

CHAPTER XIII

TARDY JUSTICE

The courtesy of Lieutenant von Holtz was beyond criticism. He obtained for his charges a comfortable suite of rooms in an overcrowded hotel, obliging the landlord to turn away other guests that Mr. Merrick's party might be accommodated. The dinner that was served in their cosy sitting room proved excellent, having been ordered by von Holtz after he had requested that privilege. When the young officer appeared to see that it was properly served, Patsy invited him to join them at the table and he laughingly consented.

"You are one of our party, by force of circumstances," said the girl, "and since we've found you good-natured and polite, and believe you are not to blame for our troubles, we may as well be friendly while we are together."

The young man was evidently well pleased.

"However evil your fortune may be," said he, "I cannot fail to be impressed by my own good luck. Perhaps you may guess what a relief this pleasant commission is to one who for days has been compelled to patrol those vile smelling docks, watching for spies and enduring all sorts of weather."

"To think," said Uncle John gloomily, "that we are accused of being spies!"

"It is not for me," returned von Holtz, "to criticize the acts of my superiors. I may say, however, that were it my province to decide the question, you would now be free. Colonel Grau has an excellent record for efficiency and seldom makes a mistake, but I suspect his judgment was influenced by the general, whose son was once jilted by an American girl."

"We're going to get even with them both, before this affair is ended," declared Patsy, vindictively; "but although you are our actual jailer I promise that you will escape our vengeance."

"My instructions are quite elastic, as you heard," said the lieutenant. "I am merely ordered to keep you in Ostend, under my eye, until your case has been passed upon by the commandant or the general staff. Since you have money, you may enjoy every luxury save that of travel, and I ask you to command my services in all ways consistent with my duty."

"What worries me," said Patsy to Uncle John, "is the delay. If we are kept here for long, poor Denton will die before we can find his wife and take her to him."

"How long are we liable to be detained?" Uncle John asked the officer.

"I cannot say. Perhaps the council of the general staff will meet to-morrow morning; perhaps not for several days," was the indefinite reply.

Patsy wiped away the tears that began to well into her eyes. She had so fondly set her heart on reuniting the Dentons that her disappointment was very great.

Von Holtz noticed the girl's mood and became thoughtful. Captain Carg had remained glum and solemn ever since they had left the colonel's office. Uncle John sat in silent indignation, wondering what could be done to influence these stupid Germans. Presently the lieutenant remarked:

"That sailor whom you left with the launch seemed an intelligent fellow."

Patsy gave a start; Uncle John looked at the young man expectantly; the captain nodded his head as he slowly replied:

"Henderson is one of the picked men I brought from Sangoa. He is both intelligent and loyal."

"Curiously enough," said von Holtz, "I neglected to place the man under arrest. I even forgot to report him. He is free."

"Ah!" exclaimed Patsy, her eyes lighting.

"I know a civilian here--a bright young Belgian--who is my friend and will do anything I ask of him," resumed von Holtz, still musingly. "I had the good fortune to protect his mother when our troops entered the city, and he is grateful."

Patsy was thinking very fast now.

"Could Henderson get to Charleroi, do you imagine?" she asked. "He has a passport."

"We do not consider passports of much value," said the officer; "but a Red Cross appointment--"

"Oh, he has that, too; all our men carry them."

"In that case, with my friend Rondel to guide him, I believe Henderson could accomplish your errand."

"Let us send for him at once!" exclaimed Uncle John.

Carg scribbled on a card.

"He wouldn't leave the launch without orders, unless forced by the

Germans," asserted the captain, and handed the card to von Holtz.

The young lieutenant took his cap, bowed profoundly and left the room. In ten minutes he returned, saying: "I am not so fortunate as I had thought. All our troops are on the move, headed for the Yser. There will be fighting, presently, and--I must remain here," he added despondently.

"It won't be your last chance, I'm sure," said Patsy. "Will that dreadful Colonel Grau go, too?"

"No; he is to remain. But all regiments quartered here are now marching out and to-morrow a fresh brigade will enter Ostend."

They were silent a time, until someone rapped upon the door. Von Holtz admitted a slim, good-looking young Belgian who grasped his hand and said eagerly in French:

"You sent for me?"

"Yes. You may speak English here, Monsieur Rondel." Then he presented his friend to the Americans, who approved him on sight.

Henderson came a few minutes later and listened respectfully to the plan Miss Doyle unfolded. He was to go with Monsieur Rondel to Charleroi, find Mrs. Denton, explain that her husband was very ill, and bring her back with him to Ostend. He would report promptly on his return and they

would tell him what to do next.

