

CHAPTER III

THE DECISION OF DOCTOR GYS

Uncle John was up bright and early next morning, and directly after breakfast he called upon his old friend and physician, Dr. Barlow. After explaining the undertaking on which he had embarked, Mr. Merrick added:

"You see, we need a surgeon with us; a clever, keen chap who understands his business thoroughly, a sawbones with all the modern scientific discoveries saturating him to his finger-tips. Tell me where to get him."

Dr. Barlow, recovering somewhat from his astonishment, smiled deprecatingly.

"The sort of man you describe," said he, "would cost you a fortune, for you would oblige him to abandon a large and lucrative practice in order to accompany you. I doubt, indeed, if any price would tempt him to abandon his patients."

"Isn't there some young fellow with these requirements?"

"Mr. Merrick, you need a physician and surgeon combined. Wounds lead to fever and other serious ailments, which need skillful handling. You

might secure a young man, fresh from his clinics, who would prove a good surgeon, but to master the science of medicine, experience and long practice are absolutely necessary."

"We've got a half-way medicine man on the ship now--a fellow who has doctored the crew for years and kept 'em pretty healthy. So I guess a surgeon will about fill our bill."

"H-m, I know these ship's doctors, Mr. Merrick, and I wouldn't care to have you and your nieces trust your lives to one, in case you become ill. Believe me, a good physician is as necessary to you as a good surgeon. Do you know that disease will kill as many of those soldiers as bullets?"

"No."

"It is true; else the history of wars has taught us nothing. We haven't heard much of plagues and epidemics yet, in the carefully censored reports from London, but it won't be long before disease will devastate whole armies."

Uncle John frowned. The thing was growing complicated.

"Do you consider this a wild goose chase, Doctor?" he asked.

"Not with your fortune, your girls and your fine ship to back it. I

think Miss Stanton's idea of venturing abroad unattended, to nurse the wounded, was Quixotic in the extreme. Some American women are doing it, I know, but I don't approve of it. On the other hand, your present plan is worthy of admiration and applause, for it is eminently practical if properly handled."

Dr. Barlow drummed upon the table with his fingers, musingly. Then he looked up.

"I wonder," said he, "if Gys would go. If you could win him over, he would fill the bill."

"Who is Gys?" inquired Uncle John.

"An eccentric; a character. But clever and competent. He has just returned from Yucatan, where he accompanied an expedition of exploration sent out by the Geographical Society--and, by the way, nearly lost his life in the venture. Before that, he made a trip to the frozen North with a rescue party. Between times, he works in the hospitals, or acts as consulting surgeon with men of greater fame than he has won; but Gys is a rolling stone, erratic and whimsical, and with all his talent can never settle down to a steady practice."

"Seems like the very man I want," said Uncle John, much interested.

"Where can I find him?"

"I've no idea. But I'll call up Collins and inquire."

He took up the telephone receiver and got his number.

"Collins? Say, I'm anxious to find Gys. Have you any idea--Eh? Sitting with you now? How lucky. Ask him if he will come to my office at once; it's important."

Uncle John's face was beaming with satisfaction. The doctor waited, the receiver at his ear.

"What's that, Collins?... He won't come?... Why not?... Absurd!... I've a fine proposition for him.... Eh? He isn't interested in propositions? What in thunder is he interested in?... Pshaw! Hold the phone a minute."

Turning to Mr. Merrick, he said:

"Gys wants to go on a fishing trip. He plans to start to-night for the Maine woods. But I've an idea if you could get him face to face you might convince him."

"See if he'll stay where he is till I can get there."

The doctor turned to the telephone and asked the question. There was a long pause. Gys wanted to know who it was that proposed to visit him.

John Merrick, the retired millionaire? All right; Gys would wait in Collins' office for twenty minutes.

Uncle John lost no time in rushing to his motor car, where he ordered the driver to hasten to the address Dr. Barlow had given him.

The offices of Dr. Collins were impressive. Mr. Merrick entered a luxurious reception room and gave his name to a businesslike young woman who advanced to meet him. He had called to see Dr. Gys.

The young woman smothered a smile that crept to her lips, and led Uncle John through an examination room and an operating room--both vacant just now--and so into a laboratory that was calculated to give a well person the shivers. Here was but one individual, a man in his shirt-sleeves who was smoking a corncob pipe and bending over a test tube.

Uncle John coughed to announce his presence, for the woman had slipped away as she closed the door. The man's back was turned partially toward his visitor. He did not alter his position as he said:

"Sit down. There's a chair in the southwest corner."

Uncle John found the chair. He waited patiently a few moments and then his choler began to rise.

