

THE ODYSSEY OF FRANCESCA.

PART II.

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The next stage of Francesca's journey was by car. She thought it sounded opulent to be touring through Greece in an automobile, even though not a Rolls-Royce but a *very* joggly "tin Lizzie."

Their way led along the flat Crissian plain towards Amphissa. "Solid and heavy" had been the curses pronounced against whomsoever should till this soil by the Amphycion Council but now it looked fertile enough with vineyards, groves of cork oak and terraces of silver gnarled olives.

Presently, they began to climb the hill where Delphi lay hidden from profane eyes in the fold of a steep terrace under the stark grey cliffs of Mount Parnassus. Francesca was hoping to wangle time enough to visit the temples but to her bitter disappointment they turned off to the left on a forked road just a few kilometres from Delphi. There were two or three things about which she would have much liked to consult the Delphic Oracle. But the inexorable car went on panting up the steep hair-pin bends of the wonderful new road which in many places is blasted out of the solid rock with a sheer precipice below. Hundreds of peasant women and little girls of about seven years old and upwards were working away at the road. There ought to have been a glorious view from the top of the pass but clouds enveloped them with a clammy hand, on the summit an icy wind stung their faces, and as they went down the other side flakes of snow began to fall and Francesca began to freeze.

Her destination this time was a raw mountain camp knee-deep in mud and slush. Francesca was conducted to an icy leaking tent where she found four other females all in bed. They explained that it was much too cold to do anything else, but it was only two o'clock, so Francesca decided to be superior to these minor discomforts and go for a walk to warm herself. The sleet and the rain and the closing-in of the short winter afternoon soon drove her in again. There were no seats in the tent so she cowered on her bed, covering herself with everything she possessed. But she maintained her self-respect by refusing to *undress*. Those other depraved females had undressed altogether and got into their pyjamas, plus everything else they had with them.

The next day passed, and the next, and the next, and the mud and the snow were churned up ankle deep inside the tent. The cold grew colder, and the snow snowed without stopping. Each morning they got up hurriedly, took it in turns to wash at the one tin basin, flew to breakfast and tore back to *bed*, got up reluctantly for lunch and returned triumphantly to *bed*. Got up to dinner and then retired finally for the night.

Habits grew primitive. The lady with the pink

nose couldn't powder it any more, having dropped the box of powder into the mud on the floor of the tent, and the other with the lovely bronze hair bundled it up anyhow into a sort of penny bun. Francesca had lost her pocket mirror and couldn't see to do her hair at all, but being short it didn't much matter. Such big emotions as love or war seemed quite unimportant beside the thing that *really* mattered, such as getting one's hot-water bottle filled, or losing one's turn at the basin.

Francesca had lost all hope of ever going on, and had almost settled down to spend the winter there, when one morning, when they were still in bed, the Matron came in waving her permission to proceed. Francesca got up hastily while the other females cursed their luck at her getting off before them, but they were west and she was eastward bound. She fastened up her boots somehow with stiff, shivering fingers, threw her things into the kitbag, bid goodbye to the unhappy occupants of the tent, got into an ambulance, and was fruddled away to a station. It was a glorious morning; it had stopped snowing and the sun came out in greeting for the first time in many days. Francesca's spirits went up with a bound.

The train did not start for several hours, as General Sarail had announced his intention of travelling by it; but at last the great man appeared accompanied by his successor, General Guillemat.

The train presently began to climb, and they crept slowly up the mountain in front of them till they reached the top of the Pass of Thermopylæ, the plain laid out like a contour map far below their feet. Soon darkness came on, and Francesca rolled herself in a rug and was about to compose herself to slumber when an officer from the next carriage—with whom she had made friends—marched in triumphantly, bearing a huge charcoal brazier. "Its getting frightfully cold," quoth he, "so I have wangled this for you for the night."

He deposited it on the floor and went away, and why Francesca wasn't burnt to death or suffocated by charcoal fumes, she never knew. The train swayed from side to side, and every now and then some burning embers escaped from the brazier's perforated sides and she had to jump up and stamp them out. As the brazier burnt down, she got very cold and kept lifting up one foot and then the other to thaw it by sitting on it for a while. She dozed off towards morning; and, just as the grey light was beginning to struggle in, the train stopped and she was wakened by her friend putting his head in at the window and saying: "Well, we have arrived in this heavenly spot." It was Salonika at last.

Francesca's first impression of Salonika was a rain-blurred sky, a misty grey sea, an icy wind that nearly cut one in half, noisy trams and streets, and, because it was Christmas Eve, everyone was rushing about buying presents at the little temporary booths that have been set up in Salonika since "The Great Fire" burnt out the centre of the beautiful eastern city.

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