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Helen Sherman Griffith



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THE PENN PUBLISHING COMPANY
PHILADELPHIA

Her Service Flag

A Play in One Act

By

HELEN SHERMAN GRIFFITH



PHILADELPHIA
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1918

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Her Service Flag

CHARACTERS

MRS. REYNOLDS . . . *whose stepson has left town under a cloud three years before.*
MRS. KEITH }
MRS. TAYLOR } . . . *her neighbors and intimate friends.*
SUSIE *the maid, an old family retainer.*

TIME OF PLAYING.—Forty-five minutes.

STORY OF THE PLAY

Mrs. Reynolds, whose stepson has disappeared three years ago, grieves that she has no son to give to her country. Mrs. Keith and Mrs. Taylor, both of whom have dear ones "doing their bit," call and sympathize with Mrs. Reynolds. She has secretly bought a one-star service flag, in a vague way feeling that it will help her to feel as do the women who have sons in the service, and is very confused when it is discovered. "I—I bought it to—to—give to you, Susie." Susie's postman goes to war and Susie is broken-hearted. And then comes Mrs. Reynolds' big moment, for a letter arrives telling her that the errant stepson has died in France a hero—fighting for his country. And so she is entitled to her service flag, and Susie caps the climax—"Glory be to Heaven, ma'am, we're in it at last!"

COSTUMES, ETC.

MRS. REYNOLDS. About forty. On her entrance she wears a dark suit and hat and carries a shopping bag and a small parcel. She changes to a simple house dress.

MRS. KEITH AND MRS. TAYLOR. About forty and forty-two, respectively. They wear street costumes and carry knitting bags.

SUSIE. About thirty. She wears a plain dark dress and a white apron.

PROPERTIES

FOR SUSIE: An unopened letter. A number of unopened letters and a small package, containing a gold watch, a photograph case, a few letters and another small packet. This contains a medal supposed to be the Croix de Guerre. Handkerchief. Tea tray, with tea, cups, corn bread, sugar, etc.

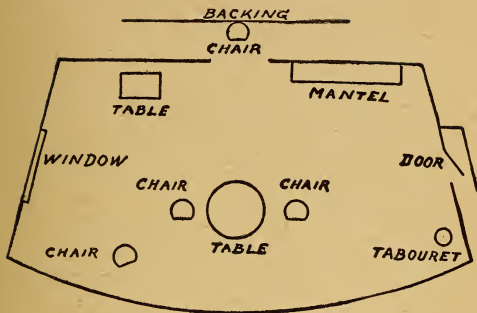
FOR MRS. REYNOLDS: Shopping bag. Small parcel. Half knitted sock. Service flag with one star. Two parcels.

FOR MRS. KEITH: Knitting. Handkerchief. Letter (opened).

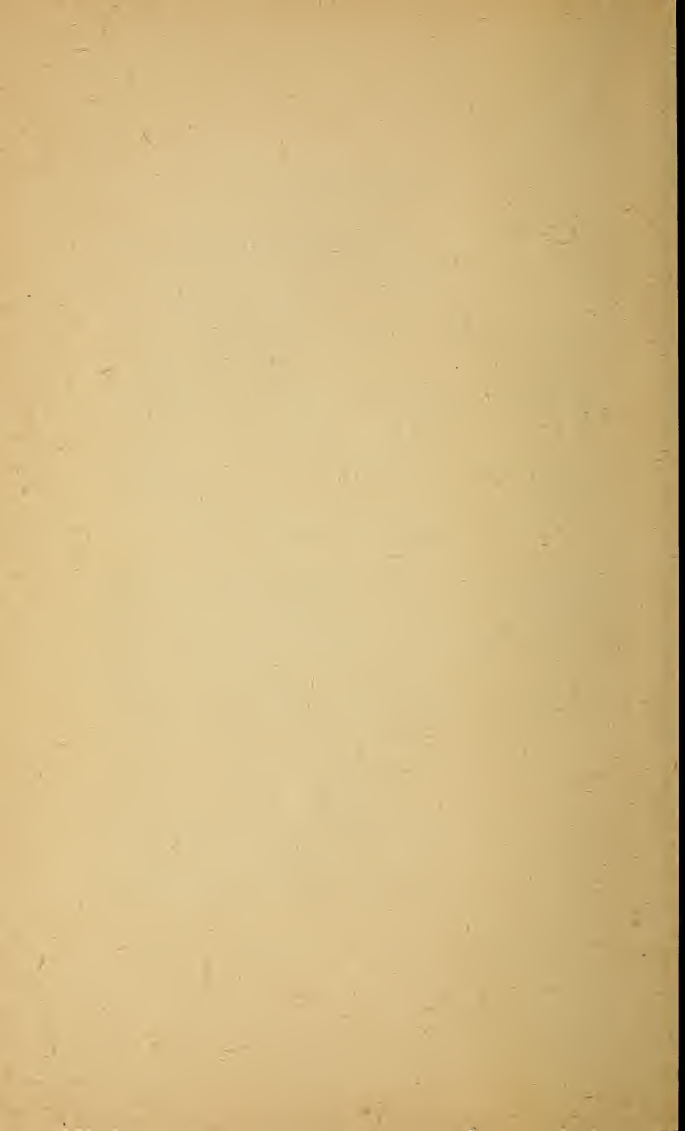
FOR MRS. TAYLOR: Knitting. Two opened letters.

