

## CHAPTER XII

### THE OTHER SIDE

The launch in which they embarked bore the Red Cross on its sides, and an American flag floated from the bow and a Red Cross flag from the stern. Its four occupants wore the Red Cross uniforms. Yet three miles out of Dunkirk a shot came singing across their prow and they were obliged to lay to until a British man-of-war could lower a boat to investigate their errand. The coast is very shallow in this section, which permits boats of only the lightest draught to navigate in-shore, but the launch was able to skim over the surface at twelve miles an hour.

"This is pleasant!" grumbled Uncle John, as they awaited the approach of the warship's boat. "Our very appearance ought to insure us safe conduct, but I suppose that in these times every craft is regarded with suspicion."

The boat came alongside.

"Where are you going?" demanded an officer, gruffly.

"To Ostend."

"On what business?"

"Our own," replied Mr. Merrick.

"Be respectful, sir, or I'll arrest your entire outfit," warned the officer.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," declared Mr. Merrick. "You'll examine our papers, apologize for your interference and row back to your ship. We have the authority of the Red Cross to go wherever our duty calls us, and moreover we're American citizens. Permit me to add that we're in a hurry."

The officer turned first white and then red, but he appreciated the force of the argument.

"Your papers!" he commanded.

Uncle John produced them and waited patiently for their inspection, which was very deliberate. Finally the officer returned them and gave the order to his men to row back to the ship.

"One moment!" called Uncle John. "You haven't made the apology."

There was no answer. The boat moved swiftly away and at a gesture from Captain Carg the sailor started the launch again.

"I wonder why it is," mused Mr. Merrick, "that there is always this raspy feeling when the English meet Americans. On the surface we're friendly enough and our governments always express in diplomatic relations the most cordial good will; but I've always noticed in the English individual an undercurrent of antipathy for Americans that cannot be disguised. As a race the English hate us, I'm positive, and I wonder why?"

"I believe you're wrong, Uncle," remarked Patsy. "A few of the British may individually dislike us, but I'm sure the two nations are not antagonistic. Why should they be?"

"Yorktown," muttered the captain.

"I don't believe it," declared the girl. "They're too good sportsmen to bear grudges."

"All the same," persisted Uncle John, "the English have never favored us as the French have, or even the Russians."

From Dunkirk to Ostend, by the coast line, is only some twenty-five miles, yet although they started at a little after eleven o'clock it was three in the afternoon before they finally landed at the Belgian seaport. Interruptions were numerous, and although they were treated courteously, in the main, it was only after rigid questioning and a

thorough examination that they were permitted to proceed. A full hour was consumed at the harbor at Ostend before they could even land.

As they stepped upon the wharf a group of German soldiers met them and now Captain Carg became the spokesman of the party. The young officer in command removed his helmet to bow deferentially to Patsy and then turned to ask their business at Ostend.

"He says we must go before the military governor," said Carg, translating. "There, if our papers are regular, permits will be issued for us to proceed to Charleroi."

They left the sailor in charge of the launch, which was well provisioned and contained a convertible bunk, and followed the officer into the town. Ostend is a large city, fortified, and was formerly one of the most important ports on the North Sea, as well as a summer resort of prominence. The city now being occupied by the Germans, our friends found few citizens on the streets of Ostend and these hurried nervously on their way. The streets swarmed with German soldiery.

Arriving at headquarters they found that the commandant was too busy to attend to the Red Cross Americans. He ordered them taken before Colonel Grau for examination.

"But why examine us at all?" protested Mr. Merrick. "Doesn't our sacred mission protect us from such annoying details?"

The young officer regretted that it did not. They would find Colonel Grau in one of the upper rooms. It would be a formal examination, of course, and brief. But busy spies had even assumed the insignia of the Red Cross to mask their nefarious work and an examination was therefore necessary as a protective measure. So they ascended a broad staircase and proceeded along a corridor to the colonel's office.

Grau was at the head of the detective service at Ostend and invested with the task of ferreting out the numerous spies in the service of the Allies and dealing with them in a summary manner. He was a very stout man, and not very tall. His eyes were light blue and his grizzled mustache was a poor imitation of that affected by the Kaiser. When Grau looked up, on their entrance, Patsy decided that their appearance had startled him, but presently she realized that the odd expression was permanent.

In a chair beside the colonel's desk sat, or rather lounged, another officer, encased in a uniform so brilliant that it arrested the eye before one could discover its contents. These were a wizened, weather-beaten man of advanced age, yet rugged as hickory. His eyes had a periodical squint; his brows wore a persistent frown. There was a broad scar on his left cheek and another across his forehead. A warrior who had seen service, probably, but whose surly physiognomy was somewhat disconcerting.

The two officers had been in earnest conversation, but when Mr. Merrick's party was ushered in, the elder man leaned back in his chair, squinting and scowling, and regarded them silently.

"Huh!" exclaimed the colonel, in a brusque growl. "What is it, von Holtz?"

The young officer explained that the party had just arrived from Dunkirk in a launch; the commandant had asked Colonel Grau kindly to examine them. Uncle John proceeded to state the case, Captain Carg interpreting. They operated a Red Cross hospital ship at Dunkirk, and one of their patients, a young Belgian, was dying of his wounds. They had come to find his young wife and take her back with them to Dunkirk in their launch, that she might comfort the last moments of her husband. The Americans asked for safe conduct to Charleroi, and permission to take Mrs. Denton with them to Dunkirk. Then he presented his papers, including the authority of the American Red Cross Society, the letter from the secretary of state and the recommendation of the German ambassador at Washington.

