

CHAPTER IX

COURAGE, OR PHILOSOPHY?

"I never realized," said Maud, delightedly, "what a strictly modern, professional hospital ship Uncle John has made of this, until we put it to practical use. I am sure it is better than those makeshifts we observed at Calais, and more comfortable than those crowded hospitals on land. Every convenience is at our disposal and if our patients do not recover rapidly it will be because their condition is desperate."

She had just come on deck after a long and trying session in assisting Doctors Gys and Kelsey to care for the injured, a session during which Beth and Patsy had also stood nobly to their gruesome task. There were eleven wounded, altogether, in their care, and although some of these were in a critical condition the doctors had insisted that the nurses needed rest.

"It is Dr. Gys who deserves credit for fitting the ship," replied Mr. Merrick, modestly, to Maud's enthusiastic comment, "and Ajo is responsible for the ship itself, which seems admirably suited to our purpose. By the way, how is Gys behaving now? Is he still shaking with fear?"

"No, he seems to have recovered his nerve. Isn't it a terrible

affliction?"

"Cowardice? Well, my dear, it is certainly an unusual affliction in this country and in these times. I have been amazed to-day at the courage I have witnessed. These Belgians are certainly a brave lot."

"But no braver than the German we brought with us," replied Maud thoughtfully. "One would almost think he had no sensation, yet he must be suffering terribly. The doctor will amputate the remnants of his foot in an hour or so, but the man positively refuses to take an anaesthetic."

"Does he speak English or French?"

"No; only German. But Captain Carg understands German and so he has been acting as our interpreter."

"How about the Belgian we picked up on the road?"

"He hasn't recovered consciousness yet. He is wounded in the back and in trying to get to the rear became insensible from loss of blood."

"From what I saw I wouldn't suppose any Belgian could be wounded in the back," remarked Uncle John doubtfully.

"It was a shell," she said, "and perhaps exploded behind him. It's a bad

wound, Dr. Gys says, but if he regains strength he may recover."

During this conversation Patsy Doyle was lying in her stateroom below and crying bitterly, while her cousin Beth strove to soothe her. All unused to such horrors as she had witnessed that day, the girl had managed to retain her nerve by sheer force of will until the Red Cross party had returned to the ship and extended first aid to the wounded; but the moment Dr. Gys dismissed her she broke down completely.

Beth was no more accustomed to bloodshed than her cousin, but she had anticipated such scenes as they had witnessed, inasmuch as her year of training as nurse had prepared her for them. She had also been a close student of the daily press and from her reading had gleaned a knowledge of the terrible havoc wrought by this great war. Had Patsy not given way, perhaps Beth might have done so herself, and really it was Maud Stanton who bore the ordeal with the most composure.

After a half hour on deck Maud returned to the hospital section quite refreshed, and proceeded to care for the patients. She alone assisted Gys and Kelsey to amputate the German's foot, an operation the man bore splendidly, quite unaware, however, that they had applied local anaesthetics to dull the pain. Dr. Gys was a remarkably skillful surgeon and he gave himself no rest until every one of the eleven had received such attention as his wounds demanded. Even Kelsey felt the strain by that time and as Maud expressed her intention of remaining to minister to the wants of the crippled soldiers, the two doctors went on deck for

a smoke and a brief relaxation.

By this time Beth had quieted Patsy, mainly by letting her have her cry out, and now brought her on deck to join the others and get the fresh air. So quickly had events followed one another on this fateful day that it was now only four o'clock in the afternoon. None of them had thought of luncheon, so the ship's steward now brought tea and sandwiches to those congregated on deck.

As they sat together in a group, drinking tea and discussing the exciting events of the day, little Maurie came sauntering toward them and removed his cap.

"Your pardon," said he, "but--are the wounded all cared for?"

"As well as we are able to care for them at present," answered Beth.

"And let me thank you, Jakob Maurie--let us all thank you--for the noble work you did for us to-day."

"Pah! it was nothing," said he, shifting from one foot to another. "I enjoyed it, mamselle. It was such fun to dive into the battle and pull out the wounded. It helped them, you see, and it gave us a grand excitement. Otherwise, had I not gone with you, I would be as ignorant as all in Dunkirk still are, for the poor people do not yet know what has happened at the front."

"We hardly know ourselves what has happened," said Uncle John. "We can hear the boom of guns yet, even at this distance, and we left the battle line flowing back and forth like the waves of the ocean. Have a cup of tea, Maurie?"

The man hesitated.

"I do not like to disturb anyone," he said slowly, "but if one of the young ladies is disengaged I would be grateful if she looks at my arm."

"Your arm!" exclaimed Beth, regarding him wonderingly as he stood before her.

Maurie smiled.

"It is hardly worth mentioning, mamselle, but a bullet--"

"Take off your coat," she commanded, rising from her seat to assist him.

Maurie complied. His shirt was stained with blood. Beth drew out her scissors and cut away the sleeve of his left arm. A bullet had passed directly through the flesh, but without harming bone or muscle.

"Why didn't you tell us before?" she asked reproachfully.

"It amounted to so little, beside the other hurts you had to attend," he

answered. "I am shamed, mamselle, that I came to you at all. A little water and a cloth will make it all right."

