

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE CAPTURE

There was considerable excitement when the ambulance returned. Part of the roof had been torn away, the doors were gone, the interior wrecked and not a pane of glass remained in the sides; yet Ajo drove it to the dock, the motor working as smoothly as ever, and half a dozen wounded were helped out and put into the launch to be taken aboard the hospital ship.

When all were on deck, young Jones briefly explained what had happened. A shell had struck the ambulance, which had been left in the rear, but without injuring the motor in any way. Fortunately no one was near at the time. When they returned they cleared away the rubbish to make room for a few wounded men and then started back to the city.

Doctor Gys, hatless and coatless, his hair awry and the mask making him look more hideous than ever, returned with the party and came creeping up the ship's ladder in so nervous a condition that his trembling knees fairly knocked together.

The group around Ajo watched him silently.

"What do you think that fool did?" asked the boy, as Gys slunk away to

his room.

"Tell us," pleaded Patsy, who was one of the curious group surrounding him.

"We had gone near to where a machine gun was planted, to pick up a fallen soldier, when without warning the Germans charged the gun. Maurie and I made a run for life, but Gys stood stock still, facing the enemy. A man at the gun reeled and fell, just then, and with a hail of bullets flying around him the doctor coolly walked up and bent over him. The sight so amazed the Germans that they actually stopped fighting and waited for him. Perhaps it was the Red Cross on the doctor's arm that influenced them, but imagine a body of soldiers in the heat of a charge suddenly stopping because of one man!"

"Well, what happened?" asked Mr. Merrick.

"I couldn't see very well, for a battery that supported the charge was shelling the retreating Allies and just then our ambulance was hit. But Maurie says he watched the scene and that when Gys attempted to lift the wounded man up he suddenly turned weak as water. The Germans had captured the gun, by this time, and their officer himself hoisted the injured man upon the doctor's shoulders and attended him to our ambulance. When I saw the fight was over I hastened to help Gys, who staggered so weakly that he would have dropped his man a dozen times on the way had not the Germans held him up. They were laughing, as if the

whole thing was a joke, when crack! came a volley of bullets and with a great shout back rushed the French and Belgians in a counter-charge. I admit I ducked, crawling under the ambulance, and the Germans were so surprised that they beat a quick retreat.

"And now it was that Gys made a fool of himself. He tore off his cap and coat, which bore the Red Cross emblem, and leaped right between the two lines. Here were the Germans, firing as they retreated, and the Allies firing as they charged, and right in the center of the fray stood Gys. The man ought to have been shot to pieces, but nothing touched him until a Frenchman knocked him over because he was in the way of the rush. It was the most reckless, suicidal act I ever heard of!"

Uncle John looked worried. He had never told any of them of Dr. Gys' strange remark during their first interview, but he had not forgotten it. "I'll be happier when I can shake off this horrible envelope of disfigurement," the doctor had declared, and in view of this the report of that day's adventure gave the kind-hearted gentleman a severe shock.

He walked the deck thoughtfully while the girls hurried below to look after the new patients who had been brought, not too comfortably, in the damaged ambulance. "It was a bad fight," Ajo had reported, "and the wounded were thick, but we could only bring a few of them. Before we left the field, however, an English ambulance and two French ones arrived, and that gave us an opportunity to get away. Indeed, I was so unnerved by the dangers we had miraculously escaped that I was glad to

be out of it."

Uncle John tried hard to understand Doctor Gys, but the man's strange, abnormal nature was incomprehensible. When, half an hour later, Mr. Merrick went below, he found the doctor in the operating room, cool and steady of nerve and dressing wounds in his best professional manner.

Upon examination the next morning the large ambulance was found to be so badly damaged that it had to be taken to a repair shop in the city to undergo reconstruction. It would take several weeks to put it in shape, declared the French mechanics, so the Americans would be forced to get along with the smaller vehicle. Jones and Dr. Kelsey made regular trips with this, but the fighting had suddenly lulled and for several days no new patients were brought to the ship, although many were given first aid in the trenches for slight wounds.

So the colony aboard the Arabella grew gradually less, until on the twenty-sixth of November the girls found they had but two patients to care for--Elbl and Andrew Denton. Neither required much nursing, and Denton's young wife insisted on taking full charge of him. But while the hospital ship was not in demand at this time there were casualties day by day in the trenches, where the armies faced each other doggedly and watchfully and shots were frequently interchanged when a soldier carelessly exposed his person to the enemy. So the girls took turns going with the ambulance, and Uncle John made no protest because so little danger attended these journeys.

