemaid running.

'What's the matter?' The maid gave Merle a sympathetic look. 'I'll fetch a dustpan and clear it up, whatever it is.'

'You can fetch the cane from the stand in the hall,' the governess told her. 'It's a beating that's needed this time. I've never met such a wilful girl.'

As the maid hesitated, the governess pointed to the door. 'Go on! Do as I say.'

'You can't beat me.' Merle's lip quivered but she kept her voice steady. 'Only Grandma should do that.'

'Well, she left me in charge and I will do with you as I please. A few strokes of the cane will teach you not to lose your temper in future.'

'I haven't lost my temper,' said Merle.

'Do you hear how she said that?' the governess demanded. 'Absolute insolence!'

'She's just a babby,' the maid protested.

'Eight years old is much more than a baby.'

'Yes, but,' the maid lowered her voice, 'with her losing her ma and da so young ...'

'Everyone has difficulties in life. It's no excuse for disobedience and wanton destruction.'

The maid glanced round the room. 'What did she break?'

‘These!’ With a dramatic flourish the governess indicated a scattering of broken crayons on the table in front of the window. ‘I arranged her crayons in the glass bowl in the order she was to use them and outlined the exact shape of the trees in the garden that she was required to colour in. And what did she do? She deliberately flouted me, that’s what! Instead of following my instructions, she picked up every single crayon and snapped it in two. Then she grabbed some in both hands and scribbled over my drawings on the paper.’

The governess’s voice rose higher as she listed the offences. Although her tummy was aching with fear of the beating to come, part of Merle’s mind noted the changes taking place in the angry woman’s face: the pupils of her eyes dilating, her cheeks mottling with scarlet splotches. Merle glanced at the red crayon and then at the pink and peach ones. She would need three, or maybe four shades to capture those colours.

‘Look at her! She’s still being insolent!’

The governess was about to reach what Merle called the Point-of-no-Return. Occasionally, if Merle made herself out to be particularly contrite, summoned tears and begged forgiveness, the governess might pardon her. But if she showed no sign of remorse, then slaps were inevitable.

A ray from the setting sun fell upon the glass bowl. The splintered light spilled across the table.

‘Oh,’ Merle exclaimed, ‘a rainbow!’

The maid ran for the cane as the governess exploded in rage.

‘She’s not even listening to me!’

Merle closed her eyes as the cane came down.

‘You’re not even listening to me!’

Merle blinked. Her friend’s hand on her arm jolted her into the present, where the screech of the seagulls near the

quay outside Calais had reminded her of the Awful Governess fifteen years ago.

‘Sorry, Grace,’ she smiled. ‘What were you saying?’

‘I was commenting on the young soldiers on the deck below us.’

Merle laughed. ‘The Red Cross information booklet for young ladies volunteering to work in battle zones said that ogling soldiers was strictly forbidden.’

‘Becoming too friendly with the men is strictly forbidden,’ said Grace. ‘But I don’t recall being told not to *look* at them.’ She nodded towards the artist’s satchel slung over Merle’s shoulder. ‘You could make sketches of the more handsome ones.’

‘There was an officer on the quayside who took off his cap for a moment to reveal the most amazing golden hair. But I’d rather focus on seeing France again.’

‘Perhaps not the best circumstances to return.’ Grace squeezed Merle’s hand. ‘After three years of war the country will be devastated.’

It would be several days before the girls saw how devastated the French countryside had become.

To begin with they were sent to lodge at the Red Cross base in the Hotel Clairmont and were treated to welcome receptions and dinners. It was on one of these occasions that Merle met the officer with the golden hair.

They’d entered a hall thronging with people and approached the bar in search of a glass of lemonade. The waiter ignored the crowds of men and hastened to serve them.

‘There’s a fine example of women’s rights!’

It was a British voice but talking in French, which Merle had learned as a child. Raising her eyes she saw the reflection of the speaker in the long mirror above the bar. She recognized the young officer whose striking hair she’d admired as her ship was docking.

‘They want equality, but are willing to use their femininity to be served first although the men here have been queuing without complaint.’

