



## The War Effort

by *Alice Roberts*

**S**HE WAS moaning softly. It really shouldn't bother him, most of them did that, but the sound, this sound was of some deeper pain than whatever it was that made most of them moan. He didn't know. Something was strange. She didn't look like she needed the money that badly. He almost stopped, but then . . . what difference would that make now. He finished, got dressed, and reached for his wallet, getting out a few extra marks. Captain's pay was good. He hesitated with his hand on the door. The moans were silent sobs now. She lay on her face, body drawn up. He went to the bed to pull the covers over her, but she moved suddenly and struck them from him with her foot. Her whole body now lay exposed. He backed off, then turned and left, his heavy boots loud on the solid oak floor.

*Can't just lie here, must get up.*

She straightened her limbs slowly. Turning over and swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, she stood up and made her way to the bathroom.

*Just two. That's not enough, not enough. No, no more, can't tonight. Just rest, get clean and rest, must get clean.*

She took down the bottle from the cabinet. "Potassium

iodide—two teaspoons daily.” Two spoons of the brown-yellow fluid, now low in the bottle, never before the last one had left.

*Now, first, the hair. Where's the soap?*

She shampooed her hair, and with the long dark strands hanging dripping over her bare shoulders, she went on with the routine. She washed her face and hands, rinsed out her mouth, and then washed the rest of her body.

*So good. Clean. Smell clean, smell good.*

She rubbed in a sweet-smelling oil and brushed her hair down straight. The fullness of her body gleamed in the light, her skin the palest olive, smooth and fine for a woman of thirty; her ankles and arms were slim, features delicate. Her hands were delicate too, but one was half-closed, drawn in to conceal a white blotch of a scar in the palm, a glass-cut from a smashed medicine bottle.

She put on all clean clothes and did her hair up. Going into the bedroom, she picked up the discarded clothing and stripped the sheets. [*Soon we'll have it clean, it will be clean, soon we'll have it clean.*] Her mind almost chanted as she straightened things and re-made the bed.

Finally she picked up the money from the dressertop. She didn't count it or even look at it, but stuffed it in with the rest in the second drawer. [*Perhaps just a walk, h-m-m? Yes, let's just walk, in the clean night air. No one will mind.*]

So she did. She got a light wrap and went out. The small house was on the outskirts of the town. She walked slowly. By the time she got there some of the taverns were closing and soldiers crowded the streets. She hardly heard the remarks directed at her. There were not so many, because she was not looking tonight and it was hard to tell her from a hausfrau out on a late walk unless she was looking. Seldom did anyone she knew pass by. Few of them spoke to her now, anyway, their sympathies were neither with her nor the war, not these older townfolk.

She passed one of the less expensive girls, still out and leaning on a doorway.

“Bad night, honey?” the girl called out. Her hanging purple crystal beads glittered in the dim light and her nearly purple lipstick looked nearly black.

*So you profit from the war effort, Fräulein. My husband,*

*rest his dead black heart, would have loved you. Maybe he did, eh, maybe he did. Maybe I have you to thank. Thank you, Fräulein, thank you. No, poor Heinrich, I pay homage to your excellent tastes. Sorry, Fräulein, you would not have done. I thank someone else. Thank you, thank you. No! No again. I owe all I have to you, dear Heinrich, my love. You were my love, you know. But you died so long, so long ago, long before we buried you, you know.*

She walked on past the taverns and the closed but lit shops and cafes. Just as she passed a club, a blond, ruddy-faced but mature officer came out, with the keeper closing up behind him.

“U-m-m. Very nice,” he mused.

The keeper, overhearing, “That’s what I understand. But so nice only for the ranking officers with many medals.”

“Maybe I’ll qualify.” He looked down at the metal and ribbon which covered nearly a quarter of his uniformed front. “Is she clean?”

“Clean?”

“Yes, I mean,” he was impatient now, “I didn’t expect a puke pit like this to have any safe ones. She looks okay.”

“I don’t know. Guess so.”

He caught up with her as she stopped at a picture display in a photography show window.

“Hello. Nice pictures, don’t you think?”

*Oh yes, I think. I think, I think. Pictures don’t make me start or stop. Think, think, think.*

He went on. “Some real talent to taking good pictures. More than just snapping a shutter. You out looking for some subjects?”

*The ambiguous opener. Always cautious. The big ones, always cautious. How much more do you have to lose than any of the others, how much more?—but you mean more to me. You can only get to so many, so start at the top, quicker this way, to the leaders of the war effort. I’ll do my share, yes, but maybe you think I’m a war effort comrade, do you, do you think so, or do you think at all?*

She answered, “No, just out for a walk.”