OTHER PROPERTIES: Clock. Victrola to play a lively march off stage. Bell to ring off stage. Large bundle containing knitted sweaters and socks.

SCENE PLOT



SCENE.—Parlor in Mrs. Reynolds' home. Door up c. to hall, which is supposed to lead r. to front door, and l. to kitchen. Door l. to bedrooms, etc. Window at r. Chair against wall of hallway, opposite door, up c. Table against wall up r. Mantel or bookcase with mirror and clock, up l. Table at c. with two easy chairs to r. of it, and another at l. Tabouret l.



Her Service Flag

SCENE.—MRS. REYNOLDS' parlor, comfortably but old-fashionedly furnished. If possible have open doorway at back so that a glimpse may be had of hall behind.

(Curtain rises disclosing empty stage. Bell rings. SUSIE passes from L. to R. through hall, by the parlor door; presumably opens front door.)

SUSIE (heard at door). Oh, it's you, is it? I thought it didn't sound like the postman's ring. And where is our regular postman? What? Oh, takin' a day off? He's a lucky man. Wait a moment till I bring you a letter to mail. I'd have had it with me, if you'd rung twice. (SUSIE passes and repasses through hall, carrying a letter in her hand on her return. Heard at door.) Oh, stop complainin'. I didn't keep you waitin' at all. You'd ought to be glad to do somethin' fer the ladies. Yer young enough. Why aren't ye at a trainin' camp the day? Well, if ye haven't found any other uniform to wear between now an' the postman's next day off, mind ye give two sharp, short rings. Then I'll be after knowin' who 'tis. What? Oh, none of yer sauce, ye young slacker! (Sound of door closing. Enter SUSIE up c., with a bundle of letters and smallish package, which she looks over before placing on table c.) Nothin' fer me, as usual. Siveral furrin ones fer the madam, but I reckon they're from her furrin soldiers. Nothin' at all like the handwritin' of Master Jack—bad cess to 'im. With a mother like her—even if she is a “step”—it

passes my understandin' how a son could go to the dogs like him. There's a bad streak in him somewhere. Him as ought to be home, fightin' fer his mother an' his country, stid o' huntin' gold in Alaska or some other place off the globe, an' never writin' home these three years anything to speak of — (*Bell rings. SUSIE listens.*) There's the madam now. That's her ring.

(*Exit SUSIE, c. Door heard to open.*)

MRS. R. (*heard without*). Thanks, Susie. I am later than I meant to be. I don't suppose any one has come yet?

(*She enters as she speaks and comes down R., SUSIE following.*)

SUSIE (*affecting surprise*). Oh, is somebody comin', ma'am?

MRS. R. (*vexed*). You know that Mrs. Keith and Mrs. Taylor are coming over for tea. I told you, the first thing this morning.

SUSIE (*severely*). I know you mentioned it, ma'am, but as you hadn't ordered anything special for tea —

MRS. R. (*sighing*). We can't have anything "special," Susie, for a long, long time. We are at war, you know, and must conserve food.

SUSIE (*with a sniff, moving toward door*). It don't help the soldiers in the trenches to starve ourselves out o' usefulness, if you'll excuse my sayin' so. Cook was sayin' only yesterday that she was quite gettin' her hand out—havin' no cakes 'r parrrty dishes to cook.