The colonel looked them all over. He uttered little guttural exclamations and tapped the desk with his finger-tips as he read, and all the time his face wore that perplexing expression of surprise. Finally he asked:

"Which is Mr. Merrick?"

Hearing his name, Uncle John bowed.

"Huh! But the description does not fit you."

Captain Carg translated this.

"Why not?" demanded Uncle John.

"It says you are short, stout, blue-eyed, bald, forty-five years of age."

"Of course."

"You are not short; I think you are as tall as I am. Your eyes are not blue; they are olive green. You are not bald, for there is still hair over your ears. Huh! How do you explain that?"

"It's nonsense," said Uncle John scornfully.

Carg was more cautious in interpreting the remark. He assured the colonel, in German, that the description of Mr. Merrick was considered close enough for all practical purposes. But Grau was not satisfied. He went over the papers again and then turned to face the other officer.

"What do you think, General?" he asked, hesitatingly.

"Suspicious!" was the reply.

"I think so, myself," said the colonel. "Mark you: Here's a man who claims to come from Sangoa, a place no one has ever heard of; and the other has endorsements purporting to come from the highest officials in America. Huh! what does it mean?"

"Papers may be forged, or stolen from their proper owners," suggested the squinting general. "This excuse of coming here to get the wife of a hurt Belgian seems absurd. If they are really Red Cross workers, they are not attending to their proper business."

When the captain interpreted this speech Patsy said angrily:

"The general is an old fool."

"An idiot, I'll call him," added Uncle John. "I wish I could tell him so."

"You have told him," said the general in good English, squinting now more rapidly than ever, "and your manner of speech proves you to be impostors. I have never known a respectable Red Cross nurse, of any country, who called a distinguished officer a fool--and to his face."

"I didn't know you understood English," she said.



"That is no excuse!"

"But I did know," she added, "that I had judged you correctly. No one with a spark of intelligence could doubt the evidence of these papers."

"The papers are all right. Where did you get them?"

"From the proper authorities."

He turned to speak rapidly in German to Colonel Grau, who had been uneasy during the conversation in English, because he failed to understand it. His expression of piquant surprise was intensified as he now turned to the Americans.

"You may as well confess your imposture," said he. "It will make your punishment lighter. However, if on further examination you prove to be spies, your fate is beyond my power to mitigate."

"See here," said Uncle John, when this was translated to him, "if you dare to interfere with us, or cause us annoyance, I shall insist on your being courtmartialed. You are responsible to your superiors, I suppose, and they dare not tolerate an insult to the Red Cross, nor to an American citizen. You may have the sense to consider that if these papers and letters are genuine, as I declare they are, I have friends powerful enough to bring this matter before the Kaiser himself, in which

case someone will suffer a penalty, even if he is a general or a colonel."

As he spoke he glared defiantly at the older officer, who calmly proceeded to translate the speech to the colonel. Carg reported that it was translated verbatim. Then the general sat back and squinted at his companion, who seemed fairly bewildered by the threat. Patsy caught the young officer smothering a smile, but neither of them interrupted the silence that followed.

Once again the colonel picked up the papers and gave them a rigid examination, especially that of the German ambassador, which was written in his own language. "I cannot understand," he muttered, "how one insignificant American citizen could secure such powerful endorsements. It has never happened before in my experience."

"It is extraordinary," said the general.

"Mr. Merrick," said Patsy to him, "is a very important man in America. He is so important that any indignity to him will be promptly resented."

"I will investigate your case further," decided Colonel Grau, after another sotto voce conference with the general. "Spies are getting to be very clever, these days, and we cannot take chances. However, I assure you there is no disposition to worry you and until your standing is determined you will be treated with every consideration."

"Do you mean that we are prisoners?" asked Uncle John, trying to control his indignation.

"No, indeed. You will be detained, of course, but you are not prisoners--as yet. I will keep your papers and submit them to the general staff. It will be for that august body to decide."

Uncle John protested vigorously; Patsy faced the old general and told him this action was an outrage that would be condemned by the entire civilized world; Captain Carg gravely assured both officers that they were making a serious mistake. But nothing could move the stolid Germans. The general, indeed, smiled grimly and told them in English that he was in no way responsible, whatever happened. This was Colonel Grau's affair, but he believed, nevertheless, that the colonel was acting wisely.

The young officer, who had stood like a statue during the entire interview, was ordered to accompany the Americans to a hotel, where they must be kept under surveillance but might follow, to an extent, their own devices. They were not to mail letters nor send telegrams.

The officer asked who should guard the suspects.

"Why not yourself, Lieutenant? You are on detached duty, I believe?"

"At the port, Colonel."

"There are too many officers at the port; it is a sinecure. I will appoint you to guard the Americans. You speak their language, I believe?"

The young man bowed.

"Very well; I shall hold you responsible for their safety."

They were then dismissed and compelled to follow their guard from the room.

Patsy was now wild with rage and Uncle John speechless. Even Carg was evidently uneasy.

"Do not mind," said the young lieutenant consolingly. "It is merely a temporary inconvenience, you know, for your release will come very soon. And since you are placed in my care I beg you to accept this delay with good grace and be happy as possible. Ostend is full of life and I am conducting you to an excellent hotel."