

IN TRAINING

By Sofronia Anne Strong



ILLUSTRATED BY ONNA LEE

TWO 'HER TV' STORIES

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UNCLE GWEN'S DIARY

By Sofronia Anne Strong

Introduction

I had known my Dear Aunt Gwendolyn my whole life. She is the dearest, sweetest lady you could hope to know. She was forever kind and good to me and always said I was her favorite nephew. What I didn't know until recently is that Aunt Gwendolyn was really my Uncle Glen.

That's fascinating because no one but me seems to know that Aunt Gwendolyn wasn't really a lady. In fact, I would defy anyone to figure that out because my Uncle was the most feminine, fashionable, stylish lady you could ever expect to meet. How this bizarre situation came about is something I discovered by accident when I stumbled upon Aunt Gwendolyn's diary.

Even she never knew that I had it. She had often complained that she was sorry to have lost her diary some years ago. I never told her that I found it in a secret cubby hole in her roll top desk. I suppose she forgot that was where she had put it. Once I got a look at it I didn't dare tell her that I had it, so I just let her continue to think it was lost.

Colonel Gwendolyn Sharps passed away and was buried in the military cemetery with full honors after a distinguished career that began as a lieutenant in the WAACS during World War II and ended as a consultant to the Army at the time women were integrated into it. The amazing truth about Aunt Gwen was that she blended so perfectly the efficiency, crispness and authoritative style of the military officer with the grace, charm and beauty of an accomplished lady. This amazing synthesis of styles was often commented upon in the family. Col. Gwen could command a regiment with perfect authority and then turn about and charm her way through a dinner dance or a tea with all the grace and feminine charm of a Southern Belle. The mystery of the art resolved for me only when I learned, from her youthful diary, about my Uncle Glen's unusual experiences as a boy at the Shadrack Academy.

My family will probably anathematize me for publishing this diary but my Aunt's career was so distinguished, she was so decorated and so highly esteemed that I do think her unusual life deserves an accounting, at least insofar as the forces that created her are concerned.

Her later life is well enough documented, but the Shadrack Academy years are long gone now, as is Gwendolyn and, I am sure, gone also are the methods they used to transform the unruly, ill-tempered, delinquent Glen Sharps into Col. Gwendolyn Sharps, U.S. Army; the stylish, charming, gracious, and loving Auntie whom I remember. I have copied the diary, which was written in pencil in a cheap notebook, faithfully, I think, insofar as I could make out the nearly illegible handwriting. I think Glen

was under a great deal of stress when he wrote much of it. I am sure, also, that for some reason he wanted to make a full record of what was happening in his life. It is clear that he was motivated to some degree by the desire to use that record to right wrongs which he felt were being done to him. It is also clear that he later chose to keep it all to himself for good reason.

I have never met any of the others who underwent the training that Glen did, although there were obviously many others over the period from 1869 to 1981, some of them presumably still alive. Other contemporary graduates of Shadrack Academy whom I have interviewed, or tried to interview, simply deny that the Academy ever operated an Auxiliary Corps.

With the School gone I suppose they find it convenient to disremember it, especially if they were ever assigned to it. Denial is a powerful tool and more widely practiced than we admit. I have been able to learn that the Auxiliary Corps at Shadrack was first organized shortly after the Civil War. It is clear that it was among the Academy's oldest traditions. Shadrack was mainly a military academy for the taming of the scions of wealthy families desperate to straighten out their arrogant and unruly boys. The worst of these usually wound up as Cadet Missys, at least for a while.

Here, then, is the story of my Uncle/Aunt's early life in military school.

Dr. James Sharps, Ph.D.

Dean, Wexlee College

Sharps Center, VA.

December, 1992.

September 10, 1938

Dear Diary:

I have been here for four days and this is the first chance I have had to start writing anything down, but I don't know how much chance I'll get to do this. They keep me tied up, really, almost all the time. If they catch me doing this I'm sure something awful will happen, but I want to make a record. I may need it. Anyway I can only write like this before the morning bell and I have to do it under the covers. Someday I'll get even when I can smuggle this record out of here.