MRS. R. Well, let her exercise her talents on some of the new recipes for corn-meal, then, Susie.

SUSIE (*contemptuously*). Corn-meal, is it? 'Tis the stuff they feed to the hogs in Ireland.

(*SUSIE goes up c.*)

MRS. R. (*calling after her*). Remember, Susie, hot

battered corn bread and war cake for tea. Serve it about half an hour after the ladies come.

SUSIE (*who has paused in hall to take the order*). Yes, ma'am—poor ladies. And I know they're both fond of good cookin'.

(*Exit SUSIE, through door c. and toward L. grumbling. MRS. REYNOLDS, with a sigh, goes to table c. She is dressed in street costume, and carries a shopping bag and small package.*)

MRS. R. (*pushing aside things on table c., and incidentally covering the bundle of letters, to open her package there*). I suppose I am an old fool, but I just couldn't get by that shop window without going in. (*She opens the package and holds up a small service flag, with one star.*) I have looked into that window every time I've gone down-town, and this afternoon—well, I just went in and bought one. I don't want any one to know. (*Glances apprehensively at the clock.*) They would think me gone clean dotty, having no one in the service. (*Pause.*) But I might have had the right to it—if only I had brought up Jack differently—I tried so hard! Oh, if only I knew where he is now! (*She brushes away a tear and wraps up flag.*) I did not know it was so late. I must change my dress before they come. Let me see—oh, I'll leave my knitting down here.

(*She takes a half knitted sock from her shopping bag, lays it on table c., and goes out L., carrying package with her. Slight pause. Bell heard. After slight interval SUSIE goes through hall, L. to R. Door is heard to open.*)

SUSIE (*heard without*). Come right in, ladies. Yes'm, Mrs. Reynolds is expectin' you. (*Enter SUSIE up c., escorting MRS. KEITH and MRS. TAYLOR.*) Shall I take your wraps, or will you step up-stairs?

MRS. K. No, thank you, Susie. I don't believe it is formal enough for that.

MRS. T. Just ourselves, Susie, to knit and gossip over news from the front.

MRS. K. (*taking off her coat*). I am going to take off my hat, too, it is so much more comfortable.

MRS. T. (*following example*). So shall I, though I don't know what my hair looks like.

(*They give their coats and hats to SUSIE, who lays them on a chair, and exits. MRS. KEITH and MRS. TAYLOR enter parlor carrying large, handsome knitting bags. They both go to mirror over mantel-piece and arrange their hair.*)

MRS. K. (*seating herself in comfortable easy chair down R.*). This room is always so comfortable and homelike. (*Takes out her knitting.*)

MRS. T. (*seating herself in another large easy chair at R. of table, producing her knitting*). Isn't it? And I could never understand what induced Jack to leave such a comfortable home, where his mother did everything for him.

MRS. K. (*glancing toward door L. to make sure MRS. REYNOLDS is not coming*). That is just the trouble. His mother did too much for him. Effie Reynolds spoiled that boy until he believed nothing on earth was good enough for him.

MRS. T. (*also glancing toward door L. and pushing her chair a little closer to MRS. KEITH'S*). I wonder if her "mothering" him so much did not have a good deal to do with it? He felt tied to her apron string—and so made a bolt.

MRS. K. May be so, but there must be something inherently bad in a boy to treat a mother as he has done his.

MRS. T. But only a stepmother, after all.

MRS. K. (*hitching her chair a bit closer*). Then he ought to have felt his obligations the more. They do say (*confidentially*) that he had taken to drink, and gambled —

MRS. T. (*hitching her chair still closer and speaking softly*). And worse! They tell dreadful tales about his doings in Alaska —

MRS. K. And his mother here at home, grieving her heart out because he has not volunteered. What were some of the things you heard? Were they as dreadful as Anne Pierson's story ——?

MRS. T. I was up at Mary Horton's yesterday, and Louise Abbot was there.

MRS. K. A genuine gossip, if ever there was one. A story never loses at her hands. What did she have to say?

MRS. T. Why, it seems that Henry Abbot had just got back from a Western trip and they told him in Denver that about a year ago Jack was ——

(Enter MRS. REYNOLDS, L., a little breathless and still carrying her package. She is wearing a simple house dress.)

