

## CHAPTER VI

### LITTLE MAURIE

It was nearly evening when the Americans finally returned to the quay, close to which the Arabella was moored. As they neared the place a great military automobile came tearing along, scattering pedestrians right and left, made a sudden swerve, caught a man who was not agile enough to escape and sent him spinning along the dock until he fell headlong, a crumpled heap.

"Ah, here is work for us!" exclaimed Doctor Gys, running forward to raise the man and examine his condition. The military car had not paused in its career and was well out of sight, but a throng of indignant civilians gathered around.

"There are no severe injuries, but he seems unconscious," reported Gys.

"Let us get him aboard the ship."

The launch was waiting for them, and with the assistance of Jones, the doctor placed the injured man in the boat and he was taken to the ship and placed in one of the hospital berths.

"Our first patient is not a soldier, after all," remarked Patsy, a little disappointed. "I shall let Beth and Maud look after him."

"Well, he is wounded, all right," answered Ajo, "and without your kind permission Beth and Maud are already below, looking after him. I'm afraid he won't require their services long, poor fellow."

"Why didn't he get out of the way?" inquired Patsy with a shudder.

"Can't say. Preoccupied, perhaps. There wasn't much time to jump, anyhow. I suppose that car carried a messenger with important news, for it isn't like those officers to be reckless of the lives of citizens."

"No; they seem in perfect sympathy with the people," she returned. "I wonder what the news can be, Ajo."

For answer a wild whistling sounded overhead; a cry came from those ashore and the next instant there was a loud explosion. Everyone rushed to the side, where Captain Carg was standing, staring at the sky.

"What was it, Captain?" gasped Patsy.

Carg stroked his grizzled beard.

"A German bomb, Miss Patsy; but I think it did no damage."

"A bomb! Then the Germans are on us?"

"Not exactly. An aeroplane dropped the thing."

"Oh. Where is it?"

"The aeroplane? Pretty high up, I reckon," answered the captain. "I had a glimpse of it, for a moment; then it disappeared in the clouds."

"We must get our ambulances ashore," said Jones.

"No hurry, sir; plenty of time," asserted the captain. "I think I saw the airship floating north, so it isn't likely to bother us again just now."

"What place is north of us?" inquired the girl, trembling a little in spite of her efforts at control.

"I think it is Nieuport--or perhaps Dixmude," answered Carg. "I visited Belgium once, when I was a young man, but I cannot remember it very well. We're pretty close to the Belgian border, at Dunkirk."

"There's another!" cried Ajo, as a second whistling shriek sounded above them. This time the bomb fell into the sea and raised a small water-spout, some half mile distant. They could now see plainly a second huge aircraft circling above them; but this also took flight toward the north and presently disappeared.

Uncle John came hurrying on deck with an anxious face and together the group of Americans listened for more bombs; but that was all that came their way that night.

"Well," said Patsy, when she had recovered her equanimity, "we're at the front at last, Uncle. How do you like it?"

"I hadn't thought of bombs," he replied. "But we're in for it, and I suppose we'll have to take whatever comes."

Now came the doctor, supporting the injured man on one side while Maud Stanton held his opposite arm. Gys was smiling broadly--a rather ghastly expression.

"No bones broken, sir," he reported to Mr. Merrick. "Only a good shake-up and plenty of bruises. He can't be induced to stay in bed."

"Bed, when the Germans come?" exclaimed the invalid, scornfully, speaking in fair English. "It is absurd! We can sleep when we have driven them back to their dirty Faderland--we can sleep, then, and rest. Now, it is a crime to rest."

They looked at him curiously. He was a small man--almost a tiny man--lean and sinewy and with cheeks the color of bronze and eyes the hue of the sky. His head was quite bald at the top; his face wrinkled; he had a bushy mustache and a half-grown beard. His clothing was soiled,

torn and neglected; but perhaps his accident accounted for much of its condition. His age might be anywhere from thirty to forty years. He looked alert and shrewd.

"You are Belgian?" said Uncle John.

He leaned against the rail, shaking off the doctor's support, as he replied:

"Yes, monsieur. Belgian born and American trained." There was a touch of pride in his voice. "It was in America that I made my fortune."

"Indeed."

"It is true. I was waiter in a New York restaurant for five years. Then I retired. I came back to Belgium. I married my wife. I bought land. It is near Ghent. I am, as you have guessed, a person of great importance."

"Ah; an officer, perhaps. Civil, or military?" inquired Ajo with mock deference.

