

## CHAPTER V

### NEARING THE FRAY

On September twenty-eighth they entered the English Channel and were promptly signalled by a British warship, so they were obliged to lay to while a party of officers came aboard. The Arabella was flying the American flag and the Red Cross flag, but the English officer courteously but firmly persisted in searching the ship. What he found seemed to interest him, as did the papers and credentials presented for his perusal.

"And which side have you come to assist?" he asked.

"No side at all, sir," replied Jones, as master of the Arabella. "The wounded, the sick and helpless, whatever uniform they chance to wear, will receive our best attention. But we are bound for Calais and intend to follow the French army."

The officer nodded gravely.

"Of course," said he, "you are aware that the channel is full of mines and that progress is dangerous unless you have our maps to guide you. I will furnish your pilot with a diagram, provided you agree to keep our secret and deliver the diagram to the English officer you will meet at

Calais."

They agreed to this and after the formalities were concluded the officer prepared to depart.

"I must congratulate you," he remarked on leaving, "on having the best equipped hospital ship it has been my fortune to see. There are many in the service, as you know, but the boats are often mere tubs and the fittings of the simplest description. The wounded who come under your care will indeed be fortunate. It is wonderful to realize that you have come all the way from America, and at so great an expense, to help the victims of this sad war. For the Allies I thank you, and--good-bye!"

They remembered this kindly officer long afterward, for he proved more generous than many of the English they met.

Captain Carg now steamed ahead, watching his chart carefully to avoid the fields of mines, but within two hours he was again hailed, this time by an armored cruiser. The first officer having vided the ship's papers, they were spared the delay of another search and after a brief examination were allowed to proceed. They found the channel well patrolled by war craft and no sooner had they lost sight of one, than another quickly appeared.

At Cherbourg a French dreadnaught halted them and an officer came aboard to give them a new chart of the mine fields between there and Calais and

full instructions how to proceed safely. This officer, who spoke excellent English, asked a thousand questions and seemed grateful for their charitable assistance to his countrymen.

"You have chosen a dangerous post," said he, "but the Red Cross is respected everywhere--even by the Germans. Have you heard the latest news? We have driven them back to the Aisne and are holding the enemy well in check. Antwerp is under siege, to be sure, but it can hold out indefinitely. The fighting will be all in Belgium soon, and then in Germany. Our watchword is 'On to Berlin!'"

"Perhaps we ought to proceed directly to Ostend," said Uncle John.

"The Germans still hold it, monsieur. In a few days, perhaps, when Belgium is free of the invaders, you will find work enough to occupy you at Ostend; but I advise you not to attempt to go there now."

In spite of the friendly attitude of this officer and of the authorities at Cherbourg, they were detained at this port for several days before finally receiving permission to proceed. The delay was galling but had to be endured until the infinite maze of red tape was at an end. They reached Calais in the early evening and just managed to secure an anchorage among the fleet of warships in the harbor.

Again they were obliged to show their papers and passports, now vided by representatives of both the English and French navies, but this

formality being over they were given a cordial welcome.

Uncle John and Ajo decided to go ashore for the latest news and arrived in the city between nine and ten o'clock that same evening. They found Calais in a state of intense excitement. The streets were filled with British and French soldiery, with whom were mingled groups of citizens, all eagerly discussing the war and casting uneasy glances at the black sky overhead for signs of the dreaded German Zeppelins.

"How about Antwerp?" Jones asked an Englishman they found in the lobby of one of the overcrowded hotels.

The man turned to stare at him; he looked his questioner up and down with such insolence that the boy's fists involuntarily doubled; then he turned his back and walked away. A bystander laughed with amusement. He also was an Englishman, but wore the uniform of a subaltern.

"What can you expect, without a formal introduction?" he asked young Jones. "But I'll answer your question, sir; Antwerp is doomed."

"Oh; do you really think so?" inquired Uncle John uneasily.

"It's a certainty, although I hate to admit it. We at the rear are not very well posted on what is taking place over in Belgium, but it's said the bombardment of Antwerp began yesterday and it's impossible for the place to hold out for long. Perhaps even now the city has fallen under

the terrific bombardment."

There was something thrilling in the suggestion.

"And then?" asked Jones, almost breathlessly.

The man gave a typical British shrug.

"Then we fellows will find work to do," he replied. "But it is better to fight than to eat our hearts out by watching and waiting. We're the reserves, you know, and we've hardly smelled powder yet."