MRS. R. How do you do, girls? I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting. I went down-town to do an errand and it took me longer than I expected. I —— *(She shakes hands with each in turn, and discovers her package.)* Oh, I did not mean to bring that down. I caught it up, thinking it was my knitting, but I remember I left that down here.

MRS. K. Yes, I saw it there on the table. How fast you knit, Effie.

MRS. T. *(admiringly)*. You hold the record in town, you know.

MRS. R. *(tucking the package away hastily in the centre table drawer and taking up her sock)*. I want to do my bit. *(Seats herself L. of table.)* It is not much, I know, at best, but I give all I have to give. *(There is an awkward little pause. MRS. KEITH and MRS. TAYLOR glance consciously toward each other. MRS. REYNOLDS drops her knitting and falls into short reverie. As if to herself.)* Have I given all I had to give? Was my bringing up entirely wrong, that he turned so away from love and duty? Ah me! *(Comes to herself with a start, and turns to her guests, knitting rapidly, and speaking as if following her own line of thought.)* After all, those lines of Tennyson's are rather selfish, don't you think? I mean:

“Of all sad words of tongue or pen
The saddest are these, ‘it might have been.’”

No cause was ever won by thinking of the might-have-beens, and I hope I shan't be that kind of a slacker. But there, I am growing dreadfully preachy. What is the news? Have you had any letters?

(Looks from one to the other.)

MRS. K. (*eagerly*). Yes, a letter from Will. I got it from the postman on our way here, and read it aloud to Harriet as we walked along. Would you like to read it?

(She rummages in her bag for a letter.)

MRS. T. And I had one from Irene. She finds her canteen work more absorbing every day. I think I have the letter with me. The postman gets to our house very early, you know, but I intended to put it in my bag.

(Searches in her knitting bag for letter.)

MRS. R. Then the foreign mail is in? I had hoped for a letter or two myself. I am “fairy godmother” to several “Tommies” and Belgians, you know. They write very amusingly—and very sadly too, sometimes.

MRS. K. I dare say their letters give a truer state of affairs than those from our own boys. They would write more frankly.

(Takes letter from her bag and hands it to MRS. REYNOLDS.)

MRS. R. (*wistfully*). Ah, but yours are from your own! *(Takes letter and reads.)*

MRS. T. (*at last finding two letters in her bag*). Here is Irene's letter—and one from Teddy at Camp Meade. I—— Hark, what is that?

(A faint sound of music is heard. SUSIE appears at the door up c., flushed and excited.)

SUSIE. Oh, ma'am, some of the boys is marching away! Go to the window, quick! You'll see 'em.

(MRS. KEITH and MRS. TAYLOR spring to their feet, dropping their knitting, and hurry to window R., MRS. REYNOLDS last.)

MRS. R. Open the front door, Susie, so we can hear the music better.

(Exit SUSIE; sound of music becomes louder, gradually dying away as band presumably passes. MRS. REYNOLDS joins MRS. KEITH and MRS. TAYLOR at window, R.)

MRS. K. (waving her handkerchief excitedly). There they go! Why, nobody said they were leaving to-day!

MRS. T. (waving hers). Nobody knows now when anybody's going until they go. (Peering out window.) There goes the butcher's boy. Mercy, who'll deliver our meat?

MRS. K. (peering out). And Tim Mark, the blacksmith's son —

MRS. T. And Swansen's head clerk —

MRS. K. And his bookkeeper —

MRS. T. And there goes —

(SUSIE appears at the door, sobbing.)

MRS. R. Why, Susie, what's the matter?

(She goes up c. to SUSIE. While they speak MRS. KEITH and MRS. TAYLOR listen partly to what she says, and partly devote their attention to waving out the window, now and then surreptitiously wiping away a tear.)

SUSIE (dramatically). Oh, ma'am, the postman's gone! He's been an' gone an' enlisted, the black-guard, an' him over age! Whatever'll I do without 'im?

MRS. R. (coming away from window). Why,

Susie, I didn't know you were interested in the postman.

SUSIE. It wasn't fer me to be showin' my feelin's, ma'am, on my sleeve. But I always went to the door prompt when he rang. It was myself that twitted him about not enlistin' fer the ould counthry, and now he's gone an' done it. Oh, lack-a-me!

MRS. R. But you ought to feel proud, Susie, if you have been the means of pointing out his duty to him.

