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WAR GIRLS

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Shadow and Light

by Theresa Breslin

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.