

CHAPTER XVI

CLARETTE

So it was toward evening of the fourth day that the launch finally sighted the ship Arabella. Delays and difficulties had been encountered in spite of government credentials and laissez-passer and Patsy had begun to fear they would not reach the harbor of Dunkirk before dark.

All through the journey the Belgian woman and her children had sat sullenly in the bow, the youngsters kept from mischief by the stern eye of Henderson. In the stern seats, however, the original frigid silence had been thawed by Patsy Doyle's bright chatter. She began by telling the countess and Elizabeth all about herself and Beth and Maud and Uncle John, relating how they had come to embark upon this unusual mission of nursing the wounded of a foreign war, and how they had secured the services of the clever but disfigured surgeon, Dr. Gys. She gave the ladies a clear picture of the hospital ship and told how the girls had made their dash to the firing line during the battle of Nieuport and brought back an ambulance full of wounded--including Andrew Denton.

Patsy did not answer very fully Elizabeth Denton's eager questions concerning the nature of her husband's injuries, but she tried to prepare the poor young wife for the knowledge that the wound would prove

fatal. This was a most delicate and difficult thing to do and Patsy blundered and floundered until her very ambiguity aroused alarm.

"Tell me the worst!" begged Elizabeth Denton, her face pale and tensely drawn.

"Why, I cannot do that, you see," replied Patsy, "because the worst hasn't happened yet; nor can I tell you the best, because a wound is such an uncertain thing. It was a shell, you know, that exploded behind him, and Dr. Gys thought it made a rather serious wound. Mr. Denton was unconscious a long time, and when he came to himself we eased his pain, so he would not suffer."

"You came to get me because you thought he would die?"

"I came because he asked me to read to him your letters, and I found they comforted him so much that your presence would, I knew, comfort him more."

There was a long silence. Presently the countess asked in her soft, even voice:

"Will he be alive when we get there?"

Patsy thought of the days that had been wasted, because of their detention at Ostend through Colonel Grau's stupidity.

"I hope so, madam," was all she could reply.

Conversation lagged after this episode. Elizabeth was weeping quietly on her mother's shoulder. Patsy felt relief in the knowledge that she had prepared them, as well as she could, for whatever might wait upon their arrival.

The launch made directly for the ship and as she came alongside to the ladder the rail was lined with faces curious to discover if the errand had been successful. Doctor Gys was there to receive them, smiling horribly as he greeted the two women in black. Maud, seeing that they recoiled from the doctor's appearance, took his place and said cheerfully:

"Mr. Denton is asleep, just now, but by the time you have bathed and had a cup of tea I am quite sure he will be ready to receive you."

"Tell me; how is he? Are you his nurse?" asked the young wife with trembling lips.

"I am his nurse, and I assure you he is doing very well," answered Maud with her pleasant, winning smile. "When he finds you by his side I am sure his recovery will be rapid. No nurse can take the place of a wife, you know."

Patsy looked at her reproachfully, thinking she was misleading the poor young wife, but Maud led the ladies away to a stateroom and it was Dr. Gys who explained the wonderful improvement in the patient.

"Well," remarked Uncle John, "if we'd known he had a chance, we wouldn't have worried so because we were held up. In fact, if we'd known he would get well, we needn't have gone at all."

"Oh, Uncle John!" cried Patsy reprovingly.

"It was your going that saved him," declared the doctor. "I promised to keep him alive, for that little wife of his, and when he took a turn for the worse I had to assume desperate chances--which won out."

Meantime the big Belgian woman and her children had been helped up the ladder by Henderson, who stood respectfully by, awaiting orders for their disposal. The mother had her eye on the shore and was scowling steadily upon it when little Maurie came on deck and strolled toward Mr. Merrick to greet him on his return. Indeed, he had approached to within a dozen feet of the group when the woman at the rail suddenly turned and saw him.

"Aha--mon Henri!" she cried and made a dash toward him with outstretched arms.

"Clarette!"

Maurie stopped short; he grew pallid; he trembled. But he did not await her coming. With a howl that would have shamed a wild Indian he leaped upon the rail and made a dive into the water below.

Even as her engulfing arms closed around the spot where he had stood, there was a splash and splutter that drew everyone to the side to watch the little Belgian swim frantically to the docks.

The woman grabbed a child with either arm and held them up.

"See!" she cried. "There is your father--the coward--the traitor--the deserter of his loving family. He thinks to escape; but we shall capture him yet, and when we do--"

"Hurry, father," screamed the little girl, "or she'll get you."

A slap on the mouth silenced her and set the boy wailing dismally. The boy was accustomed to howl without provocation. He kicked his mother until she let him down. By this time they could discern only Maurie's head bobbing in the distant water. Presently he clambered up the dock and ran dripping toward the city, disappearing among the buildings.

"Madam," said Uncle John, sternly, "you have cost us the best chauffeur we ever had."

She did not understand English, but she shook her fist in Mr. Merrick's face and danced around in an elephantine fashion and jabbered a stream of French.

"What does she say?" he asked Patsy, who was laughing merrily at the absurd scene.

"She demands to be put ashore at once. But shall we do that, and put poor Maurie in peril of being overtaken?"

"Self preservation is the first law of nature, my dear," replied Uncle John. "I'm sorry for Maurie, but he alone is responsible. Henderson," he added, turning to the sailor, "put this woman ashore as soon as possible. We've had enough of her."