

**A SOLDIER'S
MOTHER IN FRANCE**

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A Soldier's Mother in France by Rheta Childe Dorr

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RHETA CHILDE DORR

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A SOLDIER'S MOTHER IN FRANCE

(Louis) By
Mrs. RHETA CHILDE DORR, 1872 -
Author of *Inside the Russian Revolution*



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A Soldier's Mother in France

CHAPTER I

WHERE THE LONG TRAIL LED

ON THE lapel of my coat I wear a little pin, a pin with a single star, ruby red on a bar of white. My only son is a member of the American Expeditionary Force in France. More than a million American women wear pins like mine. Some have two stars, three, even four, and every one covers a heart heavy with anxiety and foreboding. That little service pin which mothers wear, fathers, too; sisters, sweethearts, wives, is a symbol of sacrifice. It should be something more than that.

My star has come to mean love of country far surpassing the mild patriotism of other days. It means confidence and courage for whatever in these tragic times I shall need courage. It means pride in the young manhood of America and hope unbounded for the future of America, which lies in their hands. Before I went to France I wore my service pin for one soldier—my son. I wear it now for the American army. If I can, by writing of that army as I have

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just seen it in France, lessen a little for other women the burden of anxiety and dread I shall count my journey worth while.

I went to France as a correspondent, a reporter, to write about the war. I was sent, not because I am a woman, but in spite of the fact, and merely because my editors believed that I could handle that particular job. My letter of credentials to the French Foreign Office said that I had reported the Russian revolution for my paper and that I was now assigned to France with the view of informing readers in the United States as to participation of United States troops in war and the political situations of the allied countries in the war.

I hope that my editors' confidence in me was not entirely misplaced and that I did not quite fall down on my job. But what I experienced in France and what I brought out with me were not exactly what I had expected. I went to France as a correspondent, deeply interested in my work, but very soon after I arrived and almost with my first contact with our marvelous new army I forgot all about my work. I forgot that I was in France after military and political facts.

I forgot that I was a correspondent. I was conscious only that I was a mother. The mother of a boy in France. I was one in heart with a million other American women I have never seen and will never see; one with every woman in the land who wears a service pin.

I discovered that try as I might to think of armies, strategies and diplomacies, the only thing that vitally

concerned me in France was to find out how my son was faring, and in doing so I was finding out the things that other mothers wanted to know about their boys.

Where they are, how they live, who their comrades are, how they work and play, what they are learning, how they get along with their strange new neighbors, the French people, and what the war is doing to their minds and souls, as well as their bodies. I wanted, fervently, to know all this about one soldier, and I believed that the other women would like to know about their own.

Our soldiers are more than three thousand miles away from home, and they have gone on a terrible errand. We know less about war than any other women in the world, but we know that it is a brutal, pitiless, bloodthirsty business. We know that bodies perish in war, and sometimes souls, which is worse. Going over in the steamer a horrible story was told me, a story which turned out to be quite untrue, but which when I heard it cost me a sleepless night. It was to the effect that vice was so rampant in all the armies that a whole shipload of hopelessly diseased Australian soldiers had recently sailed from England. The hospitals had salvaged many, it was said, but these men, who had left home clean, wholesome, decent boys, were now being sent back to die, physical and moral wrecks. Some, it was certain, would commit suicide during the voyage.

That tale filled me with such terror that I went to

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some lengths to investigate it. It was quite untrue, and I repeat it here only because it is representative of stories that are current everywhere and add greatly to the sufferings of the women at home. *The first thing I want to say about our army is that the men are morally as safe in France as they could possibly be at home. I made it my particular business to know it.*

I spent three months in France, traveling over most of the considerable territory occupied by the American forces. I visited something like twenty-five camps, small ones, large ones and immense ones, where the men are training, where they are being made into experts in special lines of fighting; where they are at work building miles of wharves, warehouses, cold storage plants, barracks and hospitals; where they are laying railroads and dredging rivers; where they are performing marvels of constructive work necessary to the life of an army far removed from its base.

I met and talked with thousands of soldiers in their camps, in the Y. M. C. A. and Red Cross canteens, in many ancient towns of central France. I saw our men disembarking from their transports, and I saw them tramping through ice-cold mud to the front-line trenches. I talked with them in their billets in lonely little villages of the north, and in vacation cities of the azure south. I have visited American soldiers in hospitals and I have knelt beside their graves. *Our soldiers have only one enemy, and that is the Germans.* That enemy they must fight and conquer, and we over here must steel our hearts to the sacrifices of

life, the suffering and maiming that are absolutely inevitable and will have to be borne. The casualty lists, every day growing a little longer, are bound to grow even longer. What English mothers and French mothers, what all the people of all the warring nations have endured, we shall have to endure. It is the world's pain and we can not escape it.

What we Americans have to help us bear what is coming in the next few months is the knowledge that our losses are going to be as few as possible. Life is to be safeguarded as far as human agencies can devise. Our army is organized for that. Men are not to be sacrificed unnecessarily. The best science in the world is being mobilized to save suffering and to heal wounds. Sickness and accident are being guarded against. Drunkenness and immorality are under strictest ban.

Some of this I was privileged to hear from the man who perhaps more than any other individual is responsible for the lives and the souls of our men in France, General Pershing. I saw him twice, once briefly in Paris, where he talked to me five minutes before leaving for an allied war council at Versailles, and once at length in his headquarters in a quaint old town which is the general headquarters of the staff of our army in France.

General Pershing is the least formal of any great officer I have ever seen, with the notable exception of "Papa" Joffre, but generals are all very important personages and have to be addressed with circumspection. I wanted very much to say to General Pershing,