

## THE ODYSSEY OF FRANCESCA.

## PART I.

Francesca left Rome one night for a certain Italian port on her way to the Near East. Her manner of arriving at the port was a strange one, for she was promptly put under arrest and forbidden to leave the station. Some little cabalistic sign which should have been on her passport was missing, and the Italian authorities let loose vials of wrath on Francesca's innocent head. She was not perturbed—she felt no responsibility for that document. Had she not sat for hours at 83, Pall Mall waiting for that magic book in the chaste dark blue binding, which had been viséed by the Consul of nearly every country in Europe? And had not the Powers that Be assured her that all was in order? So she sat peacefully all day in the R.T.O.'s office (which was an empty railway van) and read the new book of Georgian verse, and lo! by the evening all was well, and Francesca free to depart on her way.

Her destination for the next few days was a certain camp on the coast some miles away, and she went down to the quay and embarked on someone's picket boat to get there.

It was just getting dusk, and so warm and still one could not have believed it was December. As Francesca left the quay the sun was setting over the harbour and the sky was all afire with apricot colour and rose and gold. The sea was the deepest sapphire blue until it met the sky, and then it glowed with the reflection from it like the heart of a flame. Soon the sky faded into a warm velvety darkness powdered with stars. There were no lights anywhere, and the only sound to be heard was the throb, throb of the engine as the little picket boat made her way through the water. It almost seemed as though they were alone on the sea. They went on and on and Francesca began to experience that queer, uncanny sensation that one gets when one goes to an unknown destination at night. Presently they came to a tiny jetty and stopped. Francesca was landed, and began to climb a precipitous hill, stumbling along in the dark as best she could, not knowing where she was going. A sailor followed behind carrying her luggage. Ten minutes' walk brought her to the British Hospital Camp, where she was to stay, and the first sight of this prosaic institution dispelled at once all mystic dreams and visions. A long baraque with 28 beds all in a row and no other furniture save two iron camp washstands is enough to quench any romance. And, alas! there were 27 other unknown females sharing this chaste retreat. Army Sisters are sometimes haughty and look down their noses at members of other units who are not of the elect as they, but those particular ones were very nice to Francesca and she enjoyed her sojourn with the British Army.

On the third morning a signal message came to say that Francesca was to be on the — Wharf in half an hour's time, when a boat would convey her to a certain French transport which, in its

turn, would take her to a certain Greek port. Francesca made her adieux, and presently the little boat pulled out and took her off to a great grey troopship which was lying outside, surrounded by her escort. She was crowded with French troops, mostly permissionnaires returning to their units, and they were busy in trying on, with loud guffaws of laughter, the enormous life belts which had to be worn throughout the voyage. There were only eight officers on board—six French and two English. It is not permitted to describe how the ship was escorted, or where she went, but on the second morning Francesca found herself at anchor between the island of Corfu and the coast of Albania. No one was allowed to land, which was a great affliction. There was nothing to do on board but to eat, and this particular ship only rose to two meals a day—luncheon at 10.30 and dinner at 6.30—so however long they were spun out there were long gaps of time in between. Francesca would have been quite happy, but men are such restless beings that they probably infected her.

About 9.30 she was sitting on deck, watching the doings of the variegated crowd below, when a sailor brought a cow on to the lower deck. Francesca innocently thought they were going to milk it, and was not at all prepared for what followed. A blow, the flash of a knife, and the poor cow was no more. Some of the poilus standing round were also taken by surprise and were spattered with gore from head to foot.

Luncheon followed quickly on this sacrifice, but Francesca could not bring herself to look at the beefsteaks which had been walking about on deck an hour before. This ceremony was repeated every morning, but Francesca took care to be out of the way at that hour afterwards. The ship sailed away in a golden sunset mist, and the next morning found them again at anchor in a secluded little bay close to a rocky forbidding coast. A ship is like a village for rumours, and an interesting one spread quickly round that there was a submarine waiting outside, and that it might be a week before they could go on. So after lunch they settled down to a bridge party in the saloon, when suddenly they started, and presently were zig-zagging down the Gulf of Corinth. So much for rumours!

Francesca thought it incredibly beautiful. The coast-line, stretching away into space, could be seen on both sides. Far to the south the peaks of dream-like unsubstantial mountains caught the last rose rays of the setting sun. The sea was a deep ultramarine blue, just flecked with white, and there were fishing boats about, with russet sails and Greek sailors singing melancholy songs in the bows.

Just as it grew dark the ship approached the nameless port that was their destination, and Francesca was delighted to see a motor-boat at once skim out to meet them. It turned out to be for Lieut. X—, but he most nobly persuaded the captain to allow Francesca to go ashore with him, or she would have had to wait till the morning.

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