

CHAPTER VIII

THE COWARD

"Great heavens!" gasped Mr. Merrick, running toward the doctor. "Are you hit?"

Gys looked up at him appealingly and nodded.

"Where did it strike you? Was it a bullet--or what?"

The doctor wrung his hands, moaning pitifully. Uncle John bent over him.

"Tell me," he said. "Tell me, Gys!"

"I--I'm scared, sir--s-s-scared stiff. It's that yellow s-s-s-streak in me; I--I--can't help it, sir." Then he collapsed, crouching lifelessly close to the sand.

Uncle John was amazed. He drew back with such an expression of scorn that Gys, lying with face upward, rolled over to hide his own features in the sand. But his form continued to twist and shake convulsively.

Patsy came up with her soldier, whose gaudy uniform proclaimed him an officer. He had a rugged, worn face, gray hair and mustache, stern eyes.

His left side was torn and bleeding where a piece of shell had raked him from shoulder to knee. No moan did he utter as Mr. Merrick and the girl assisted him to one of the swinging beds, and then Patsy, with white, set face but steady hands, began at once to cut away the clothing and get at the wound. This was her first practical experience and she meant to prove her mettle or perish in the attempt.

Uncle John skipped over to the sand bank and clutched Gys savagely by the collar.

"Get up!" he commanded. "Here's a man desperately wounded, who needs your best skill--and at once."

Gys pulled himself free and sat up, seeming dazed for the moment. Then he rubbed his head briskly with both hands, collected his nerve and slowly rose to his feet. He cast fearful glances at the firing line, but the demand for his surgical skill was a talisman that for a time enabled him to conquer his terror. With frightened backward glances he ran to the ambulance and made a dive into it as if a pack of wolves was at his heels.

Safely inside, one glance at the wounded man caused Gys to stiffen suddenly. He became steady and alert and noting that Patsy had now bared a portion of the gaping wound the doctor seized a thermos flask of hot water and in a moment was removing the clotted blood in a deft and intelligent manner.

Now came Jones and Maurie bearing the man they had picked up. As they set the stretcher down, Uncle John came over.

"Shall we put him inside?" asked Mr. Merrick.

"No use, I think," panted the Belgian.

"Where's the doctor?" asked Ajo.

Kelsey, who had been busy elsewhere, now approached and looked at the soldier on the stretcher.

"The man is dead," he said. "He doesn't need us now."

"Off with him, then!" cried Maurie, and they laid the poor fellow upon the sand and covered him with a cloth. "Come, then," urged the little chauffeur, excitedly, "lots more out there are still alive. We get one quick."

They left in a run in one direction while Kelsey, who had come to the ambulance for supplies, went another way. Mr. Merrick looked around for the other two girls. Only Maud Stanton was visible through the smoky haze. Uncle John approached her just as a shell dropped into the sand not fifty feet away. It did not explode but plowed a deep furrow and sent a shower of sand in every direction.

Maud had just finished dressing a bullet wound in the arm of a young soldier who smiled as he watched her. Then, as she finished the work, he bowed low, muttered his thanks, and catching up his gun rushed back into the fray. It was a flesh wound and until it grew more painful he could still fight.

"Where are the Germans?" asked Uncle John. "I haven't seen one yet."

As he spoke a great cheer rose from a thousand throats. The line before them wavered an instant and then rushed forward and disappeared in the smoke of battle.

"Is it a charge, do you think?" asked Maud, as they stood peering into the haze.

"I--I don't know," he stammered. "This is so--so bewildering--that it all seems like a dream. Where's Beth?"

"I don't know."

"Are you looking for a young lady--a nurse?" asked a voice beside them.

"She's over yonder," he swung one arm toward the distant sand dunes. The other was in a sling. "She has just given me first aid and sent me to the rear--God bless her!" Then he trailed on, a British Tommy Atkins, while with one accord Maud and Uncle John moved in the direction he had

indicated.

"She mustn't be so reckless," said Beth's uncle, nervously. "It's bad enough back here, but every step nearer the firing line doubles the danger."

"I do not agree with you, sir," answered Maud quietly. "A man was killed not two paces from me, a little while ago."

He shuddered and wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief, but made no reply. They climbed another line of dunes and in the hollow beyond came upon several fallen soldiers, one of whom was moaning with pain. Maud ran to kneel beside him and in a twinkling had her hypodermic needle in his arm.

"Bear it bravely," she said in French. "The pain will stop in a few minutes and then I'll come and look after you."

He nodded gratefully, still moaning, and she hurried to rejoin Mr. Merrick.

"Beth must be in the next hollow," said Uncle John as she overtook him, and his voice betrayed his nervous tension. "I do wish you girls would not be so reckless."