I didn't want to come here at all. Mom was always nice about everything and said boys will be boys and I was just high-spirited. I like that, but when I smashed the chair over the high school principal's head and almost killed the S.O.B., Dad said he was washing his hands of me. It didn't help when I stole the car out of the school parking lot to make my getaway and racked it up against a tree. I guess I totaled it. If it weren't for Mom, I don't think Dad even would have bailed me out of jail and I'd still be there.

The county prosecutor had demanded a long prison sentence in Juvenile Hall when I went to the hearing in the Judge's chambers. He charged aggravated assault, attempted murder, destruction of school property, grand theft auto and damage to public property. I figured I was in for a long stay. It didn't seem to make any difference

when I told them the principal was wrong when he said I had to do detention for stealing books from the library when I hadn't.

I hate that, being accused of something I didn't do. I mean, sure, I lost my temper, but wouldn't anyone? Dad had always said my temper would get me in real trouble some time, and I guess he was right, but Mom said I'd grow out of my tantrums. I didn't outgrow them soon enough, I guess. It was all so dumb, and they all just wanted to give me a bad time. A guy has to defend himself, you know. I figured I was on my way to Juvenile Hall. That terrified me. I had heard horror stories about that place and the prosecutor demanded that I be sent there until I was eighteen. I knew a kid who spent some time there for stealing cars and he said they beat the kids all the time just for the fun of it.

The Judge was pretty good, though. She said she hated to see a boy of fourteen from a good family ruin his life so young. She said she would prefer that we find an alternative to Juvenile Hall, but insisted they put me somewhere safe.

After Dad agreed to pay the principal's medical bills, and for the chair, and the guy's car, and the tree in the park, the Judge said she respected his desire to make things right, but she wanted to know what he was going to do about me. At that point they took me back to Juvenile Detention and the next thing I knew I was back home, under house arrest, until September.

Dad's alternative was Shadrack Academy. That scared me too. I had heard of some guys who went there and I'd heard this place was rough. All the bad kids with money seemed to wind up in Shadrack, but the alternative was years in Juvenile Hall and that, the folks told me, was out of the question. They said they didn't want the stain on the family's reputation. I don't wonder. It looks like they just wanted me out of their hair and didn't want people to know I was in kiddy jail.

Sure, they told me I couldn't qualify for the regular Academy so I was being assigned to the Auxiliary Corps, but no one gave me a hint what that really meant. I didn't find out until I got here last Monday and saw the name on my admission papers.

There it was in print, "Auxiliary Cadet Missy Gwendolyn Sharps."

I found out fast what that meant when I was escorted from the Bursar's office right past the cadet barracks to the Commandant's house.

The two guys escorting me snapped to attention when Madame Headmistress came into her office. She's the Commandant's wife, but that's what I was told to call her. She sent them packing right away and I knew in a minute that there was going to be trouble because I felt the same rage I had in the principal's office when he said I stole the books. She stood behind her desk and called me Auxiliary Cadet Missy Gwendolyn.

That got me mad. Then she said that with my juvenile crime record it was apparent that I was no gentleman.

That made me madder. So, she tells me that Shadrack Academy is for the making of officers and gentlemen and only gentlemen can enroll, so I can't be admitted.

Now I'm confused and mad so she makes it worse.

She says there are only gentlemen and ladies at Shadrack and because I'm no gentleman I'm going to have to be a lady for a while to prove I can behave. That's what the Auxiliary Corps is all about, she says. When cadets aren't gentlemen they get sent to her so they can be ladies for a while. Me, she says, I get to go up to the Academy after I've shown her what a nice little lady I've become. Ladies, she says, never lose their tempers. It isn't ladylike.

That's when I got all the way mad and told her to shove it. My name was Glen and I was a boy and she could take her Auxiliary Corps and stick it. At least I didn't throw anything, like before at school.