Patsy had already gone for the water and in a few minutes Beth was deftly cleansing the wound.

"How did it happen, Maurie?" asked Jones. "I was with you most of the time and noticed nothing wrong. Besides, you said nothing about it."

"It was on the road, just as we picked up that fallen soldier with the hole in his back. The fight jumped toward us pretty quick, you remember, and while I sat at the wheel the bullet came. I knew when it hit me, but I also knew I could move my arm, so what did it matter? I told myself to wait till we got to the ship. Had we stayed there longer, we might all have stopped bullets--and some bullets might have stopped us." He grinned, as if the aphorism amused him, and added: "To know when to run is the perfection of courage."

"Does it hurt?" asked Uncle John, as Beth applied the lint and began winding the bandage.

"It reminds me it is there, monsieur; but I will be ready for another trip to-morrow. Thank you, mamselle. Instead of the tea, I would like a little brandy."

"Give him some in the tea," suggested Gys, noting that Maurie swayed a

little. "Sit down, man, and be comfortable. That's it. I'd give a million dollars for your nerve."

"Have you so much money?" asked Maurie.

"No."

"Then I cannot see that you lack nerve," said the little Belgian thoughtfully. "I was watching you to-day, M'sieur Doctor, and I believe what you lack is courage."

Gys stared so hard at him with the one good eye that even Maurie became embarrassed and turned away his head. Sipping his tea and brandy he presently resumed, in a casual tone:

"Never have I indulged in work of more interest than this. We go into the thick of the fight, yet are we safe from harm. We do good to both sides, because the men who do the fighting are not to blame for the war, at all. The leaders of politics say to the generals: 'We have declared war; go and fight.' The generals say to the soldiers: 'We are told to fight, so come on. We do not know why, but it is our duty, because it is our profession. So go and die, or get shot to pieces, or lose some arms and legs, as it may happen.' The business of the soldiers is to obey; they must back up the policies of their country, right or wrong. But do those who send them into danger ever get hurt? Not to the naked eye."

"Why, you're quite a philosopher, Maurie," said Patsy.

"It is true," agreed the Belgian. "But philosophy is like courage--easy to assume. We strut and talk big; we call the politicians sharks, the soldiers fools; but does it do any good? The war will go on; the enemy will destroy our homes, separate our families, take away our bread and leave us to starve; but we have the privilege to philosophize, if we like. For myself, I thank them for nothing!"

"I suppose you grieve continually for your wife," said Patsy.

"Not so much that, mamselle, but I know she is grieving for me," he replied.

"As soon as we find time," continued the girl, "we intend to search for your wife and children. I am sure we can find them for you."

Maurie moved uneasily in his chair.

"I beg you to take no trouble on my account," said he. "With the Red Cross you have great work to accomplish. What is the despair of one poor Walloon to you?"

"It is a great deal to us, Maurie," returned the girl, earnestly. "You have been a friend in need; without you we could not have made our dash to the front to-day. We shall try to repay you by finding your wife."

He was silent, but his troubled look told of busy thoughts.

"What does she look like?" inquired Beth. "Have you her photograph?"

"No; she would not make a good picture, mamselle," he answered with a sigh. "Clarette is large; she is fat; she has a way of scowling when one does not bring in more wood than the fire can eat up; and she is very religious."

"With that description I am sure we can find her," cried Patsy enthusiastically.

He seemed disturbed.

"If you please," said he plaintively, "Clarette is quite able to take care of herself. She has a strong will."

"But if you know she is safe it will relieve your anxiety," suggested Beth. "You told us yesterday you had been searching everywhere for her."

"If I said everywhere, I was wrong, for poor Clarette must be somewhere. And since yesterday I have been thinking with more deliberation, and I have decided," he added, his tone becoming confidential, "that it is better I do not find Clarette just now. It might destroy my usefulness to the Red Cross."

"But your children!" protested Patsy. "Surely you cannot rest at ease with your two dear children wandering about, in constant danger."

"To be frank, mamselle," said he, "they are not my children. I had a baby, but it was killed, as I told you. The boy and girl I have mentioned were born when Clarette was the wife of another man--a blacksmith at Dinant--who had a sad habit of beating her."

"But you love the little ones, I am sure."

He shook his head.

"They have somewhat the temper of their father, the blacksmith. I took them when I took Clarette--just as I took the silver spoons and the checkered tablespread she brought with her--but now that a cruel fate has separated me from the children, perhaps it is all for the best."

The doctor gave a snort of disgust, while Ajo smiled. The girls were too astonished to pursue the conversation, but now realized that Maurie's private affairs did not require their good offices to untangle. Uncle John was quite amused at the Belgian's confession and was the only one to reply.

"Fate often seems cruel when she is in her happiest mood," said he.

"Perhaps, Maurie, your Clarette will come to you without your seeking

her, for all Belgium seems headed toward France just now. What do you think? Will the Germans capture Dunkirk?"

The man brightened visibly at this turn in the conversation.

"Not to-day, sir; not for days to come," he replied. "The French cannot afford to lose Dunkirk, and by to-morrow they will pour an irresistible horde against the German invader. If we stay here, we are sure to remain in the rear of the firing line."