

CHAPTER XVII

PERPLEXING PROBLEMS

Although the famous battle of Nieuport had come to an end, the fighting in West Flanders was by no means over. All along the line fierce and relentless war waged without interruption and if neither side could claim victory, neither side suffered defeat. Day after day hundreds of combatants fell; hundreds of disabled limped to the rear; hundreds were made prisoners. And always a stream of reinforcements came to take the places of the missing ones. Towns were occupied to-day by the Germans, to-morrow by the Allies; from Nieuport on past Dixmude and beyond Ypres the dykes had been opened and the low country was one vast lake. The only approaches from French territory were half a dozen roads built high above the water line, which rendered them capable of stubborn defence.

Dunkirk was thronged with reserves--English, Belgian and French. The Turcos and East Indians were employed by the British in this section and were as much dreaded by the civilians as the enemy. Uncle John noticed that military discipline was not so strict in Dunkirk as at Ostend; but the Germans had but one people to control while the French town was host to many nations and races.

Strange as it may appear, the war was growing monotonous to those who were able to view it closely, perhaps because nothing important resulted

from all the desperate, continuous fighting. The people were pursuing their accustomed vocations while shells burst and bullets whizzed around them. They must manage to live, whatever the outcome of this struggle of nations might be.

Aboard the American hospital ship there was as yet no sense of monotony. The three girls who had conceived and carried out this remarkable philanthropy were as busy as bees during all their waking hours and the spirit of helpful charity so strongly possessed them that all their thoughts were centered on their work. No two cases were exactly alike and it was interesting, to the verge of fascination, to watch the results of various treatments of divers wounds and afflictions.

The girls often congratulated themselves on having secured so efficient a surgeon as Doctor Gys, who gloried in his work, and whose judgment, based on practical experience, was comprehensive and unfailing. The man's horribly contorted features had now become so familiar to the girls that they seldom noticed them--unless a cry of fear from some newly arrived and unnerved patient reminded them that the doctor was exceedingly repulsive to strangers.

No one recognized this grotesque hideousness more than Doctor Gys himself. When one poor Frenchman died under the operating knife, staring with horror into the uncanny face the surgeon bent over him, Beth was almost sure the fright had hastened his end. She said to Gys that evening, when they met on deck, "Wouldn't it be wise for you to wear a

mask in the operating room?"

He considered the suggestion a moment, a deep flush spreading over his face; then he nodded gravely.

"It may be an excellent idea," he agreed. "Once, a couple of years ago, I proposed wearing a mask wherever I went, but my friends assured me the effect would be so marked that it would attract to me an embarrassing amount of attention. I have trained myself to bear the repulsion involuntarily exhibited by all I meet and have taught myself to take a philosophic, if somewhat cynical, view of my facial blemishes; yet in this work I can see how a mask might be merciful to my patients. I will experiment a bit along this line, if you will help me, and we'll see what we can accomplish."

"You must not think," she said quietly, for she detected a little bitterness in his tone, "that you are in any way repulsive to those who know you well. We all admire you as a man and are grieved at the misfortunes that marred your features. After all, Doctor, people of intelligence seldom judge one by appearances."

"However they may judge me," said he, "I'm a failure. You say you admire me as a man, but you don't. It's just a bit of diplomatic flattery. I'm a good doctor and surgeon, I'll admit, but my face is no more repellent than my cowardly nature. Miss Beth, I hate myself for my cowardice far more than I detest my ghastly countenance. Yet I am powerless to remedy

either defect."

"I believe that what you term your cowardice is merely a physical weakness," declared the girl. "It must have been caused by the suffering you endured at the time of your various injuries. I have noticed that suffering frequently unnerves one, and that a person who has once been badly hurt lives in nervous terror of being hurt again."

"You are very kind to try to excuse my fault," said he, "but the truth is I have always been a coward--from boyhood up."

"Yet you embarked on all those dangerous expeditions."

"Yes, just to have fun with myself; to sneer at the coward flesh, so to speak. I used to long for dangers, and when they came upon me I would jeer at and revile the quaking I could not repress. I pushed my shrinking body into peril and exulted in the punishment it received."

Beth looked at him wonderingly.

"You are a strange man, indeed," said she. "Really, I cannot understand your mental attitude at all."

He chuckled and rubbed his hands together gleefully.

"I can," he returned, "for I know what causes it." And then he went away

and left her, still seeming highly amused at her bewilderment.

In the operating room the next day Gys appeared with a rubber mask drawn across his features. The girls decided that it certainly improved his appearance, odd as the masked face might appear to strangers. It hid the dreadful nose and the scars and to an extent evened the size of the eyes, for the holes through which he peered were made alike. Gys was himself pleased with the device, for after that he wore the mask almost constantly, only laying it aside during the evenings when he sat on deck.

It was three days after the arrival of Mrs. Denton and her mother--whose advent had accomplished much toward promoting the young Belgian's convalescence--when little Maurie suddenly reappeared on the deck of the Arabella.

"Oh," said Patsy, finding him there when she came up from breakfast, "where is Clarette?"

He shook his head sadly.

"We do not live together, just now," said he. "Clarette is by nature temperamental, you know; she is highly sensitive, and I, alas! do not always please her."

"Did she find you in Dunkirk?" asked the girl.