"If you're in such a blamed hurry to go fishing, why don't you get rid of me now?" he asked.

The shoulders shook gently and there was a chuckling laugh. The man laid down his test tube and swung around on his stool.

For a moment Mr. Merrick recoiled. The face was seared with livid scars, the nose crushed to one side, the mouth crooked and set in a sneering grin. One eye was nearly closed and the other round and wide open. A more forbidding and ghastly countenance Mr. Merrick had never beheld and in his surprise he muttered a low exclamation.

"Exactly," said Gys, his voice quiet and pleasant. "I don't blame you and I'm not offended. Do you wonder I hesitate to meet strangers?"

"I--I was not--prepared," stammered Uncle John.

"That was Barlow's fault. He knows me and should have told you. And now I'll tell you why I consented to see you. No! never mind your own proposition, whatever it is. Listen to mine first. I want to go fishing, and I haven't the money. None of my brother physicians will lend me another sou, for I owe them all. You are John Merrick, to whom money is of little consequence. May I venture to ask you for an advance of a couple of hundred for a few weeks? When I return I'll take up your proposition, whatever it may be, and recompense you in services."

He refilled and relighted the corncob while Mr. Merrick stared at him in thoughtful silence. As a matter of fact, Uncle John was pleased with the fellow. A whimsical, irrational, unconventional appeal of this sort went straight to his heart, for the queer little man hated the commonplace most cordially.

"I'll give you the money on one condition," he said.

"I object to the condition," said Gys firmly. "Conditions are dangerous."

"My proposition," went on Uncle John, "won't wait for weeks. When you hear it, if you are not anxious to take it up, I don't want you. Indeed, I'm not sure I want you, anyhow."

"Ah; you're frightened by my features. Most people with propositions are. I'm an unlucky dog, sir. They say it's good luck to touch a hunchback; to touch me is the reverse. Way up North in a frozen sea a poor fellow went overboard. I didn't get him and he drowned; but I got caught between two cakes of floating ice that jammed my nose out of its former perfect contour. In Yucatan I tumbled into a hedge of poisoned cactus and had to operate on myself--quickly, too--to save my life. Wild with pain, I slashed my face to get the poisoned tips of thorn out of the flesh. Parts of my body are like my face, but fortunately I can cover them. It was bad surgery. On another I could have operated without leaving a scar, but I was frantic with pain. Don't stare at that big

eye, sir; it's glass. I lost that optic in Pernambuco and couldn't find a glass substitute to fit my face. Indeed, this was the only one in town, made for a fat Spanish lady who turned it down because it was not exactly the right color."

"You certainly have been--eh--unfortunate," murmured Uncle John.

"See here," said Gys, taking a leather book from an inside pocket of the coat that hung on a peg beside him, and proceeding to open it. "Here is a photograph of me, taken before I embarked upon my adventures."

Uncle John put on his glasses and examined the photograph curiously. It was a fine face, clean-cut, manly and expressive. The eyes were especially frank and winning.

"How old were you then?" he asked.

"Twenty-four."

"And now?"

"Thirty-eight. A good deal happened in that fourteen years, as you may guess. And now," reaching for the photograph and putting it carefully back in the book, "state your proposition and I'll listen to it, because you have listened so patiently to me."

Mr. Merrick in simple words explained the plan to take a hospital ship to Europe, relating the incidents that led up to the enterprise and urging the need of prompt action. His voice dwelt tenderly on his girls and the loyal support of young Jones.

Dr. Gys smoked and listened silently. Then he picked up the telephone and called a number.

"Tell Hawkins I've abandoned that fishing trip," he said. "I've got another job." Then he faced Mr. Merrick. His smile was not pretty, but it was a smile.

"That's my answer, sir."

"But we haven't talked salary yet."

"Bother the salary. I'm not mercenary."

"And I'm not sure--"

"Yes, you are. I'm going with you. Do you know why?"

"It's a novel project, very appealing from a humanitarian standpoint and--"

"I hadn't thought of that. I'm going because you're headed for the

biggest war the world has ever known; because I foresee danger ahead, for all of us; but mainly because--"

"Well?"

"Because I'm a coward--a natural born coward--and I can have a lot of fun forcing myself to face the shell and shrapnel. That's the truth; I'm not a liar. And for a long time I've been wondering--wondering--" His voice died away in a murmur.

"Well, sir?"

Dr. Gys roused himself.

"Oh; do you want a full confession? For a long time, then, I've been wondering what's the easiest way for a man to die. No, I'm not morbid. I'm simply ruined, physically, for the practice of a profession I love, a profession I have fully mastered, and--I'll be happier when I can shake off this horrible envelope of disfigurement."