The man accepted the mission without a word of protest. Charleroi was in central Belgium, but that did not mean many miles away and Rondel assured him they would meet with no difficulties. The trains were reserved for soldiers, but the Belgian had an automobile and a German permit to drive it. The roads were excellent.

"Now, remember," said Patsy, "the lady you are going for is Mrs. Albert Denton. She lives with her mother, or did, the last we heard of her."

"And her mother's name and address?" inquired Henderson.

"We are ignorant of either," she confessed; "but it's not a very big town and I'm sure you'll easily find her."

"I know the place well," said Rondel, "and I have friends residing there who will give me information."

Uncle John supplied them liberally with money, impressed upon them the necessity of haste, and sent them away. Rondel declared the night time was best for the trip and promised to be on the way within the hour, and in Charleroi by next morning.

Notwithstanding the fact that they had succeeded in promoting by proxy the mission which had brought them to Belgium, the Americans found the

next day an exceedingly irksome one. In the company of Lieutenant von Holtz they were permitted to walk about the city, but they found little pleasure in that, owing to the bustle of outgoing troops and the arrival of others to replace them. Nor did they care to stray far from their quarters, for fear the council would meet and they might be sent for.

However, no sign from Colonel Grau was received that day. Patsy went to bed with a nervous headache and left Uncle John and the captain to smoke more than was good for them. Both the men had now come to regard their situation as serious and as the American consul was at this time absent in Brussels they could think of no way to secure their freedom. No one knew when the consul would return; Mr. Merrick had been refused the privilege of using the telegraph or mails. During one of their strolls they had met the correspondent of an American newspaper, but when the man learned they were suspects he got away from them as soon as possible. He did not know Mr. Merrick and his own liberty was too precarious for him to argue with Colonel Grau.

"I'm beginning to think," said Uncle John, "that we're up against a hard proposition. Letters and endorsements from prominent Americans seem to have no weight with these Germans. I'd no idea our identity could ever be disputed."

"We must admit, sir," returned the captain, reflectively, "that the spy system in this war is something remarkable. Spies are everywhere; clever ones, too, who adopt every sort of subterfuge to escape detection. I do

not blame Grau so much for caution as for lack of judgment."

"He's a blockhead!" cried Mr. Merrick testily.

"He is. I'm astonished they should place so much power in the hands of one so slow witted."

"He has insulted us," continued Uncle John. "He has dared to arrest three free-born Americans."

"Who came into a troubled country, occupied by a conquering army, without being invited."

"Well--that's true," sighed the little millionaire, "but what are we going to do about it?"

"Wait," counseled the captain.

The next day dawned dark and rainy and the weather had a depressing effect upon the prisoners. It was too damp to stir out of doors and the confinement of the hotel rooms became especially irksome. Not only were they anxious about their own fate but it was far past the time when they should have heard from Henderson and Rondel. Patsy's nerves were getting beyond her control; Uncle John stumped around with his hands thrust deep in his pockets and a frown wrinkling his forehead; the captain smoked innumerable pipes of tobacco and said not a word. Von Holtz, noting the

uneasiness of his charges, discreetly forbore conversation and retired to a far corner where he hid behind a book.

It was nearing evening when a commotion was heard on the stairs, followed by the heavy tramp of feet in the corridor. A sharp rap sounded on the door of their sitting room. Uncle John stepped forward to open it, when in stalked a group of German officers, their swords and spurs clanking and their cloaks glistening with rain-drops. At sight of the young girl off came cap and helmet and with one accord they bowed low.

The leader was a tall, thin man with a leathern face, hooked nose and piercing gray eyes. His breast glittered with orders. It was von Kargenbrut, the military governor.

"Pardon our intrusion," he said in English, his harsh voice having a guttural accent. "Which gentleman is Mr. John Merrick?"

"I am John Merrick."

The eagle eyes swept over him with a swift glance.

"We owe you our apology," continued the governor, speaking as fiercely as if he were ordering Uncle John beheaded. "I have been too busy to take up your case before to-day, when I discover that we have treated you discourteously. You will consider our fault due to these troubled times, when mistakes occur in spite of our watchfulness. Is it not so?"

"Your error has caused us great inconvenience," responded Mr. Merrick stiffly.

The governor whirled around. "Colonel Grau!" he called, and from the rear of the group the colonel stepped forward. His face still wore the expression of comical surprise. "Return to Mr. Merrick his papers and credentials."