"Almost, mamselle, but not quite. It was this way: I knew if I permitted her to follow me she would finally succeed in her quest, for she and the dear children have six eyes among them, while I have but two; so I reposed within an ash-barrel until they had passed on, and then I followed them, keeping well out of their sight. In that way I managed to escape. But it proved a hard task, for my Clarette is very persistent, as you may have noticed. So I decided I would be more safe upon the ship than upon the shore. She is not likely to seek me here, and in any event she floats better than she swims."

Patsy regarded the little man curiously.

"Did you not tell us, when first we met you, that you were heart-broken over the separation from your wife and children?" she inquired in severe tones.

"Yes, of course, mamselle; it was a good way to arouse your sympathy," he admitted with an air of pride. "I needed sympathy at that time, and my only fear was that you would find Clarette, as you threatened to do. Well," with a deep sigh, "you did find her. It was an unfriendly act, mamselle."

"They told us in Ostend that the husband of Clarette is a condemned spy, one who served both sides and proved false to each. The husband of Clarette is doomed to suffer death at the hands of the Germans or the

Belgians, if either is able to discover him."

Maurie removed his cap and scratched the hair over his left ear reflectively.

"Ah, yes, the blacksmith!" said he. "I suspected that blacksmith fellow was not reliable."

"How many husbands has Clarette?"

"With the blacksmith, there are two of us," answered Maurie, brightly. "Doubtless there would be more if anything happened to me, for Clarette is very fascinating. When she divorced the blacksmith he was disconsolate, and threatened vengeance; so her life is quite occupied in avoiding her first husband and keeping track of her second, who is too kind-hearted to threaten her as the blacksmith did. I really admire Clarette--at a distance. She is positively charming when her mind is free from worry--and the children are asleep."

"Then you think," said Ajo, who was standing by and listening to Maurie's labored explanations, "that it is the blacksmith who is condemned as a spy, and not yourself?"

"I am quite sure of it. Am I not here, driving your ambulance and going boldly among the officers? If it is Jakob Maurie they wish, he is at hand to be arrested."

"But you are not Jakob Maurie."

The Belgian gave a start, but instantly recovering he answered with a smile:

"Then I must have mistaken my identity, monsieur. Perhaps you will tell me who I am?"

"Your wife called you 'Henri,'" said Patsy.

"Ah, yes; a pet name. I believe the blacksmith is named Henri, and poor Clarette is so accustomed to it that she calls me Henri when she wishes to be affectionate."

Patsy realized the folly of arguing with him.

"Maurie," said she, "or whatever your name may be, you have been faithful in your duty to us and we have no cause for complaint. But I believe you do not speak the truth, and that you are shifty and artful. I fear you will come to a bad end."

"Sometimes, mamselle," he replied, "I fear so myself. But, pestel! why should we care? If it is the end, what matter whether it is good or bad?"

Watching their faces closely, he saw frank disapproval of his sentiments written thereon. It disturbed him somewhat that they did not choose to continue the conversation, so he said meekly:

"With your kind permission, I will now go below for a cup of coffee," and left them with a bow and a flourish of his cap. When he had gone Patsy said to Ajo:

"I don't believe there is any such person as the blacksmith."

"Nor I," was the boy's reply. "Both those children are living images of Maurie, who claims the blacksmith was their father. He's a crafty little fellow, that chauffeur of ours, and we must look out for him."

"If he is really a spy," continued the girl, after a brief period of thought, "I am amazed that he dared join our party and go directly to the front, where he is at any time likely to be recognized."

"Yes, that is certainly puzzling," returned Ajo. "And he's a brave little man, too, fearless of danger and reckless in exposing himself to shot and shell. Indeed, our Maurie is something of a mystery and the only thing I fully understand is his objection to Clarette's society."

At "le revue matin," as the girls called the first inspection of the morning, eight of their patients were found sufficiently recovered to be discharged. Some of these returned to their regiments and others were

sent to their homes to await complete recovery. The hospital ship could accommodate ten more patients, so it was decided to make a trip to Dixmude, where an artillery engagement was raging, with the larger ambulance.

"I think I shall go to-day," announced Gys, who was wearing his mask.

"Dr. Kelsey can look after the patients and it will do me good to get off the ship."

Uncle John looked at the doctor seriously.

"There is hard fighting, they say, in the Dixmude district. The Germans carried the British trenches yesterday, and to-day the Allies will try to retake them."

"I don't mind," returned the doctor, but he shuddered, nevertheless.

"Why don't you avoid the--the danger line?" suggested Mr. Merrick.

"A man can't run away from himself, sir; and perhaps you can understand the fascination I find in taunting the craven spirit within me."

"No, I can't understand it. But suit yourself."

"I shall drive," announced Maurie.

"You may be recognized," said Patsy warningly.

"Clarette will not be at the front, and on the way I shall be driving. Have you noticed how people scatter at the sound of our gong?"

"The authorities are watching for spies," asserted Ajo.

Maurie's face became solemn.

"Yes; of course. But--the blacksmith is not here, and," he added with assurance, "the badge of the Red Cross protects us from false accusations."

When they had gone Uncle John said thoughtfully to the girls:

"That remark about the Red Cross impressed me. If that fellow Maurie is really in danger of being arrested and shot, he has cleverly placed himself in the safest service in the world. He knows that none of our party is liable to be suspected of evil."