"Of better rank than either. I am a citizen."

"Now, I like that spirit," said Uncle John approvingly. "What is your name, my good man?"

"Maurie, monsieur; Jakob Maurie. Perhaps you have met me--in New York."

"I do not remember it. But if you live in Ghent, why are you in Dunkirk?"

He cast an indignant glance at his questioner, but Uncle John's serene expression disarmed him.

"Monsieur is not here long?"

"We have just arrived."

"You cannot see Belgium from here. If you are there--in my country--you will find that the German is everywhere. I have my home at Brussels crushed by a shell which killed my baby girl. My land is devastate--my crop is taken to feed German horse and German thief. There is no home left. So my wife and my boy and girl I take away; I take them to Ostend, where I hope to get ship to England. At Ostend I am arrested by Germans. Not my wife and children; only myself. I am put in prison. For three weeks they keep me, and then I am put out. They push me into the street. No one apologize. I ask for my family. They laugh and turn away. I search everywhere for my wife. A friend whom I meet thinks she has gone to Ypres, for now no Belgian can take ship from Ostend to England. So I go to Ypres. The wandering people have all been sent to Nieuport and Dunkirk. Still I search. My wife is not in Nieuport. I come here, three days ago; I cannot find her in Dunkirk; she has vanished. Perhaps--but I

will not trouble you with that. This is my story, ladies and gentlemen. Behold in me--a wealthy landowner of Liege--the outcast from home and country!"

"It is dreadful!" cried Patsy.

"It is fierce," said the man. "Only an American can understand the horror of that word."

"Your fate is surely a cruel one, Maurie," declared Mr. Merrick.

"Perhaps," ventured Beth, "we may help you to find your wife and children."

The Belgian seemed pleased with these expressions of sympathy. He straightened up, threw out his chest and bowed very low.

"That is my story," he repeated; "but you must know it is also the story of thousands of Belgians. Always I meet men searching for wives. Always I meet wives searching for husbands. Well! it is our fate--the fate of conquered Belgium."

Maud brought him a deck chair and made him sit down.

"You will stay here to-night," she said.

"That's right," said Dr. Gys. "He can't resume his search until morning, that's certain. Such a tumble as he had would have killed an ordinary man; but the fellow seems made of iron."

"To be a waiter--a good waiter--develops the muscles," said Maurie.

Ajo gave him a cigarette, which he accepted eagerly. After a few puffs he said:

"I heard the German bombs. That means the enemy grows insolent. First they try to frighten us with bombs, then they attack."

"How far away do you think the Germans are?" asked Beth.

"Nieuport les Bains. But they will get no nearer."

"No?"

"Surely not, mamselle. Our soldiers are there, awaiting them. Our soldiers, and the French."

"And you think the enemy cannot capture Dunkirk?" inquired Jones.

"Dunkirk! The Germans capture Dunkirk? It is impossible."

"Why impossible?"



"Dunkirk is fortified; it is the entrance to Calais, to Dover and London. Look you, m'sieur; we cannot afford to lose this place. We cannot afford to lose even Nieuport, which is our last stand on Belgian soil. Therefore, the Germans cannot take it, for there are still too many of us to kill before Kitchener comes to save us." He spoke thoughtfully, between puffs of his cigarette, and added: "But of course, if the great English army does not come, and they kill us all, then it will not matter in the least what becomes of our country."

Maurie's assertion did not wholly reassure them. The little Belgian was too bombastic to win their confidence in his judgment. Yet Jones declared that Maurie doubtless knew the country better than anyone they had yet met and the doctor likewise defended his patient. Indeed, Gys seemed to have taken quite a fancy to the little man and long after the others had retired for the night he sat on deck talking with the Belgian and getting his views of the war.

"You say you had land at Ghent?" he once asked.

"It is true, Doctor."

"But afterward you said Brussels."

Maurie was not at all confused.

"Ah; I may have done so. You see, I traded my property."

"And, if I am not mistaken, you spoke of a home at Liege."

Maurie looked at him reproachfully.

"Is there not much land in Belgium?" he demanded; "and is a rich man confined to one home? Liege was my summer home; in the winter I removed to Antwerp."

"You said Ghent."

"Ghent it was, Doctor. Misfortune has dulled my brain. I am not the man I was," he added with a sigh.

"Nevertheless," said Gys, "you still possess the qualities of a good waiter. Whatever happens here, Maurie, you can always go back to America."