The colonel drew the packet of papers from his breast pocket and handed it to Uncle John. Then he glanced hesitatingly at his superior, who glared at him.

"He cannot speak the English," said the governor to Mr. Merrick, "but he owes you reparation."

"Grau's stupidity has been very annoying, to say the least," was the ungracious reply. "We came here on important business, and presented our papers--all in proper order--on demand. We had the right to expect decent treatment, as respectable American citizens engaged in humanitarian work; yet this--this--man," pointing an accusing finger at the colonel, "ordered us detained--arrested!--and kept our papers."

The governor listened coldly and at the end of the speech inclined his head.

"Colonel Grau," said he, "has been relieved of his duties here and transferred to another station. To you I have personally apologized. You will find my endorsement on your papers and, in addition, an order that will grant you safe conduct wherever you may wish to go. If that is not enough, make your demands and I will consider them."

"Why, that is all I can expect, your Excellency, under the circumstances," replied Mr. Merrick. "I suppose I ought to thank you for your present act of justice."

"No; it is your due. Good evening, Mr. Merrick."

He swung around on his heel and every officer of the group turned with him, like so many automatons, all facing the door. But Mr. Merrick touched the governor upon the arm.

"One moment, your Excellency. This young officer, Lieutenant von Holtz, has treated us kindly and courteously. I want you to know that one of your men, at least, has performed his duty in a way to merit our thanks--and yours."

The governor scowled at Lieutenant von Holtz, who stood like a statue, with lowered eyes.

"Lieutenant, you are commissioned to guide Mr. Merrick as long as he remains within our lines. You will guard his safety and that of his

party. When he departs, come to me personally with your report."

The young officer bowed; the governor tramped to the door and went out, followed by his staff. Grau left the room last, with hang-dog look, and Patsy slammed the door in the hope of bumping his wooden head.

"So we're free?" she said, turning to von Holtz.

"Not only that, Fraulein, but you are highly favored," he replied. "All German territory is now open to you."

"It's about time they came to their senses," remarked Uncle John, with a return to his accustomed cheerfulness.

"And, best of all," said Patsy exultantly, "they've fired that awful colonel!"

The captain thoughtfully filled and lighted his pipe.

"I wonder," said he, "how that happened. Was it the council, do you think, Lieutenant?"

Von Holtz shook his head.

"I think it was the governor," he replied. "He is a just man, and had you been able to see him personally on your arrival you would have been

spared any annoyance."

"Perhaps," said Patsy doubtfully. "But your governor's a regular bear."

"I believe that is merely his way," asserted Uncle John. "I didn't mind the man's tone when I found his words and deeds were all right. But he--"

Another rap at the door. Patsy opened it and admitted Henderson. He saluted the captain, bowed to the others and said:

"We've got her, sir."

"Mrs. Denton?" cried Patsy, delightedly.

Henderson nodded.

"Yes, Miss Doyle; Mrs. Denton and the children."

"The children! Why, there aren't any."

"I beg your pardon, Miss; there are two."

"Two children!" she exclaimed in dismay. "There must be some mistake. The young people have only been married five months."

Henderson stood stiff as a poker, refusing to argue the point.

"A governess, maybe," suggested the captain.

"More likely," said Uncle John, "young Denton married a widow, with--eh--eh--incumbrances."

"That's it, sir," said Henderson earnestly.

"What's it?"

"The incumbrances, sir. No other word could describe 'em."

Patsy's heart sank; she was greatly disappointed.

"And she so young and pretty!" she murmured.

Henderson started to smile, but quickly suppressed it.

"Shall I show them up, Miss?" he inquired.

"Of course," answered Uncle John, as the girl hesitated. "You should have brought her to us at once. Where is that Belgian--Rondel?"

"He is guarding the woman, sir."

"Guarding her!"

"She's a little difficult to manage, sir, at times. She left Charleroi willingly enough, but she's tricky, and it is our duty to deliver her to you safely."

"Get her at once, Henderson," exclaimed Patsy, recovering her wits; "and the dear children, too."

Presently there was a sound of shuffling on the stairs and through the corridor. The door opened to admit the arrivals from Charleroi.

Henderson first pushed in a big woman dressed in a faded blue-checked gown, belted around the waist in a manner that made her look like a sack tied in the middle. Her head was bare, her hair awry, her face sullen and hard; she was undeniably "fleshy" and not altogether clean. She resisted Henderson at every step and glared around her with shrewd and shifting eyes.

