

CYNTHIA'S ONE NIGHT OUT

A Practical Adventure Into a Canadian Munition Canteen Some Time Before Morning

CYNTHIA, despite her eccentricities, never fails to be fashionable. Consequently her message to "Please come over, I've been nearly dead from grippe," failed to surprise me either by its matter or manner. All the elect had grippe this season, and "nearly died" with it.

Ushered into the blue and white symphony where Cynthia "woos repose," I found her looking remarkably cheerful for one in a moribund condition. Before I could reproach her with the fact, she hastened to say, "This is absolutely the worst cold I ever had. It has been given mustard plasters, camphorated oil, alcohol, hot salt, turpentine, black currant tea, gruel, quinine, aspirin, whiskey and cream, somebody's incomparable cough syrup, and assorted cough lozenges; but until to-day it was impervious to them all. This morning it seems inclined to come out of its shell. Perhaps because the said shell (which is me) has become so thin as to be a doubtful shelter."

"Then you are not actually considering shuffling off this mortal coil, to-day?" I asked somewhat heartlessly.

"Well," she said ingratiatingly, "not until I have told you about my 'night out.' It will be such fine 'copy,' as you call it. Of course this would have been a good time to die. Flowers are awfully expensive. It would make me so much more 'deeply regretted.' You know there are some people who would be mean enough to send them from their own gardens if it was the right season."

"What is this latest tom-foolery?"

"Tom-foolery nothing!" said Cynthia tersely, if inelegantly. "I have been doing patriotic work. You should be pleased instead of coming to scold me. Of course if the family were silly enough to not understand when I said that 'for once in my life I was going to have a night out,' and imagined me doing some crazy slumming stunt insufficiently chaperoned, that isn't my fault."

"You know," she went on hastily, as I opened my mouth with the obvious intention of stating the family's case more fairly, "I have always felt that even to work in a munition plant, at from eighteen to thirty dollars a week, wasn't attaining a very giddy height of patriotism. So when I heard about the canteens for the women munition makers in which you could toil for a ten-hour shift without any remuneration whatsoever, except 'the joy of the working,' it seemed to me just the thing."

"It is all managed by the Y.W.C.A. That was why the family were so foolish—but there's no use going into that again—and perhaps I did forget to tell them. Anyway, I chose a night shift. It seemed such a lark to stay up all night."

"I thought you said it was 'patriotic work'! If you only did it for a lark—"

"Now," she exclaimed belligerently, "If you are going to begin splitting hairs, I won't tell you a thing, and I know you are simply dying to hear."

"All right, go ahead! You have the floor," I said, resignedly. Whereupon Cynthia, whose long suit is a monologue, continued unabashed:

"For once in my life, I was ahead of time, so my duenna wasn't in sight when I hopped off the car at the corner where she had arranged to meet me; but as it was barely 9.35 p.m. my tingling sensation of adventure was the result of anticipation rather than any happenings of the moment."

"NOW, it took me only a few minutes to reach the brilliantly lit factory, whose quiet surroundings gave it the atmosphere of a hornet's nest in a peaceful orchard."

"You might note that simile," she added patronizingly. "It is a good one; for in a few minutes I was looking awe-struck at the hornets. Great piles of shells that filled every table in the big room."

"They didn't give me much time to gloat over them, however; but whisked me up three floors into a very different scene. The elevator landed me in a huge room where a stretch of bare floor and then an oasis of rugs, tables, easy chairs, etc., looked like 'Boffin's Bower' reproduced from Dickens' own de-

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scription. 'Mr. Boffin' only appeared at intervals in the form of the night watchman, but dozens of Mrs. Boffins of various heights, widths, ages and conditions occupied the part devoted to 'high-fliers of fashion.'

"Later I learned that many of them formed the reserve, which in this plant numbers fifteen women. They are on hand constantly to step into the place of any regular worker who might become ill, meet with an accident, or fail to appear when her shift was called. For you know," Cynthia said very impressively, "no matter what happens the machines must never stop day or night, Sunday or week day."

"How do they arrange about the reserves," I asked, as Cynthia seemed lost in contemplation.

"Oh!" she replied glibly, "The reserves go on with the regular shifts, and unless 'called' they spend the six hours reading, knitting or dozing. For this display of patience they receive ten cents an hour."

"But, like Silas Wegg when he visited the Boffins, my chief interest was in the refreshments. A partition gleaming with spotless gray paint shut off the canteen from the rest room. Three long tables covered with white oil-cloth and flanked by penitential benches, furnished the restaurant, while a long counter laden with clean dishes and eatables formed a barricade behind which the Y. M. C. A. enthusiasts toiled."

"It was now the midnight hour of ten p.m., and here three others with myself were to hold the fort until eight o'clock the next morning. Everything looked very bright and inviting, but a bit complicated to the novice. So I listened eagerly to the words of wisdom with which the Y. secretary—a most inspiring and capable lady—did the Tom Sawyer act."