After conversing with several of the soldiers and civilians--the latter being mostly too unnerved to talk coherently--the Americans made their way back to the quay with heavy hearts. They threaded lanes filled with sobbing women, many of whom had frightened children clinging to their skirts, passed groups of old men and boys who were visibly trembling with trepidation and stood aside for ranks of brisk soldiery who marched with an alertness that was in strong contrast with the terrified attitude of the citizens. There was war in the air--fierce, relentless war in every word and action they encountered--and it had the effect of depressing the newcomers.

That night an earnest conference was held aboard the *Arabella*.

"As I understand it, here is the gist of the situation," began Ajo. "The

line of battle along the Aisne is stationary--for the present, at least. Both sides are firmly entrenched and it's going to be a long, hard fight. Antwerp is being bombarded, and although it's a powerful fortress, the general opinion is that it can't hold out for long. If it falls, there will be a rush of Germans down this coast, first to capture Dunkirk, a few miles above here, and then Calais itself."

"In other words," continued Uncle John, "this is likely to be the most important battleground for the next few weeks. Now, the question to decide is this: Shall we disembark our ambulances and run them across to Arras, beginning our work behind the French trenches, or go on to Dunkirk, where we are likely to plunge into the thickest of the war? We're not fighters, you know, but noncombatants, bent on an errand of mercy. There are wounded everywhere."

They considered this for a long time without reaching a decision, for there were some in the party to argue on either side of the question. Uncle John continued to favor the trenches, as the safest position for his girls to work; but the girls themselves, realizing little of the dangers to be encountered, preferred to follow the fortunes of the Belgians.

"They've been so brave and noble, these people of Belgium," said Beth, "that I would take more pleasure in helping them than any other branch of the allied armies."

"But, my dear, there's a mere handful of them left," protested her uncle. "I'm told that at Dunkirk there is still a remnant of the Belgian army--very badly equipped--but most of the remaining force is with King Albert in Antwerp. If the place falls they will either be made prisoners by the Germans or they may escape into Holland, where their fighting days will be ended for the rest of the war. However, there is no need to decide this important question to-night. To-morrow I am to see the French commandant and I will get his advice."

The interview with the French commandant of Calais, which was readily accorded the Americans, proved very unsatisfactory. The general had just received reports that Antwerp was in flames and the greater part of the city already demolished by the huge forty-two-centimetre guns of the Germans. The fate of King Albert's army was worrying him exceedingly and he was therefore in little mood for conversation.

The American consul could do little to assist them. After the matter was explained to him, he said:

"I advise you to wait a few days for your decision. Perhaps a day--an hour--will change the whole angle of the war. Strange portents are in the air; no one knows what will happen next. Come to me, from time to time, and I will give you all the information I secure."

Dr. Gys had accompanied Jones and Mr. Merrick into Calais to-day, and while he had little to say during the various interviews his

observations were shrewd and comprehensive. When they returned to the deck of the *Arabella*, Gys said to the girls:

"There is nothing worth while for us to do here. The only wounded I saw were a few Frenchmen parading their bandaged heads and hands for the admiration of the women. The hospitals are well organized and quite full, it is true, but I'm told that no more wounded are being sent here. The Sisters of Mercy and the regular French Red Cross force seem very competent to handle the situation, and there are two government hospital ships already anchored in this port. We would only be butting in to offer our services. But down the line, from Arras south, there is real war in the trenches and many are falling every day. Arras is less than fifty miles from here--a two or three hours' run for our ambulances--and we could bring the wounded here and care for them as we originally intended."

"Fifty miles is a long distance for a wounded man to travel," objected Maud.

"True," said the doctor, "but the roads are excellent."

"Remember those swinging cots," said Ajo.

"We might try it," said Patsy, anxious to be doing something. "Couldn't we start to-morrow for Arras, Uncle?"



"It occurs to me that we must first find a chauffeur," answered Mr. Merrick, "and from my impressions of the inhabitants of Calais, that will prove a difficult task."

"Why?"

"Every man jack of 'em is scared stiff," said Ajo, with a laugh. "But we might ask the commandant to recommend someone. The old boy seems friendly enough."

The next day, however, brought important news from Antwerp. The city had surrendered, the Belgian army had made good its escape and was now retreating toward Ostend, closely followed by the enemy.

This news was related by a young orderly who met them as they entered the Hotel de Ville. They were also told that the commandant was very busy but would try to see them presently. This young Frenchman spoke English perfectly and was much excited by the morning's dispatches.