‘The young ladies did not ask for preferential treatment.’ The officer’s companion was a much older Frenchman. ‘And who can blame the waiter? These new recruits to our Red Cross are so pretty.’

‘Pretty to look at, but pretty frivolous and pretty feeble under fire, I’d imagine,’ joked the captain.

‘Then you’d imagine incorrectly, sir,’ said the Frenchman indignantly. ‘I’ll excuse you as it’s your first tour of duty on active service. You’ll soon find out that British Red Cross ladies are valued and respected here.’

Merle didn’t hear the officer’s response. But it wouldn’t matter what it was. Despite his golden hair, she had made up her mind that he was pompous. She didn’t mention to Grace what she’d overheard. There was no need to sour her evening and they’d probably never see that particular officer again.

Unfortunately the table plan was such that she and Grace were seated directly opposite him and were forced to introduce themselves.

He was Captain George Taylor with a responsibility for hospital trains. His companion was Michel Vallon, the Director of the Red Cross for the area around Trécourt, the town between Amiens and Albert where the girls’ ambulance unit would be based.

‘Do tell me, what made you young ladies join the Red Cross?’ Michel Vallon asked in perfect English.

‘How could any fit person read the casualty lists after the Somme Battle last year and *not* volunteer to do something?’ Merle was aware that her reply was waspish.

Grace glanced at her friend and said lightly, ‘Truthfully I am glad to be away from boring Britain. And Edinburgh will

be so *dreich* with winter coming on I thought it would be warmer in France.'

'Indeed.' Captain Taylor exchanged a look with Michel Vallon as if to say, 'I told you so!' His face was so smug Merle had the impulse to smack it.

'Yes,' Grace went on, oblivious of the tension, 'I was more inclined to knit balaclavas and socks than join an ambulance unit - which might be situated too close to the Front Line for my comfort - but Merle convinced me otherwise.'

'You can both drive motor vehicles?' said the captain.

'Oh, don't sound so surprised,' said Merle tartly. 'We have also learned how to repair the engine and change tyres.'

Grace stared at her.

Michel Vallon glanced from one to the other and said, 'We are very glad to have you. Without the British women volunteers our medical services would be completely overwhelmed.'

'Thank you,' said Merle. She paused and then spoke distinctly in French. 'We're expecting to be kept *pretty* busy. And we appreciate that wounded men are not a *pretty* sight, but we're *pretty* much prepared for anything we may have to cope with.'

There was a short silence before Michel Vallon clicked his tongue against his teeth and declared, 'Ah! The bar!'

With deep satisfaction Merle saw Captain George Taylor's face blush crimson.

Grace leaned forward. 'Is there a joke that I am missing?'

Michel Vallon chuckled. 'One might say *un esprit d'escalier*. Miss Stevenson will explain later, I'm sure.' He tilted his head towards Merle. 'Where did you learn your French?'

'From my *maman*,' Merle answered him. 'My home was in Paris until my parents were killed in a road accident when I was seven years old. My father was British and I

was sent to live with his mother as my own had no relatives who could take me in. This is the first time I've been back.'

'How sad to lose one's parents when so young.'

'Yes, it was,' Merle agreed. 'And it took me months to bond with my grandmother. But now we are very close. She's the reason I'm here. She is a friend of Doctor Elsie Inglis, who started the Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service.' She shot a look at Captain Taylor. 'All the staff are women: doctors, nurses, cooks and ambulance drivers. After reading her letters about the conditions of the soldiers, I felt I must do something to help.'

'Bravo!' Michel raised his glass. 'Bravo to you both, Miss Merle Stevenson and Miss Grace Jeffries.'

'Yes, indeed!' Captain Taylor quickly raised his glass. 'Miss Stevenson, regarding what happened earlier, I must say—'

'No, you must not,' Michel Vallon placed his hand on the captain's arm. 'Not here and not now. At a future date you may sue for peace with Miss Stevenson, and I hope you will be successful. But for the moment we will talk of pleasant things and avoid discord of any kind.'