Each day, while one of the American girls rode to the front, the other two would visit the city hospitals and render whatever assistance they could to the regular nurses. Gys sometimes accompanied them and sometimes went to the front with the ambulance; but he never caused his friends anxiety on these trips, because he could not endanger his life, owing to the cessation of fighting.

The only incident that enlivened this period of stagnation was the capture of Maurie. No; the authorities didn't get him, but Clarette did. Ajo and Patsy had gone into the city one afternoon and on their return to the docks, where their launch was moored, they found a street urchin awaiting them with a soiled scrap of paper clenched fast in his fist. He surrendered it for a coin and Patsy found the following words scrawled in English:

"She has me fast. Help! Be quick. I cannot save myself so you must save me. It is your Maurie who is in distress."

They laughed a little at first and then began to realize that the loss of their chauffeur would prove a hardship when fighting was resumed. Maurie might not be a good husband, and he might be afraid of a woman, but was valuable when bullets were flying. Patsy asked the boy:

"Can you lead us to the man who gave you this paper?"

"Oui, mamselle."

"Then hurry, and you shall have five centimes more."

The injunction was unnecessary, for the urchin made them hasten to keep up with him. He made many turns and twists through narrow alleys and back streets until finally he brought them to a row of cheap, plastered huts built against the old city wall. There was no mistaking the place, for in the doorway of one of the poorest dwellings stood Clarette, her ample figure fairly filling the opening, her hands planted firmly on her broad hips.

"Good evening," said Patsy pleasantly. "Is Maurie within?"

"Henri is within," answered Clarette with a fierce scowl, "and he is going to stay within."

"But we have need of his services," said Ajo sternly, "and the man is in our employ and under contract to obey us."

"I also need his services," retorted Clarette, "and I made a contract with him before you did, as my marriage papers will prove."

The little boy and girl had now crowded into the doorway on either side of their mother, clinging to her skirts while they "made faces" at the Americans. Clarette turned to drive the children away and in the act

allowed Patsy and Ajo to glance past her into the hut.

There stood little Maurie, sleeves rolled above his elbows, bending over a battered dishpan where he was washing a mess of cracked and broken pottery. He met their gaze with a despairing countenance and a gesture of appeal that scattered a spray of suds from big wet fingers. Next moment Clarette had filled the doorway again.

"You may as well go away," said the woman harshly.

Patsy stood irresolute.

"Have you money to pay the rent and to provide food and clothing?" she presently asked.

"I have found a few francs in Henri's pockets," was the surly reply.

"And when they are gone?"

Clarette gave a shrug.

"When they are gone we shall not starve," she said. "There is plenty of charity for the Belgians these days. One has but to ask, and someone gives."

"Then you will not let us have Maurie?"

"No, mademoiselle." Then she unbent a little and added: "If my husband goes to you, they will be sure to catch him some day, and when they catch him they will shoot him."

"Why?"

"Don't you know?"

"No."

Clarette smiled grimly.

"When Henri escapes me, he always gets himself into trouble. He is not so very bad, but he is careless--and foolish. He tries to help the Germans and the French at the same time, to be accommodating, and so both have conceived a desire to shoot him. Well; when they shoot him he can no longer earn money to support me and his children."

"Are they really his children?" inquired young Jones.

"Who else may claim them, monsieur?"

"I thought they were the children of your first husband, the blacksmith."



Clarette glared at him, with lowering brow.

"Blacksmith? Pah! I have no husband but Henri, and heaven forsook me when I married him."

"Come, Patsy," said Ajo to his companion, "our errand here is hopeless. And--perhaps Clarette is right."

They made their way back to the launch in silence. Patsy was quite disappointed in Maurie. He had so many admirable qualities that it was a shame he could be so untruthful and unreliable.

As time passed on the monotony that followed their first exciting experiences grew upon them and became oppressive. December weather in Flanders brought cutting winds from off the North Sea and often there were flurries of snow in the air. They had steam heat inside the ship but the deck was no longer a practical lounging place.

Toward the last of the month Lieutenant Elbl was so fully recovered that he was able to hobble about on crutches. The friendship between the two cousins continued and Elbl was often found in the captain's room. No more had been said about a parole, but the French officials were evidently keeping an eye on the German, for one morning an order came to Mr. Merrick to deliver Elbl to the warden of the military prison at Dunkirk on or before ten o'clock the following day.