Madame Headmistress just stood there, all cool, staring at me with a mean smile on her face and not saying a thing until this big, six foot woman, the Head Housekeeper, came in behind me and twisted my arm in a breakhold. I didn't see her coming. She turned me around and slammed me face first into the wall.

Then the Colonel's wife says, "You are Auxiliary Cadet Missy Gwendolyn Sharps and I am your Commanding Mistress. You will be in my charge until I recommend you to the Academy. While you are in my charge you will be docile, obedient and cooperative. You are to show me that you are a lovely girl and a charming little lady. You have your orders. Do you understand?"

The Head Housekeeper twisted my arm until I hollered and she whispered in my ear, "Say, 'Yes, Madame Headmistress,' or I break it."

I spoke the words, but I didn't mean them.

"I think you need to cool off a bit, Missy Gwendolyn. Astrid, you had better take our pretty Missy down to the Coal Hole until she can cool down and come to her senses."

That was four days ago. Four days in that dark hole down in the basement was pretty bad, but the Housekeeper said I was going to stay there until I was ready to apologize to the Madame Headmistress and start off on a better foot. They can call me Gwendolyn if they want, but I'm still going to be Glen. I don't know what they're going to do to me today, but I guess I'll have to tell the lady I'm sorry and then let them do whatever they like, or I'll be back in the Coal Hole again.

Astrid said if I go back it'll be worse the next time. Astrid said they'd keep me there until I behaved. I guess I could just stay there but I can't stand the dark all the time.

Sept. 11th

Dear Diary:

I'm not sure I shouldn't have stayed in the Coal Hole. It was so scary down there in the dark, alone. I couldn't see or hear anything except when the Housekeeper came with food and water and to take my bucket and empty it. I began to see things and thought I was going crazy. I couldn't really stand up in there and when I lay down I couldn't stretch out either, so I suppose I had to get out of there, but I'm not sure I haven't gone from bad to worse. This is pretty dreadful too.

Astrid (I'm not supposed to call her that. I'm supposed to call her "Madame Head Housekeeper," but you don't care what I call her, do you?), she said she'd let me out if

I understood what Madame Headmistress had told me and she said if I misbehaved she'd put me right back, so I said OK. So this morning she marches me into the Headmistress' office and holds one hand behind me and tells me if I don't behave she'll break my arm in an instant. What happened went pretty much like this:

“Who is this dirty, disheveled boy, Astrid?”

“This is Auxiliary Cadet Missy Gwendolyn Sharps, Madame.”

“Oh, yes, it's that horrid new creature I sent to the Coal Hole, isn't it? I had almost forgotten. What have you to tell me, you Wretched Twit?”

Astrid gave my arm a slight twist. She had coached me on what to say to stay out of their dungeon.

“I'm sorry, Madame Headmistress. I lost my head and just didn't think.” Astrid's slight twisting told me I had to go on. “I'll never be naughty again. I'll always be nice and I'll always do as you say. I apologize and I'll try to be good.”

The tall, thin, angular Headmistress smiled at me and finally decreed. She lifted one, long, dark arched eyebrow.

“We'll see. Remember, obedience, docility, cooperation and compliance, always. I have to know that you know that.”

“Yes, Madame Headmistress, obedience, docility, cooperation and compliance. Yes, Ma'am, I'll be sure to do that.” Astrid gave my arm another little twist and I remembered what else she told me to say. “I know it is an honor to be a member of the Auxiliary Corps and it is for my own good, Ma'am. I really want to be Auxiliary Cadet Missy Gwendolyn, it if pleases you, Madame Headmistress.”

She sat down and scowled at me.

“That's very nice, but I'm afraid your outburst on Monday makes that quite out of the question. You will have to begin at a lower level. I misjudged you when you came here. You are not fit to be even a little lady. You will have to earn that privilege now.”