Yes; they found her in the next hollow, where several men were grouped

about her. She was dressing the shattered hand of a soldier, while two or three others were patiently awaiting her services. Just beside her a sweet-faced Sister of Mercy was bending over a dying man, comforting him with her prayers. Over the ridge of sand could be heard the "ping" of small arms mingled with the hoarse roar of machine guns. Another great shout--long and enthusiastic--was borne to their ears.

"That is good," said a tall man standing in the group about Beth; "I think, from the sound, we have captured their guns."

"I'm sure of it, your Majesty," replied the one whom Beth was attending.

"There; that will do for the present. I thank you. And now, let us get forward."

As they ran toward the firing Uncle John exclaimed:

"His Majesty! I wonder who they are?"

"That," said a private soldier, an accent of pride in his voice, "is our Albert."

"The king?"

"Yes, monsieur; he is the tall one. The other is General Mays. I'm sure we have driven the Germans back, and that is lucky, for before our charge they had come too close for comfort."

"The king gave me a ring," said Beth, displaying it. "He seemed glad I was here to help his soldiers, but warned me to keep further away from the line. King Albert speaks English perfectly and told me he loves America better than any other country except his own."

"He has traveled in your country," explained the soldier. "But then, our Albert has traveled everywhere--before he was king."

Between them Maud and Beth quickly applied first aid to the others in the group and then Uncle John said:

"Let us take the king's advice and get back to the ambulance. We left only Patsy and Dr. Gys there and I'm sure you girls will be needed."

On their return they came upon a man sitting in a hollow and calmly leaning against a bank of sand, smoking a cigarette. He wore a gray uniform.

"Ah, a German!" exclaimed Maud. She ran up to him and asked: "Are you hurt?"

He glanced at her uniform, nodded, and pointed to his left foot. It had nearly all been torn away below the ankle. A handkerchief was twisted about the leg, forming a rude tourniquet just above the wound, and this had served to stay the flow of blood.

"Run quickly for the stretcher," said Maud to Uncle John. "I will stay with him until your return."

Without a word he hurried away, Beth following. They found, on reaching the ambulance, that Maurie and Jones had been busy. Five of the swinging beds were already occupied.

"Save the other one," said Beth. "Maud has found a German." Then she hurried to assist Patsy, as the two doctors had their hands full.

Jones and Maurie started away with the stretcher, Uncle John guiding them to the dunes where Maud was waiting, and presently they had the wounded German comfortably laid in the last bed.

"Now, then, back to the ship," said Gys. "We have in our care two lives, at least, that can only be saved by prompt operations."

Maurie got into the driver's seat.

"Careful, now!" cautioned Jones, beside him.

"Of course," replied the Belgian, starting the motor; "there are many sores inside. But if they get a jolt, now and then, it will serve to remind them that they are suffering for their country."

He began to back up, for the sand ahead was too deep for a turn, and the way he managed the huge car along that narrow ridge aroused the admiration of Ajo, who alone was able to witness the marvelous performance. Slowly, with many turns, they backed to the road, where Maurie swung the ambulance around and then stopped with a jerk that drew several groans from the interior of the car.

"What's wrong?" asked Mr. Merrick, sticking his head from a window.

"We nearly ran over a man," answered Jones, climbing down from his seat.

"Our front wheels are right against him, but Maurie stopped in time."

Lying flat upon his face, diagonally across the roadway, was the form of a man in the blue-and-red uniform of the Belgian army. Maurie backed the ambulance a yard or so as Maud sprang out and knelt beside the prostrate form.

The firing, which had lulled for a few minutes, suddenly redoubled in fury. There rose a wild, exultant shout, gradually drawing nearer.

"Quick!" shouted Gys, trembling and wringing his hands. "The Germans are charging. Drive on, man--drive on!"

But Maurie never moved.

"The Germans are charging, sure enough," he answered, as the line of

retreating Belgians became visible. "But they must stop here, for we've blocked the road."

All eyes but those of Maud were now turned upon the fray, which was practically a hand to hand conflict. Nearer and nearer came the confused mass of warriors and then, scarce a hundred yards away, it halted and the Belgians stood firm.

"He isn't dead," said Maud, coming to the car. "Help me to put him inside."

"There is no room," protested Gys.

The girl looked at him scornfully.

"We will make room," she replied.

A bullet shattered a pane of glass just beside the crouching doctor, but passed on through an open window without injuring anyone. In fact, bullets were singing around them with a freedom that made others than Dr. Gys nervous. It was chubby little Uncle John who helped Jones carry the wounded man to the ambulance, where they managed to stretch him upon the floor. This arrangement sent Patsy to the front seat outside, with Maurie and Ajo, although her uncle strongly protested that she had no right to expose her precious life so wantonly.

There was little time for argument, however. Even as the girl was climbing to her seat the line of Belgians broke and came pouring toward them. Maurie was prompt in starting the car and the next moment the ambulance was rolling swiftly along the smooth highway in the direction of Dunkirk and the sounds of fray grew faint behind them.