SUSIE. Proud, would ye call it—to send me dearie to his death? Oh, boo-hoo! But I was mistrustin' somethin' of the kind had happened when the other imperdent feller come this afternoon. Oh me, oh me! (*Weeps.*)

MRS. R. I am sorry for you, Susan, but it is the right thing, you know. You say the other postman came. Were there no letters for me?

SUSIE (*drying her eyes*). Sure, ma'am, lots, there on the table, ma'am. I thought I mentioned it when ye come in.

(MRS. KEITH and MRS. TAYLOR return to their chairs and pick up knitting, murmuring words of sympathy to SUSIE.)

MRS. R. (*reseating herself L. of table*). Bring us our tea now, Susie.

SUSIE. Yes, ma'am. The world must be goin' on, I s'pose.

(*Exit SUSIE up c., blowing her nose.*)

MRS. R. I am sure we shall all be glad of a cup of tea after that emotional scene. It must have brought back the day Will marched away, Alberta. Thank you for letting me see his letter.

(*She hands back letter to MRS. KEITH and they exchange a smile of sympathy.*)

MRS. T. (*anxiously*). I wonder when my Teddy

will have to go? It seems only a couple of years since he was toddling around with me. Oh, dear!

MRS. K. (*after slight pause*). Did not Susie say you had some mail, Effie? Perhaps you have some interesting letters from abroad, after all.

MRS. R. Perhaps. But first we'll have tea and then I want to show you the socks and sweaters I have made for the Red Cross. They are to come for the package to-night. (*Rising, MRS. REYNOLDS fetches a large package from a table at the back of the room, and opens it on table c., disclosing a goodly array of sweaters and socks. She takes two small packages from the heap and hands one to each MRS. KEITH and MRS. TAYLOR. Handing package to MRS. KEITH.*) For Will. (*Handing package to MRS. TAYLOR.*) And for Teddy, Harriet. I love to do them, and hope they will each have their pair a month from me until they march home from Berlin.

(*Enter SUSIE up c., red-eyed and catching her breath, after sobbing. She carries a laden tea tray which she sets on a low table or tabouret L. at MRS. REYNOLDS' side.*)

SUSIE (*severely, surveying tray*). It appears to me there's a great sight of luxuries there, considerin' our boys that are starvin' in the trenches.

MRS. R. (*smiling patiently, after scrutinizing tray*). Only the "war dishes" I ordered, Susie. One can't let one's guests starve. (*They all smile but SUSIE.*) By the way, Susie, do you remember where you put my letters?

SUSIE. Right here, ma'am, on the big table. (*She goes c. and looks.*) Why, they're gone.

MRS. R. (*pouring tea and passing cups*). I may have pushed them back when I opened the package. Look under the sweaters, Susie.

(*MRS. REYNOLDS pours tea, asks "How many lumps?" and "Won't you have corn bread?" and so forth, the others helping themselves, while SUSIE searches table, puzzled.*)

SUSIE (*at length*). They was here. Mebbe you put 'em in the drawer, ma'am?

(*She opens the table drawer. The parcel containing the service flag falls out and unrolls.*)

MRS. K. } (*together*). Why, what is that? Whose
MRS. T. } is it?

(*SUSIE picks up the flag and holds it out. MRS. REYNOLDS has had her back to table. She looks over her shoulder and catches sight of flag.*)

MRS. R. Oh—why—I—the truth is I bought it—this afternoon, to—to give—to give to you, Susie, for the postman.

SUSIE. Sure, an' I've no right to it, ma'am. Yer just bein' charitable like, to make me feel better.

MRS. R. (*insistently, taking the flag from SUSIE and holding it out to her again*). But I want you to have it, Susie.

SUSIE (*backing away, her hands behind her back*). But ye couldn't 'a' meant it fer me, ma'am. Why, ye wasn't after knowin' until——

MRS. R. I must have had a psychological inspiration.

SUSIE (*staring*). A what, ma'am? No'm, I'm sure not—the postman never did anything of the sort, either in secret or public. Besides, ye see, I never accepted 'im. Thank ye kindly, just the same, ma'am. I'm sorry I can't find the letters. They was here.

(*She turns again to the table.*)

MRS. R. (*hastily folding up the flag and thrusting it into her work-bag*). Never mind the letters, Susie. I'll find them presently.