She could see that he was a little suspicious because of her looks. She usually eased their wonder by charging more. *You wonder why, do you? My clients must be of your*

*class only. Not suspicious enough to quit now, are you?— you seldom are. Doesn't make that much difference when you're this close, does it?*

He was a little anxious. "But I'll be leaving tomorrow. I mean, well, it's so seldom one finds a woman such as you in one of these towns, a woman to really talk with, that is. Couldn't we go someplace and talk?"

"Well, if you must leave tomorrow, maybe we could." *Can't even do your part for the war effort when you want. Well, no matter. I guess no matter at all. Today will do as well as tomorrow. Want to take something with you? Yes, take it with you. Take all you can get, and maybe a little more, too, huh? The officers, the war effort makers, are always more cautious. They can afford to be. Well, we'll see. Just for you, just for all of you, we'll see what we can do, oh, we'll see.*

When they reached her house and went inside, he seemed genuinely interested in looking around. She showed him the better rooms briefly. They ended in the bedroom.

"Really, a very nice place, a nice home. Have you lived here long? It seems so properly furnished."

"The great old house you use as headquarters for all of your officers, you know the old story. Family estate where one grows up, you know. But for the war effort, well, we all give up something. My husband was very helpful to the influentials. I still do my part, yes, I do my part. You do yours, and I do mine. My brother was a soldier, you know. He didn't really want to be, but they thought he ought to do his part too. Yes, he did. He's not any more though. He retired. Yes, very retired. Oh, I don't mean to bore you. Let's get on with it."

She was not the woman of taste he had thought she might be. He was a little disappointed. Either she was stupid or a bit addled. That didn't always affect their other talents though. And besides, it was so seldom one could be sure of a safe one. You had to be so careful these days. But if the German women were going to do their part and keep the German men happy, he was certainly going to let them. He unbuttoned his uniform coat, the one with all the medals and ribbons.

When he was gone, she was so tired she only went to the bathroom and washed quickly. She was almost tempted to let her hair go, but didn't. She dried it as best she could, and forgetting the light, went to her bedroom, a guestroom she had made over for herself, a room where no man had ever been with her. She pulled back the covers and slid under them, not bothering with a nightgown.

*So tired. Clean and rest, clean and rest. Cool clean sheets. Rest with me, cool clean sheets. We'll soon be warm together. Cool and clean and rest. And she slept.*

He was back late the next afternoon. Seemed that he hadn't had to leave that day after all.

"Travel orders postponed until further notice," he said. "How's that for luck?"

"That's just fine." *Don't tell me. I know the next line. Why don't we. . . .*

"I have plenty of money. Why don't we make an evening of it? Dinner and dancing at one of the quiet clubs and then. . . ."

"Sorry. Can't afford it." She cut him off and turned away to dismiss him, but he didn't go.

He took the comment as a personal affront. *All of you, such big men. I will explain to you so you will feel better, so you can go on with your glad life.*

"Oh, it's not you, you're perfectly all right. I just haven't the time." *No, certainly no time. Once is enough, quite enough, they say. You'll find that is true, war-maker, big man war effort maker.*

"I didn't realize. Then tomorrow night, perhaps?"

"No, not tomorrow night, nor any other night."

"But I have money, I'll pay you enough. . . ."

"You don't have enough to pay me this time."

"Then it is something I have done. If you'd tell me."

"No. Dear officer of the medals, you are a perfectly fine love-maker." [*You really are, yes, quite good—almost, almost as if you cared. I almost, yes, almost am sorry for you, too.*] "But no amount of money can buy my time now, not for you. Do you understand?"

No, he certainly didn't understand. He shook his head. It didn't look like he could get an explanation either. Funny,

he thought, he liked to hear her talk. She knew something, she wasn't like all the rest of the dunderheads around here. But she talked strangely, like something secret occupied her thoughts. Didn't look like there was any fighting in it. He left, not understanding, maybe he wouldn't even understand later, if she was lucky, but he left.

She had been just about to leave when he'd come. Now she picked up her dark orange sweater and started for town. *It will not do to keep the good doctor waiting. There's another war effort man, but I don't think he would get a medal for his work either. We all fight our wars, yes, wars and wars, wars for wars, wars against wars.*

She would come home after the examination with the best her old friend could do for her—another bottle of the brown-yellow fluid. And he would be discreet. They each fought their own battles, and some together. “Potassium iodide,” the pharmacists' manual read, “prepared in liquid form; sometimes used in the treatment of neurosyphilis and . . . .”

## Springtime Comes,

### After

*by Paul Kratoska*

In the first year of peace, the springtime sun  
 Shone long on a wintry scene, but naturally  
 No one complained, and the winter's heavy quiet  
 Was wholly undisturbed. For once the world,  
 Perhaps preferring ice to the touch of fire,  
 Seemed quite content to prolong the winter's passing.  
 Then, because spring is an act of God and quite  
 Beyond control, the snow did finally yield  
 To her gentle, warming touch, though passing slowly,  
 As if reluctant to reveal the peaceful,  
 Cindered earth to summer's brooding eye.