

CHAPTER XVIII

A QUESTION OF LOYALTY

During the morning they were visited by a French official who came aboard in a government boat and asked to see Mr. Merrick.

The ship had been inspected several times by the commander of the port and the civil authorities, and its fame as a model hospital had spread over all Flanders. Some attempt had been made to place with the Americans the most important of the wounded--officers of high rank or those of social prominence and wealth--but Mr. Merrick and his aids were determined to show no partiality. They received the lowly and humble as well as the high and mighty and the only requisite for admission was an injury that demanded the care of good nurses and the skill of competent surgeons.

Uncle John knew the French general and greeted him warmly, for he appreciated his generous co-operation. But Beth had to be called in to interpret because her uncle knew so little of the native language.

First they paid a visit to the hospital section, where the patients were inspected. Then the register and records were carefully gone over and notes taken by the general's secretary. Finally they returned to the after-deck to review the convalescents who were lounging there in their

cushioned deck-chairs.

"Where is the German, Lieutenant Elbl?" inquired the general, looking around with sudden suspicion.

"In the captain's room," replied Beth. "Would you like to see him?"

"If you please."

The group moved forward to the room occupied by Captain Carg. The door and windows stood open and reclining upon a couch inside was the maimed German, with Carg sitting beside him. Both were solemnly smoking their pipes.

The captain rose as the general entered, while Elbl gave his visitor a military salute.

"So you are better?" asked the Frenchman.

Beth repeated this in English to Carg, who repeated it in German to Elbl. Yes, the wounded man was doing very well.

"Will you keep him here much longer?" was the next question, directed to Mr. Merrick.

"I think so," was the reply. "He is still quite weak, although the wound

is healing nicely. Being a military prisoner, there is no other place open to him where the man can be as comfortable as here."

"You will be responsible for his person? You will guarantee that he will not escape?"

Mr. Merrick hesitated.

"Must we promise that?" he inquired.

"Otherwise I shall be obliged to remove him to a government hospital."

"I don't like that. Not that your hospitals are not good enough for a prisoner, but Elbl happens to be a cousin of our captain, which puts a different face on the matter. What do you say, Captain Carg? Shall we guarantee that your cousin will not try to escape?"

"Why should he, sir? He can never rejoin the army, that's certain," replied Carg.

"True," said the general, when this was conveyed to him by Beth.

"Nevertheless, he is a prisoner of war, and must not be allowed to escape to his own people."

Beth answered the Frenchman herself, looking him straight in the face.

"That strikes me as unfair, sir," said she. "The German must henceforth be a noncombatant. He has been unable, since he was wounded and brought here, to learn any of your military secrets and at the best he will lie a helpless invalid for weeks to come. Therefore, instead of making him a prisoner, it would be more humane to permit him to return to his home and family in Germany."

The general smiled indulgently.

"It might be more humane, mademoiselle, but unfortunately it is against the military code. Did I understand that your captain will guarantee the German's safety?"

"Of course," said Carg. "If he escapes, I will surrender myself in his place."

"Ah; but we moderns cannot accept Pythias if Damon runs away," laughed the general. "But, there; it will be simpler to send a parole for him to sign, when he may be left in your charge until he is sufficiently recovered to bear the confinement of a prison. Is that satisfactory?"

"Certainly, sir," replied the captain.

Elbl had remained silent during this conversation, appearing not to understand the French and English spoken. Indeed, since his arrival he had only spoken the German language, and that mostly in his intercourse

with Carg. But after the French officer had gone away Beth began to reflect upon this reticence.

"Isn't it queer," she remarked to Uncle John, "that an educated German--one who has been through college, as Captain Carg says Elbl has--should be unable to understand either French or English? I have always been told the German colleges are very thorough and you know that while at Ostend we found nearly all the German officers spoke good English."

"It is rather strange, come to think of it," answered Uncle John. "I believe the study of languages is a part of the German military education. But I regret that the French are determined to keep the poor fellow a prisoner. Such a precaution is absurd, to my mind."

"I think I can understand the French position," said the girl, reflectively. "These Germans are very obstinate, and much as I admire Lieutenant Elbl I feel sure that were he able he would fight the French again to-morrow. After his recovery he might even get one of those mechanical feet and be back on the firing line."

"He's a Uhlan."

"Then he could ride a horse. I believe, Uncle, the French are justified in retaining him as a prisoner until the war is over."

Meantime, in the captain's room the two men were quietly conversing.

"He wants you to sign a parole," said Carg.

"Not I."

"You may as well. I'm responsible for your safety."

"I deny anyone's right to be responsible for me. If you have made a promise to that effect, withdraw it," said the German.

"If I do, they'll put you in prison."

"Not at present. I am still an invalid. In reality. I am weak and suffering. Yet I am already planning my escape, and that is why I insist that you withdraw any promise you have made. Otherwise--"

"Otherwise?"

"Instead of escaping by water, as I had intended, to Ostend, I must go to the prison and escape from there. It will be more difficult. The water route is best."

"Of course," agreed the captain, smiling calmly.

"One of your launches would carry me to Ostend and return here between

dark and daylight."

"Easily enough," said Carg. It was five minutes before he resumed his speech. Then he said with quiet deliberation: "Cousin, I am an American, and Americans are neutral in this war."

"You are Sangoan."

"My ship is chartered by Americans, which obliges the captain of the ship to be loyal to its masters. I will do nothing to conflict with the interests of the Americans, not even to favor my cousin."

"Quite right," said Elbl.

"If you have any plan of escape in mind, do not tell me of it," continued the captain. "I shall order the launches guarded carefully. I shall do all in my power to prevent your getting away from this ship."

"Thank you," said the German. "You have my respect, cousin. Pass the tobacco."