SUSIE. Very well, ma'am.

(*Exit SUSIE. Ladies all drink tea.*)

MRS. K. I think it very fine of the postman to volunteer, for he is over age.

MRS. T. But he is a bachelor, with nobody dependent on him.

MRS. K. Except—perhaps Susie?

MRS. R. I don't know why Susie never accepted him if he proposed. She is old enough to know her own mind. I think I shall give her a sweater and pair of socks to send to him. I can soon make others for the Red Cross. (*She sets down her cup, rises and selects a sweater and pair of socks from the pile on table. Laying these aside she wraps up the package and in so doing, pushes aside the papers that hid her letters. Taking them up.*) Why, here are my letters; quite a bunch of them. And a package. I wonder whom this can be from?

(*She returns to her seat with the packet.*)

MRS. T. It is from abroad. Perhaps one of your "god children" has sent you a souvenir.

MRS. K. Wouldn't that be interesting! The package is too big to be one of those rings they carve out of pieces of shell.

MRS. R. (*studying package*). It might be a souvenir. I have a letter from each of my soldiers. (*Looks at packet more closely.*) But the handwriting is different. Ah, here is another foreign letter, addressed in the same hand. I wonder whom it can be from?

MRS. K. Perhaps a friend of one of your protégés is writing?

MRS. T. But he would not be likely to send a present with the first letter. Suppose you open it, Effie.

MRS. R. Suppose I do. You are a regular "lady from Philadelphia," Harriet. (*Laying the package on her knee, MRS. REYNOLDS slowly opens the letter, MRS. KEITH and MRS. TAYLOR looking on interestedly. MRS. REYNOLDS stares at letter, then turns it over to signature.*) Why, it is from a perfect stranger—a Major Scott. Does either of you know him?

MRS. K. Never heard of him that I can remember.

MRS. T. Unless he was one of the men at the

Tip-Top Inn last summer? You remember what a number of military people there were.

MRS. R. I don't remember meeting any one of that name. Anyhow, why should he write to me?

MRS. K. Perhaps he has something to do with the Red Cross, or Y. M. C. A., and is writing to thank you for all the wonderful knitting you have done.

MRS. R. (*smiling and shaking her head*). I am afraid such local fame as mine has never reached the high places. Let me see what he says. (*She reads the letter aloud, and although her voice falters, and she pauses now and then, she never stops until the end. But during the reading her face takes on a change—becomes, as it were, glorified. Reading.*)

“Mrs. John Reynolds:—Dear Madam,—Two nights ago I was sent for by an officer of the Foreign Legion. It seems that a man in his company—an American, bearing the name of Jack Reynolds, no address—had died from wounds received while performing an act of particular bravery. Before his death this man had sent for his officer, and asked him to communicate with you, at the address I use, and to forward to you a small packet that was in his kit, inscribed ‘for mother.’ I promised to give his last message, which the French officer had scribbled down at his dictation. It strikes me as a bit peculiar, and was naturally Greek to the Frenchman, but it may convey a meaning to you—unless the officer entirely misunderstood. The message, verbatim, reads:—‘Tell her I may not have lived according to Hoyle, but I have died as she would have me.’ Of course we know no mother would have her son die—but I dare say you understand and can supply such words as the Frenchman may have failed to put down. I can only add that the officers of the Legion were most enthusiastic in their praise of the valor and daring of Private Jack Reynolds, and the regiment mourns the loss of a beloved comrade. Trusting that the accompanying packet reaches you safely and in good condition, believe me, Sincerely and sympathetically yours,
Francis Scott, Major 253rd Infantry A. E. F., France.”

(She folds the letter and sits gazing in a rapt silence.)

MRS. T. *(softly, putting away her knitting)*. How beautiful!

MRS. K. *(following her example)*. How wonderful!

MRS. T. *(rising)*. How happy you must be, Effie.