Following her came Monsieur Rondel leading a boy and a girl, the latter being a small replica of the woman. The boy was viciously struggling to bite the hand of the Belgian, who held him fast.

"Ah, well," said Rondel, first sighing and then turning with a smile to face the lieutenant, "we have performed our mission. But heaven guard us from another like it!"

Patsy stared hard at the woman.

"This cannot be Mrs. Denton," she gasped, bewildered.

"Indeed?" answered Rondel in English. "She declares that is her name. Question her in French or Flemish, Miss Doyle."

Patsy addressed the woman in French but could elicit no reply. She stood impassive and silent.

"How did you make the mistake?" asked the girl, looking reproachfully first at Henderson and then at Rondel, both of whom were evidently astonished to find themselves at fault. "I have seen a photograph of Mrs. Andrew Denton, taken recently, and she is young and pretty and--and--rather small."

Monsieur Rondel cleared his throat to answer:

"It happened in this way, mademoiselle: We searched one whole day in Charleroi for Mrs. Denton but could not find her. My friends, on whom I had relied for assistance, had unfortunately moved away or joined the army. The townspeople were suspicious of Monsieur Henderson, who is a foreigner. We could get no information whatever. I appealed to the burgomaster and he said he would try to find Mrs. Denton for us the next day. In the morning came to us this woman, who said she was the

person we sought. If we promised her safe conduct to Dunkirk, she would go with us. She had wanted to go to Dunkirk for some weeks, but the Germans would not let her pass the lines. We suspected nothing wrong, for she admitted she was aware that her husband is in Dunkirk, and she wanted to get to him. So we brought her to you."

Patsy faced the woman resolutely and said in French:

"Why did you wish to get to Dunkirk?"

"He has said it. To find my husband," replied the woman in a surly tone.

"What is your name?"

No reply.

"Answer me!"

The woman eyed her obstinately and remained silent.

"Very well. Release those children, Monsieur Rondel. Madam, you have imposed upon us; you have tricked us in order to get to Ostend at our expense. Now go, and take your children with you."

She pointed dramatically at the door, but the woman retained her position, only moving to cuff the boy, who was kicking Henderson on his

shins. Then, setting her hands on her hips she said defiantly:

"They promised me passage to Dunkirk, and they must take me there."

"Who promised you?"

"Those men," pointing to them, "and the burgomaster."

"Yes," admitted Henderson, "we agreed with the burgomaster to take her out of the country. We signed a paper to that effect."

"But she is a Belgian. And she is not the person she claimed to be."

To this neither Rondel nor Henderson had an answer.

"See here," said Uncle John, "I'll untangle this matter in a jiffy. Here is money; give it to the woman and tell her to get out--or we'll eject her by force."

The woman grabbed the money eagerly, but after placing it in an ample pocket she said: "I will go no place but Dunkirk. I will not leave you until you take me there."

But here the lieutenant interfered. He suddenly faced the woman, who had not noticed his presence before, and she shrank back in fear at sight of his uniform. The boy and girl both began to cry.

"I know you," said von Holtz sternly. "You are the wife of a spy who has been condemned to death by both the Belgians and the Germans, since he betrayed them both. The last time you came to Ostend to annoy us you were driven out of the city. There is still an edict against you. Will you leave this room peaceably, or shall I order you under arrest?"

"Dog of a German!" she hissed, "the day is coming when I will help to drive you out of Belgium, even as you now drive me. Brave soldiers are you, to make war on women and children. Guh! I would kill you where you stand--if I dared." With venomous hate she spat upon the floor, then seized her wailing children, shook them and waddled out of the room.

There was a general sigh of relief.

"You may return to the launch, Henderson," said the captain.

"Monsieur Rondel," said Uncle John, grasping the young Belgian's hand, "we are grateful to you for your kindness. The failure of your mission was not your fault. We thank you. The governor has given us our liberty and permission to travel where we please, so to-morrow we will go to Charleroi ourselves to search for Mrs. Denton."

"My motor car is at your disposal, sir, and my services."

"To-morrow? Oh, let us go to-night, Uncle!" cried Patsy.

Mr. Merrick looked inquiringly at the Belgian.

"I am ready now," said Rondel with a bow.

"Then," said Patsy, "we will start in half an hour. You see, we have wasted two whole days--two precious days! I hope Dr. Gys will keep his promise, and that we shall find poor Denton alive on our return."