When Merle awoke early the next day there was a folded piece of paper pushed under the door of the room she was sharing with Grace. She picked it up and read:

Dear Miss Stevenson,

I am so terribly sorry that I offended you.

Please try to forgive my foolish remarks. They were not intended for you to hear - although I appreciate that in itself is no excuse.

I spoke out of ignorance and thoughtlessness, and hope that you will overlook my abominable bad manners.

*Yours sincerely,
Captain George Taylor*

Merle pushed the note into the pocket of her coat. She would decide later if she would forgive him. For this hour before breakfast she wanted to be outside with her drawing materials.

It was a bleak November morning, but the docks were busy. America had recently joined the War on the side of the Allies and already ships loaded with troops and supplies were arriving. Merle had to walk far along the promenade to find a quiet place to work. Her mother had once taken her to see the *Mona Lisa* and explained da Vinci's use of shadow and light. It was the year prior to the accident, so Merle could only have been about six or seven, but she recalled it vividly. Maman holding her in her arms so that she could peer more closely at the face in the painting. '*Sfumato*,' Maman said. 'Like smoke. That's what it's called when the painter uses this technique. There's always light in the shadow.'

She had loved the *Mona Lisa* as she had loved all paintings, the Old Masters and newer artists like the Impressionists. She especially adored van Gogh, with his achingly vibrant canvases.

Merle put up her folding stool and easel by the sea wall. Dawn was etching the sky with slices of pearl and pewter. She sensed the colours unfold within her as she painted.

As she reached round for a cloth to wipe her brush, she found, instead, the golden-haired captain. How long had he been standing there? In the daylight she saw he wasn't much older than she was. A tiny frown appeared on her forehead. She hated having her concentration disturbed. She wasn't privileged enough to be a Government-commissioned war artist - it was almost exclusively men who held those posts - so every moment of her spare time was precious.

'Good morning.'

Merle nodded.

'Perhaps we may speak later?'

'Perhaps,' she said

'I'll not distract you.' He touched his fingers to his cap and walked back the way he had come. A decent distance away he sat down upon a bench, opened a book and began to read.

Twenty minutes elapsed without him turning a page. Merle allowed herself a smile. She continued working for the best part of an hour before she conceded that in punishing him she was punishing herself, for the weather wasn't warm and her coat was thin.

As she started to gather her belongings he leaped to his feet and approached. 'May I help you?' he asked politely.

'I am perfectly capable of carrying my own things,' she replied.

'Truthfully I didn't seek you out in order to offer to help carry your bag,' he said. 'I wanted to apologise again for my behaviour last night.'

When she didn't reply, he went on. 'I am mortified.'

'It was an arrogant remark,' she said finally.

'It was,' he admitted, 'and stupid too. I displeased the French Red Cross officer whom I am supposed to be helping. I am co-ordinating the hospital trains in his sector,' he explained.

'You assumed that, as females, we would not speak French, not be capable of knowing any language other than English.'

'I cannot claim even that amount of thought. It was a silly joke, and I didn't think of the consequences. I have no experience of women, being an only child whose mother died when I was born. I've no girl cousins either to teach me how to be less awkward and clumsy. I am truly sorry.'

Merle saw that he was making banter in order to win her over. She hesitated to let him off so easily, until he added, 'I

have just got my commission and I am overexcited at being here at last, and, truth to tell, somewhat nervous.'

'Are you?' Merle scanned his face. Something in his eyes told her this was the truth, and it had cost him a tiny part of himself to admit it to her - maybe he was only now admitting it to himself?

'But I did think I might be of use to you this morning.'

'In what way?' Merle slung the satchel over her shoulder and picked up her easel and stool to let him see that she could manage on her own.

'With this.' He took a napkin from his pocket and unwrapped it. 'I feared you'd miss breakfast so I brought you a bread roll with some jam. If you accept it I will see it as a sign that you've forgiven me.'

Merle put her hand out for the roll.

'I'm so glad.' George Taylor grinned at her. 'For we are travelling together today and it would be intolerable if we were not speaking to each other.'

That afternoon the two new ambulances set off south to Trécourt, bumping over long cobbled avenues lined with poplar trees. On the open road the booming of heavy guns sounded louder.

