

CHAPTER XIV

FOUND AT LAST

The pretty city of Charleroi had suffered little damage from the German invasion, yet many of the townspeople had gone away since the occupation and those who remained kept well within their houses or huddled in anxious groups upon the streets. The civic affairs were still administered by the Belgian burgomaster, but the martial law of the Germans prevailed over all.

When Patsy Doyle, escorted by Uncle John and accompanied by Captain Carg, Lieutenant von Holtz and Monsieur Rondel, arrived in the early morning, the streets were comparatively deserted. The Hotel Royal received them hospitably and the landlord and his daughters prepared them an excellent breakfast.

While eating, Patsy chatted with the Belgian girls, who were neat, modest and intelligent. She found that Henderson and Rondel had not stopped at this hotel while in Charleroi, but at a smaller inn at the other end of the town. The girls remembered hearing of their visit and of their inquiries for a Mrs. Denton, but did not know whether they had succeeded in their quest or not.

"We have lived here all our lives," said the eldest of the landlord's

three daughters, "but we have not known, during that time, any family of Dentons in Charleroi."

Patsy reflected.

"They were married only five months ago, these Dentons," said she, "and the young man may have come from some other town. Do you remember that any of your young girls were married about five months ago?"

Yes; there was Hildegarde Bentel, but she had married Anthony Mattison, who was not a soldier. Could the American mamselle remember what the girl's first name was?

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Patsy. "She signed her letters 'Elizabeth.'"

They shook their heads.

"My name is also Elizabeth," said one. "We have many Elizabeths in Charleroi, but none has lately married."

"And her husband told me that she was now living here with her mother."

"Ah, let us see, then," responded another. "Could she have been a lady of rank, think you?"

"I--I do not know."

"Is her husband an officer?"

"No; a private, I believe."

"Then we are on the wrong scent," laughed the girl. "I had in mind the daughter of the Countess Voig, whose name chances to be Elizabeth. She was educated at a convent in Antwerp, and the countess has lived in that city for several years, in order to be nearer her daughter. There was some gossip here that the young lady had married in Antwerp, just after leaving the convent; but we know little of the life of the Voigs because they are very reserved. Two or three months ago they returned to their castle, which is four miles to the north of Charleroi, and there they are still living in retirement. Every day the old steward drives into town to visit the post office, but we have not seen the countess nor her daughter since they came back."

Patsy related this news to Uncle John, who did not understand French.

"Let us drive over to Castle Voig the first thing," she said.

"But, my dear, it's unreasonable," he objected. "Do you suppose a high-born young lady would marry a common soldier? In America, where we have no caste, it would be quite probable, but here--"

"He wasn't a soldier five months ago," said Patsy. "He's just a

volunteer, who joined the army when his country needed him, as many of the wealthy and aristocratic Belgians did. He may be high-born himself, for all we know. At any rate I mean to visit that castle. Tell Rondel to bring around the automobile."

They had no trouble in passing the guards, owing to the presence of von Holtz, and in half an hour they were rolling through a charming, peaceful country that as yet had suffered no blemish through the German conquest.

At Castle Voig they were received by an aged retainer who was visibly nervous at their arrival. He eyed the uniform of young von Holtz with ill-concealed terror and hurried away to carry their cards to the countess. After a long wait they learned that the countess would receive the Americans, but it was a full half hour after that when they were ushered into a reception room where a lady sat in solitary state.

Under other circumstances Patsy could have spent a day in admiring the quaint, old-fashioned furniture and pictures and the wonderful carvings of the beamed ceiling, but now she was so excited that she looked only at the countess. The lady was not very imposing in form or dress but her features were calm and dignified and she met her guests with a grave courtesy that was impressive if rather chilly. Before Patsy had summoned courage to explain her errand a younger woman--almost a girl--hurriedly entered the room and took a position beside the other.

"Oh, it's Elizabeth--it really is!" cried Patsy, clapping her hands together joyfully.

Mother and daughter regarded the American girl wonderingly and somewhat haughtily, but Patsy was not in the least dismayed.

"Isn't this Mrs. Denton?" she asked, stepping forward to lay a hand upon the other girl's arm.

"Yes," was the quiet reply.

Patsy's great eyes regarded her a moment with so sad and sympathetic a look that Mrs. Denton shrank away. Then she noticed for the first time the Red Cross uniform, and her hand went swiftly to her heart as she faltered:

"You--you have brought bad news of Andrew--of my husband?"

"Yes, I am sorry to admit that it is bad news," answered Patsy soberly.

"He has been wounded and is now lying ill in our hospital ship at Dunkirk. We came here to find you, and to take you to him."

Mrs. Denton turned to her mother, a passionate appeal in her eyes. But it was some moments before the hard, set look on the face of the countess softened. It did soften at last, however, and she turned to Patsy and said simply:

"We will prepare for the journey at once. Pray excuse us; Niklas will serve refreshments. We will not detain you long."

As they turned to leave the room Elizabeth Denton suddenly seized Patsy's hand.

"He will live?" she whispered. "Tell me he will live!"

Patsy's heart sank, but she summoned her wits by an effort.

"I am not a surgeon, my dear, and do not know how serious the wound may be," she answered, "but I assure you it will gladden his heart to see you again. He thinks and speaks only of you."

The girl-wife studied her face a moment and then dropped her hand and hurried after her mother.

"I fibbed, Uncle," said Patsy despondently. "I fibbed willfully. But--how could I help it when she looked at me that way?"