A long silence filled the room. I didn't know what she meant. She began to shuffle papers and make notes. I fidgeted and Astrid kept a firm grip on my wrist. I turned my head and looked up at her but she just glared down at me.

Finally the Headmistress looked up from her desk and addressed the Head Housekeeper.

“I haven't time to spend managing the servants, Astrid. They are your responsibility. This Twit is in your charge. Put it to work and don't bother me with it again. You can use it as an in-between-maid, I am sure.”

“Certainly, Madame. Thank you, Madame.” Astrid dropped a curtsey and steered me out the door and marched me back to a tiny room behind the kitchen. It contained an iron cot, some pegs on the wall and a small dresser and chair. On one wall was a washstand with a mirror.

“You're all I need. A damn Tweeny to keep track of. Now you've done it. I didn't expect to have you on my hands. Now I'll tell you something, Missy. The sooner you become the perfect Tweeny, the sooner I'm rid of you, so listen up good and get it right

the first time. Don't say anything to anyone but me and then you say, 'Yes, Madame Head Housekeeper,' and 'No, Madame Head Housekeeper,' and when I tell you to do something, you say, 'Thank you, Madame Head Housekeeper,' and you do it. And curtsy when you are spoken to. You'd better be the perfect Tweeny quick or I'll fix you so you'll wish you were back in the Coal Hole. Got it? Now strip! Get starkers, fast!"

"Yes, Madame Head Housekeeper, thank you, Madame Head Housekeeper," I said, weakly and started tearing my clothes off. Man, was I scared.

Astrid Bogner is at least six feet tall and blonde, and wears her hair coiled in two braids on the sides of her head. Her uniform is a black silk dress with a V-shaped lace collar and cuffs and she wears black oxfords with blocky high heels that make her even taller. She wears this chain around her waist with all the keys on it. She'd be very good looking if she weren't so scary. I am sure she can break me in two without trying very hard.

And I don't even know what a Tweeny is.

Sept. 12

Dear Diary:

I know what a Tweeny is now. She is a girl of all work, everybody's dog. A Tweeny is so low that I don't even have a name anymore. They all call me, "You, Girl," or "Twit," or just "Tweeny." The cook, the parlor and upstairs maids, the whole staff orders me around and I have to do everything all of them say, and curtsy and smile and do it and if I've done everything I've been told and haven't had another order I'm supposed to stand in the corner of the kitchen, facing the wall and wait to be told what to do.

If the cook drops a knife she tells me to pick it up. If the parlor maid wants her apron tied I am made to do it. I even have to tie their shoes for them, and they all think it's so damn amusing to order the Tweeny around. I do all the scullery work, the dishwashing and kitchen cleaning and anything else any of them don't want to do. They just order the Tweeny to do it. I don't have a moment's peace or rest from 5:00 AM when the cook comes in, until after they all go to bed. When the cook comes in I have to be in the kitchen, dressed and already standing in my corner waiting.

If they don't kill me with work they are going to drive me crazy. Astrid said that I have a bad temper and I'm supposed to learn to get over it, which is why I have to learn to obey and serve. I feel like a marionette, and I have to do it all in this ghastly uniform Astrid put me in.

After I had all my clothes off this morning Astrid ordered me out of my cubicle to fetch her switch, which she said was on the kitchen counter. Naked in front of the whole staff I had to walk out into the kitchen and fetch it and bring it to her. Then with the door open she beckoned to the parlor maid. She went out and came back carrying several boxes: The boxes contained my uniform which she laid out on the bed. I covered myself with my hands, but she switched them and told me to stand up straight.

"Thank you, Sylvia," she said, and turned to me handing me a white cotton ruffled undervest. "Get dressed, Twit. Start with your camisole. If you think being a Tweeny is comfortable, forget it. With the tip of her switch she picked up a strange canvas garment from which some strings dangled. "Put it around your waist and lace it up, Girl."