They stopped in a village. The streets were empty, many of the inhabitants having fled west, in fear of being overrun if the Germans broke through. Unbelievably there was a café open. The owner made them hot chocolate, which she'd saved for just such an occasion, she told them. She would accept no payment. 'I have two sons fighting. I haven't heard from them in over a year. If you meet them, tell them their mother loves them and she is waiting for them at home.'

They stretched their legs before continuing and Merle wandered into a nearby orchard. The trees were still bearing fruit, as if reluctant to surrender to winter. Yellow,

garnet and gold; the canopy above her was the smudged paintbox of autumn.

Her grandmother had come home unexpectedly early on the day of the caning. The front door slamming made the governess jump. She thrust the cane at the housemaid.

‘Return that to where it belongs.’

The maid put her hands behind her back.

Merle clenched her teeth, determined not to cry.

And that was the scene which greeted her grandmother as she swept into the room, removing pins from her hat as she came. She tossed it onto a sofa and paused in the act of unbuttoning her gloves.

‘What’s amiss?’

‘This miss is amiss.’ The governess gave a harsh laugh.

Merle watched the feather of her grandmother’s hat waft gently to and fro. A magnificent purple feather, fastened with the white, green and violet ribbons of the women’s suffrage movement.

‘How so?’ Her grandmother’s eyes narrowed as she took in the cane in the governess’s hand.

‘I find the girl’s nature very obdurate. I drew specific trees for her to colour in. I even placed the crayons in order, so she would not have to think too much. See for yourself what she has done!’ The governess’s voice railed with righteous indignation. ‘She broke every crayon. On purpose! Then she made a mess of the outlines.’

‘Did you ask her why?’

‘There is no point in asking her why. Children are born with a wickedness in them that needs to be driven out.’

‘Oh, I think there is always a point in asking why.’ Merle’s grandmother sat down on the chair opposite her. ‘Would you like to tell me why you broke the crayons?’

Merle shook her head.

‘Ma’am,’ the housemaid began, ‘she’s a wee girl in a strange country and—’

Merle's grandmother held up her hand. 'I'd like Merle herself to tell me. Please. *S'il vous plaît.*' And, as the child's gaze flickered to her face, she smiled and winked at her.

'They are too big for my hand.'

'Nonsense!' the governess said. 'She uses her slate pencil quite easily and that is longer than these crayons.'

'I write with the pencil,' said Merle. 'With crayons, I draw.'

'Show me,' her grandmother prompted.

Merle gripped the stub of a crayon in her fist and slid it on its side across the paper.

'You see how ridiculous that is?' said the governess. 'One cannot possibly colour in properly using a crayon that way.'

'What were you drawing, *ma petite?*'

Merle pointed to the garden where the evening sun, coming through the overhanging branches, had created a cave of colour. 'Trees,' she said. 'I draw trees.'

'That's unlike any tree I've ever seen,' the governess snorted. 'There's no form, no lines.'

Merle's grandmother studied the multi-toned splashes of apricot and orange on the paper, the kaleidoscope of hues, the iridescent blend of rose-tinted cream overlapping brown and black to create warmth within shade. Then she stared out of the window into the garden, glowing with dappled light of russet, ochre, amber and yellow.

'My granddaughter does not constrict herself to lines,' she said. 'Merle is drawing Life.'

'I cannot teach a girl who will not obey a simple instruction.'

'It's perceptive of you to acknowledge that you cannot teach,' said her grandmother, 'because a true teacher would know that girls should be taught to think for themselves.'

The following morning the governess was gone. The next week her grandmother engaged a drawing instructor and proudly accompanied Merle when, in her early teens, she

enrolled as one of the youngest students at the Edinburgh College of Art.

When they reached Trécourt the staff were wearing black mourning armbands. Doctor Elsie Inglis, who had been suffering from cancer, had died on the twenty-sixth of November, the day after coming back to England from the hospital she'd established in Serbia.

Everyone assembled in the dining hall, where the supervisor of Trécourt Ambulance Station, Mrs Anne Thomson, read a lesson, and begged them not to be disheartened.