"This means that the war is headed our way at last!" he cried enthusiastically. "The Germans will make a dash to capture both Dunkirk and Calais, and already large bodies of reinforcements are on the way to defend these cities."

"English, or French?" asked Uncle John.

"This is French territory," was the embarrassed reply, "but we are glad to have our allies, the English, to support us. Their General French is now at Dunkirk, and it is probable the English will join the French and Belgians at that point."

"They didn't do much good at Antwerp, it seems," remarked Ajo.

"Ah, they were naval reserves, monsieur, and not much could be expected of them. But do not misunderstand me; I admire the English private--the fighting man--exceedingly. Were the officers as clever as their soldiers are brave, the English would be irresistible."

As this seemed a difficult subject to discuss, Uncle John asked the orderly if he knew of a good chauffeur to drive their ambulance--an able, careful man who might be depended upon in emergencies.

The orderly reflected.

"We have already impressed the best drivers," he said, "but it may be the general will consent to spare you one of them. Your work is so important that we must take good care of you."

But when they were admitted to the general they found him in a more impatient mood than before. He really could not undertake to direct Red Cross workers or advise them. They were needed everywhere; everywhere they would be welcome. And now, he regretted to state that he was very

busy; if they had other business with the department, Captain Meroux would act as its representative.

Before accepting this dismissal Uncle John ventured to ask about a chauffeur. Rather brusquely the general stated that they could ill afford to spare one from the service. A desperate situation now faced the Allies in Flanders. Captain Meroux must take care of the Americans; doubtless he could find a driver for their ambulance--perhaps a Belgian.

But in the outer office the orderly smiled doubtfully.

A driver? To be sure; but such as he could furnish would not be of the slightest use to them. All the good chauffeurs had been impressed and the general was not disposed to let them have one.

"He mentioned a Belgian," suggested Uncle John.

"I know; but the Belgians in Calais are all fugitives, terror-stricken and unmanned." He grew thoughtful a moment and then continued: "My advice would be to take your ship to Dunkirk. It is only a little way, through a good channel, and you will be as safe there as at Calais. For, if Dunkirk falls, Calais will fall with it. From there, moreover, the roads are better to Arras and Peronne, and it is there you stand the best chance of getting a clever Belgian chauffeur. If you wish--" he hesitated, looking at them keenly.

"Well, sir?"

"If you are really anxious to get to the firing line and do the most good, Dunkirk is your logical station. If you are merely seeking the notoriety of being charitably inclined, remain here."

They left the young man, reflecting upon his advice and gravely considering its value. They next visited one of the hospitals, where an overworked but friendly English surgeon volunteered a similar suggestion. Dunkirk, he declared, would give them better opportunities than Calais.

The remainder of the day they spent in getting whatever news had filtered into the city and vainly seeking a competent man for chauffeur. On the morning of October eleventh they left Calais and proceeded slowly along the buoyed channel that is the only means of approaching the port of Dunkirk by water. The coast line is too shallow to allow ships to enter from the open sea.

On their arrival at the Flemish city--twelve miles nearer the front than Calais--they found an entirely different atmosphere. No excitement, no terror was visible anywhere. The people quietly pursued their accustomed avocations and the city was as orderly as in normal times.

The town was full of Belgians, however, both soldiers and civilians, while French and British troops were arriving hourly in regiments and

battalions. General French, the English commander in chief, had located his headquarters at a prominent hotel, and a brisk and businesslike air pervaded the place, with an entire lack of confusion. Most of the Belgians were reservists who were waiting to secure uniforms and arms. They crowded all the hotels, cafés and inns and seemed as merry and light-hearted as if no news of their king's defeat and precipitate retreat had arrived. Not until questioned would they discuss the war at all, yet every man was on the qui vive, expecting hourly to hear the roar of guns announcing the arrival of the fragment of the Belgian army that had escaped from Antwerp.

To-day the girls came ashore with the men of their party, all three wearing their Red Cross uniforms and caps, and it was almost pathetic to note the deference with which all those warriors--both bronzed and fair--removed their caps until the "angels of mercy" had passed them by.

They made the rounds of the hospitals, which were already crowded with wounded, and Gys stopped at one long enough to assist the French doctor in a delicate operation. Patsy stood by to watch this surgery, her face white and drawn, for this was her first experience of the sort; but Maud and Beth volunteered their services and were so calm and deft that Doctor Gys was well pleased with them.