I tell you, it took some figuring out, but I finally got it straight. It was a stiff, coarse corset with vertical stays and laces up the front. I got the laces into all the eyes and tied it at the top. I felt really silly and embarrassed in the thing and realized I couldn't bend at the waist and when I leaned over to have the back laces tightened the point on its front poked me in my privates, so I have to stay erect all the time.

Astrid called Sylvia and the upstairs maid in and told me to raise my arms over my head and ordered the two maids to tighten the laces. When they were done and I lowered my arms my body jerked into an impossible posture with a compressed waist, a protruding rear end and huge breasts.

"A suitable S-curve, indeed," Astrid commented. "You will probably make a very good Tweeny quickly enough in that, just to get out of it."

The maids giggled and Astrid shooed them out, curtsying as they went.

"Now then, I should tell you that Tweenies have been off the domestic scene since the last century. Therefore there are no modern liveries for such an anachronism as you. The latest uniform for a Tweeny we could find dates from about 1890. We do want you appropriately dressed. It is one of Madame's rules, so into your uniform, you ill-tempered little brat."

I was pretty soon in it. There were black cotton lisle hose to garter to the corset and a white cotton corset cover to wear over it. A crotchless pair of white ruffled cotton drawers tied about my narrow waist. I had to put on high button shoes of black leather and narrow high heels and pointed toes. Then she put me in a wide, white, cotton petticoat with lace trimming. My uniform dress is black cotton and comes all the way to my ankles and covers me to a high collar of white lace and it has lace cuffs too. The bodice is fitted over my big bosom and has little buttons all down the front. A big white cotton cap with lace edge all around the bottom covers me almost down to my eyebrows and has a black ribbon around the middle of it that ties in a bow at the back. All this is very hot and stuffy and bulky and uncomfortable and I can't really get a full breath and my ankles are always turning because of the shoes.

Tonight when I was sent to bed I was told to leave on my camisole, corset and hose, and put on this big white cotton night dress with lace at the top and bottom. It's really awful.

I don't know how I can live in this wretched costume, much less do any work in it, but I did — all day they just ran me ragged and I hardly even got out of the kitchen.

Once when I was upstairs the Madame Headmistress saw me but looked right through me like I wasn't even there.

Astrid had me hang her willow switch on a nail in my bedroom and said I had better not give her a reason to make me fetch it. God, I'm scared. She says if I'm good I can have a bath next week and I can take my corset off for a while. I was so mad all

day today at what's happened, but I knew better than to let anyone know that. I don't know how things could get worse than they are. I don't see how I can live this way. I even have to wear this long, starched white cotton pinafore apron with ruffled edges over my dress. Yuck!

I never sat down all day. Astrid says Tweenies are too busy to sit down and she had better not catch me trying it.

Sept. 15th

Dear Diary,

This is the first chance I have had to write to you. Madame Head Housekeeper has had me all tied up for the last couple of days. On Friday I dropped a stack of dishes in the pantry and broke two plates because I was so tired I got dizzy and tipsy on my high heels. They are too narrow and my feet ache all the time. Just after Astrid came in I forgot myself and complained that my feet hurt. Then I realized I mustn't talk. Astrid took one of my black lisle socks out of my drawer and told me to open my mouth. Then she stuffed the sock in it and it was hard to breathe.

"Fetch my switch, Noisy Twit," she commanded me and I had to take it off its nail and hand it to her. She put the tip of it under my chin. "Impertinent, aren't you?" I knew enough to nod. "If you talk I'll fix you so you can't. Now get to work." I grunted my reply into the sock and curtsied as she tapped the side of my cheek with her switch. "And hang this up," she ordered as she strode off.

All the staff were laughing. I was pretty upset when I dropped the dishes. They had hardly hit the floor when Astrid ordered me to fetch her switch, and I really thought I was going to get a beating, but she took me by the arm and marched me, staggering and tottering, down to the Coal Hole. Once inside she made me sit on the floor with my skirts and petticoats in a heap and tied my thumbs to the heels of my shoes with some laces. At least she took the sock out of my mouth.