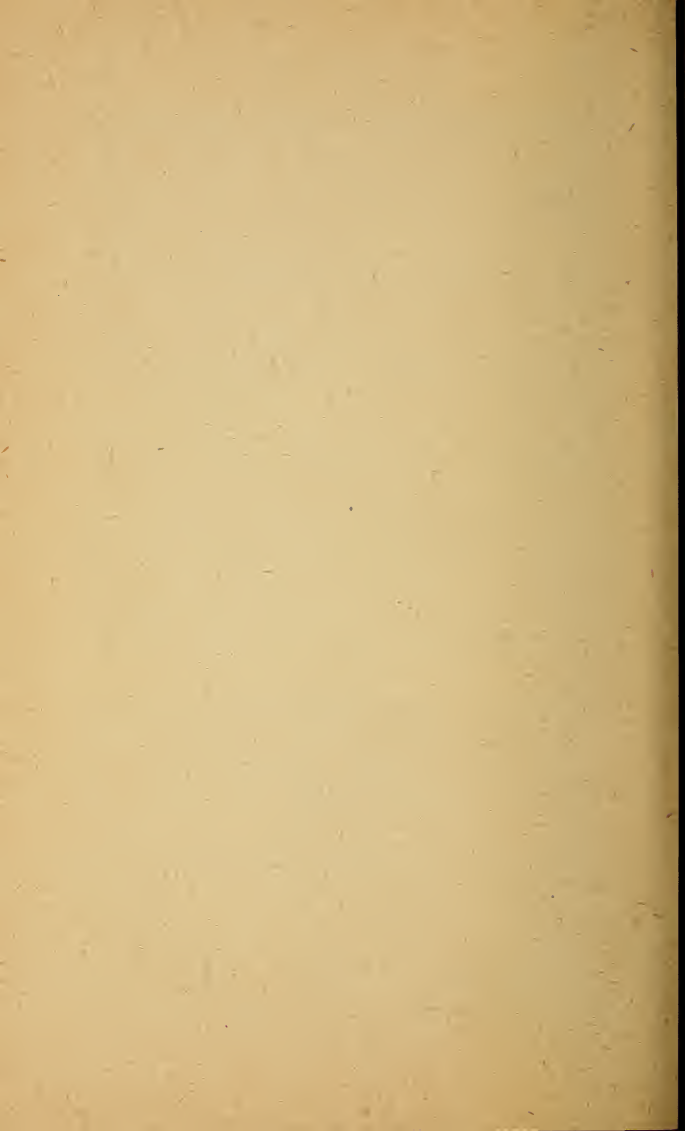
MRS. K. *(rising)*. And how proud! He died a hero! *(They both move toward door, up c.)*

MRS. R. *(solemnly)*. My poor boy is dead! *(Pause.)* But he died—fighting for his country! *(MRS. KEITH and MRS. TAYLOR tiptoe into hall and put on their wraps. MRS. REYNOLDS does not seem to realize that they have gone. Repeating.)* Fighting for his country! He knew that was how I would have him die, when the end had to come. *(She sits motionless a moment longer. MRS. KEITH and MRS. TAYLOR, their wraps on, watch from doorway. SUSIE appears; they whisper to her and point to MRS. REYNOLDS. MRS. REYNOLDS slowly unwraps the packet and discloses a gold watch, a photograph case, a few letters, and another small packet, the three women watching her from the hall. MRS. REYNOLDS opens this packet and holds up a medal.)* The *Croix de Guerre!* Oh, my boy, my precious boy!

(Reverently she lifts the medal to her lips. The three watchers furtively brush away tears. Then rising, still holding the medal, MRS. REYNOLDS takes the service flag out of her bag, and crossing to the window, she fastens it there. MRS. KEITH and MRS. TAYLOR exeunt, on tiptoe.)

SUSIE *(fervently, dropping to her knees in doorway)*. Glory be to Heaven, ma'am, we're in it at last!