'Doctor Inglis would have wanted us to carry on her good work. We aren't a large unit here, unlike the main hospitals run by women at Abbaye de Royaumont and Villers-Cotterêts, but, being close to the railway, our work is crucial in ferrying the wounded to where they need to go.'

The two new ambulances brought the number up to five, with ten drivers, including Merle and Grace. Mrs Thomson ran the unit, arranging staff shifts and ordering supplies. The work was unrelenting. The phone would ring or a bicycle messenger would bring word that a hospital train was due at the railway depot. Off they would go, backwards and forwards, shuttling the men to their designated hospitals. If they weren't driving, they took their turn at cooking and cleaning, and, above everything else, ensuring the vans were ready for action. They slept on mattresses made from jute bags stuffed with hay and lugged sacks of anthracite from the coal store to fuel the stoves to keep themselves warm. There was little free time but Merle managed to draw or paint fairly regularly. As long as it did not interfere with the function of the unit the supervisor thought it an excellent idea to record their activities.

Merle painted everything she saw: wounded soldiers with officers and orderlies moving amongst them; a doctor

speaking to one of her patients; the ambulances, inside and out; Grace with engine parts spread around her; the girls working, eating or writing letters home. She was convinced of the importance of art in this context and it fulfilled a need within her, making Merle more content than she'd felt for years. She was allowed to make a studio in one of the attic rooms, and it was there Captain George Taylor found her one day when he came to call.

'It's marvellous how you reveal colour in a winter landscape,' he said, examining her painting of two women standing in snow under a tree. 'You have infused light into the barren branches.'

'You sound knowledgeable about art,' said Merle. 'Do you paint?'

'I did dabble. My art master said that I had a talent, but perhaps that was merely to keep himself employed.'

Merle clipped fresh paper onto the easel and handed him a brush. With deft strokes he painted her standing beside her ambulance.

'An accomplished representation,' she said sincerely.

'Mmm ...' He glanced from his painting to hers, now drying on the window shelf. 'I'm more interested in what you're doing with colour. At some point I will ask you to show me how you achieve those effects.'

It was nearly Christmas before Merle saw George Taylor again. She and Grace had gone into Albert, a town east of Trécourt. They had decided to have their hair cut short. Most of the other drivers had done this already. It reduced the incidence of lice and made shampooing cheaper and faster. By chance they met George, who was in search of a new razor.

'It's so tedious to have to shave every day,' he confided.

The girls sympathised and explained the problems of long hair.

'Oh, surely not!' he said when they told him of their intention to have it cut. 'Ladies' hair is a joy to behold. If one is allowed to make that comment,' he added.

'We might have to report you to Supervisor Thomson,' joked Grace.

But Mrs Thomson was an admirer of Captain Taylor and had invited him as a guest to their Christmas dinner. 'Since that young man was appointed,' she said, 'patient transport is more efficient.'

On Christmas Day he arrived at the unit in full dress uniform, which Merle deduced was borrowed, because it hung loose on his body and long in the sleeve.

'He is attractive,' murmured Grace, 'you must admit.'

'I'm not admitting to anything,' said Merle, but she was laughing. Conversation was certainly less strained than the last dinner they'd eaten together.

It was clear that Michel Vallon had also changed his opinion about Captain Taylor. During the meal he spoke warmly of the young officer's re-organisation. Extra spur lines accommodated the trains coming and going. Throughout the journey wounds were assessed and a medical card pinned to each man. An up-to-date tally was kept on the sector's operating theatre and bed availability. It meant savings in time and fuel, because patients were taken directly to the most appropriate hospital or surgical unit.

'When the war is over,' Monsieur Vallon promised, 'I intend to recommend Captain Taylor for the *Légion d'honneur*.'

'When do you think that will be?' asked Grace. 'We hear conflicting reports. The official Allied bulletins are very positive, yet our patients tell us a different story.'

'It will be months yet,' said Michel, 'but we *will* win.'

Merle saw George look away as the older man said this. 'We are not children to be reassured with half-truths,' she said.