"WHEN we had been shown various conveniences, from the cauldrons of soup to the wash tubs which served as dish pans, this golden-tongued orator had convinced us that a night devoted to making tea, coffee, cocoa, two kinds of soup, sandwiches, etc., and serving the same was vastly preferable to our usual method of spending it in slothful sleep. We were so entranced as hardly to notice the final Sawyeresque touch to the effect that if we required sustenance between then and morning we could just help ourselves 'at the same prices charged the munition workers.'

"Unfortunately, I hadn't thought of this contingency, and a hasty search in my change purse revealed lots of car tickets but only 25c in cash. However, a glance at the price list reassured me. At these rates even a boa constrictor could become torpid on a quarter. They ran as follows: tea or coffee, 3c a cup; cocoa or milk, 5c; buttermilk, 2c; one slice of thin bread, or cracker (buttered), 2c; three slices bread and butter, or three buttered crackers, 5c; soup with two crackers, 5c; sandwiches (2 in a bag), 5c; pie, cut in 5 pieces, 5c a cut; cake (cut in 6 pieces), 5c each; sweet biscuit, 6 for 5c; bananas, 2 for 5c; chocolate bars, 5c each, ditto oranges."

"It was all very good, too, as we found a little later when, our preparations made, we decided to fortify ourselves before the rush which accompanies the change of shifts at midnight. Three of us were novices and distinctly nervous lest we should not discharge our various duties properly. One was to serve the tea, coffee, cocoa and milk. Another presided over the two big cauldrons of soup. While the third, a member of the 'Y' staff, kept a general survey of things and sold sandwiches, cake and pie, with an aplomb almost professional."

"The keeping of the till had been thrust upon me and I was in a tremor of anxiety at the horrid possibility of overcharging or short-changing a noble female patriot. I needn't have worried. It didn't require a knowledge of high finance to calculate the cost of tea and sandwiches, 8c; or soup and pie, 10c. My chief difficulty was in combining the roles of cashier and dishwasher."

"My first intimation of this new duty came in the form of a frenzied squeak from the soup server, who had run out of bowls in the middle of the twelve o'clock rush. This was followed by a shortage of cups and spoons. It was obviously more hygienic to combine dishwashing with the taking of money, than the handling of food. So for nearly an hour I cavorted wildly from wash tub to cash box."

"In spite of the hurry I was interested in seeing the munition workers who thronged in and out. I had heard so much talk of the 'silk stocking brigade' and was curious to see how they looked topped off with the blue smock and boudoir cap effect, that formed the working garb at this factory. As a matter of fact I didn't notice any society buds, nor even blossoms, among them. They looked to me like a lot of capable and thrifty (that over-driven word) young women who would be able to appreciate the comfort and economy of the 'Y' canteen."

"FOR the most part their choice of food was as sensible as their clothing. A good bowl of nourishing soup, or sandwiches and tea, coffee or cocoa were favourite orders; only a small proportion showing a preference for cake, pie or chocolate. Just to prove the rule, one exception enlivened the night's work. She was a festive little creature who, without turning a hair or otherwise showing signs of physical distress, consumed two bananas, three bars of chocolate, and a plate of assorted cakes."

"It was nearly 3 a.m. before we had the dishes washed, sandwiches made, the tables and counter cleaned, and fresh soup, cocoa and coffee prepared in the carefully scoured urns. By that time I was much too tired to sleep; and glancing at my companions it occurred to me that we looked more fagged and worn than the munition workers for whom we were gratuitously labouring."

"A couple of stretchers had been provided for our moments of idleness, and while two of the girls were occupying them I decided to take a personally-conducted tour of our surroundings. 'Mr. Boffin' had been up a little while before to turn out most of the lights on that floor, but there were avenues of electric bulbs that enabled you to find your way about."

"The oasis had only one occupant. With my voice instinctively lowered I asked about the others. Just as she nodded toward a door in the side partition there was a loud crash, and the sound of a body falling heavily, in the room beyond. As I reached the doorway there came a peal of laughter from a dozen girls stretched out on as many cots, while another, the victim of the disaster, was stoically collecting herself and her hair pins off the floor. A wag in the party remarked that 'only an expert canoeist could sleep on those cots without upsetting,' and then there was silence again in the shadowy room."

"It was the oracle of the oasis who told me I ought to see the room where the women employees keep their working outfit. Following her directions I passed through a door back of the elevator into what looked like a post office with a long counter in place of a wicket. Two capable, motherly women were in charge to give out or receive the smocks and caps. Each girl has her own compartment, like a post office box on a large scale, and the whole room spelled cleanliness and efficiency."

"Just adjoining was a wash room of the most up-to-date variety. Rows and rows of shining enamel hand basins, that tipped up to let the water out, and so did away with the sometimes unhygienic stopper and chain, were surmounted by the last idea in liquid soap receptacles. Even a small boy would enjoy washing his hands with such interesting contrivances."

"By this time the early morning rush was only an hour away, so I went back to the canteen where the veteran of the party was trying to put 'zip' into us by expatiating on the thrill of seeing the sun rise."

"I do be that upset! I thought I'd never get here this morning. I was to meet the matron at the corner of A and B streets, where she said there

(Concluded on page 27.)