CURTAIN



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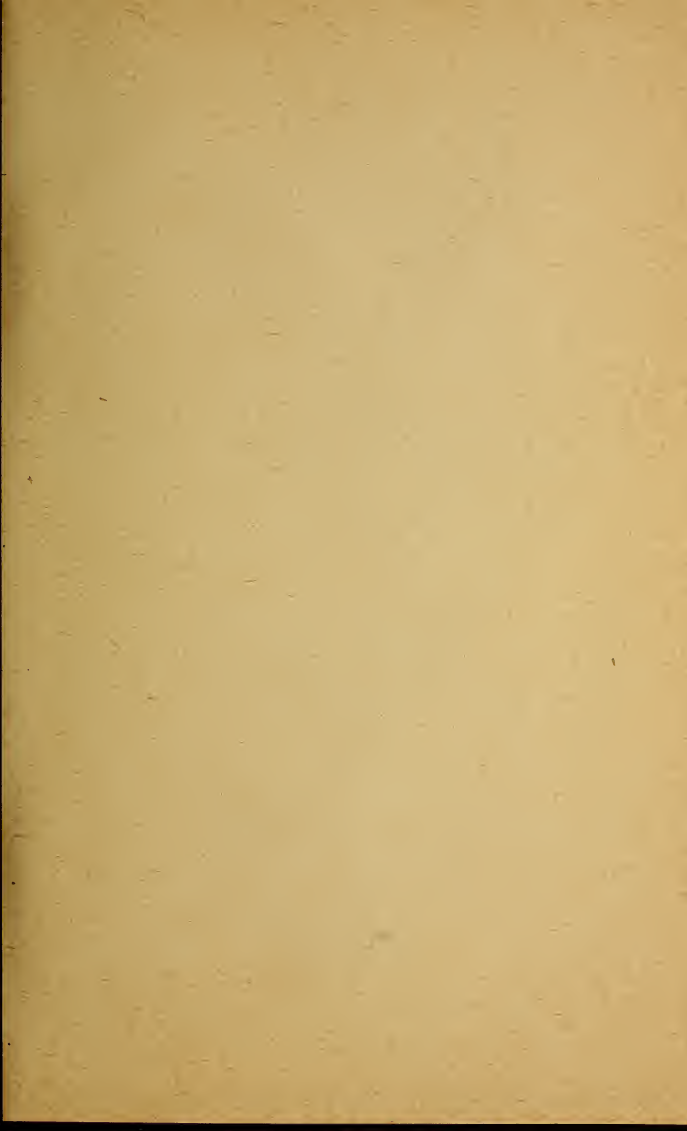
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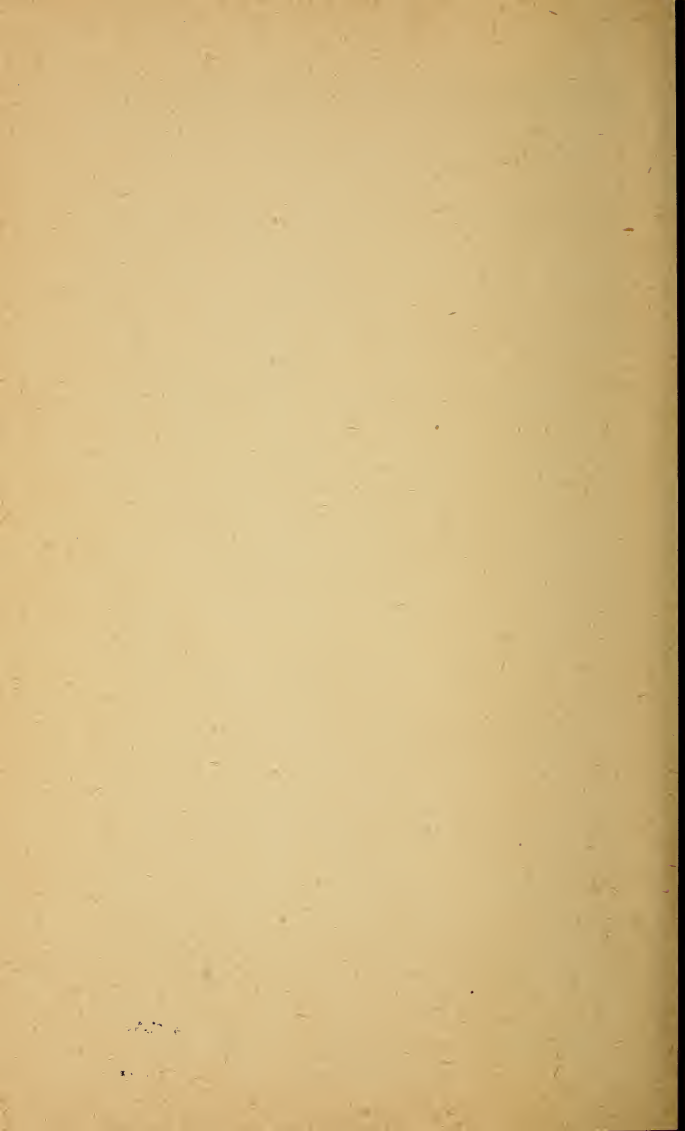
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