While the German received this notification with his accustomed stolid air of indifference, his American friends were all grieved at his transfer. They knew the prison would be very uncomfortable for the invalid and feared he was not yet sufficiently recovered to be able to bear the new conditions imposed upon him. There was no thought of protesting the order, however, for they appreciated the fact that the commandant had been especially lenient in leaving the prisoner so long in their care.

The Americans were all sitting together in the cabin that evening after dinner, when to their astonishment little Maurie came aboard in a skiff, bearing an order from the French commandant to Captain Carg, requesting him to appear at once at military headquarters.

Not only was Carg puzzled by this strange summons but none of the others could understand it. The Belgian, when questioned, merely shook his head. He was not the general's confidant, but his fee as messenger would enable him to buy bread for his family and he had been chosen because he knew the way to the hospital ship.

As there was nothing to do but obey, the captain went ashore in one of the launches, which towed the skiff in which Maurie had come.

When he had gone, Lieutenant Elbl, who had been sitting in the cabin, bade the others good night and retired to his room. Most of the others retired early, but Patsy, Uncle John and Doctor Gys decided to sit up

and await the return of the captain. It was an exceptionally cool evening and the warmth of the forward cabin was very agreeable.

Midnight had arrived when the captain's launch finally drew up to the side and Carg came hastening into the cabin. His agitated manner was so unusual that the three watchers with one accord sprang to their feet with inquiring looks.

"Where's Elbl?" asked the captain sharply.

"Gone to bed," said Uncle John.

"When?"

"Hours ago. I think he missed your society and was rather broken up over the necessity of leaving us to-morrow."

Without hesitation Carg turned on his heel and hastened aft. They followed him in a wondering group. Reaching the German's stateroom the captain threw open the door and found it vacant.

"Humph!" he exclaimed. "I suspected the truth when I found our launch was gone."

"Which launch?" asked Uncle John, bewildered.

"The one I left with the ship. On my return, just now, I discovered it was not at its moorings. Someone has stolen it."

They stared at him in amazement.

"Wasn't the deck patrolled?" asked Patsy, the first to recover.

"We don't set a watch till ten-thirty. It wasn't considered necessary. But I had no suspicion of the trick Elbl has played on me to-night," he added with a groan. Their voices had aroused others. Ajo came out of his room, enveloped in a heavy bathrobe, and soon after Maud and Beth joined them.

"What's up?" demanded the boy.

"The German has tricked us and made his escape," quietly answered Dr. Gys. "For my part, I'm glad of it."

"It was a conspiracy," growled the captain. "That rascal, Maurie--"

"Oh, was Maurie in it?"

"Of course. He was the decoy; perhaps he arranged the whole thing."

"Didn't the general want you, then?"

Carg was so enraged that he fairly snorted.

"Want me? Of course he didn't want me! That treacherous little Belgian led me into the waiting room and said the general would see me in a minute. Then he walked away and I sat there like a bump on a log and waited. Finally I began to wonder how Maurie, who was always shy of facing the authorities, had happened to be the general's messenger. It looked queer. Officers and civilians were passing back and forth but no one paid any attention to me; so after an hour or so I asked an officer who entered from an inner room, when I could see the general. He said the general was not there evenings but would be in his office to-morrow morning. Then I showed him my order and he glanced at it and said it was forged; wasn't the general's signature and wasn't in proper form, anyhow. When I started to go he wouldn't let me; said the affair was suspicious and needed investigation. So he took me to a room full of officers and they asked me a thousand fool questions. Said they had no record of a Belgian named Maurie and had never heard of him before. I couldn't figure the thing out, and they couldn't; so finally they let me come back to the ship."

"Strange," mused Uncle John; "very strange!"

"I was so stupid," continued Carg, "that I never thought of Elbl being at the bottom of the affair until I got back and found our launch missing. Then I remembered that Elbl was to have been turned over to the prison authorities to-morrow and like a flash I saw through the whole

thing."

"I'm blamed if I do," declared Mr. Merrick.

The others likewise shook their heads.

"He got me out of the way, stole the launch, and is half way to Ostend by this time."

"Alone? And wounded--still an invalid?"

"Doubtless Maurie is with him. The rascal can run an automobile; so I suppose he can run a launch."

"What puzzles me," remarked Patsy, "is how Lieutenant Elbl ever got hold of Maurie, and induced him to assist him, without our knowing anything about it."

"I used to notice them talking together a good bit," said Jones.

"But Clarette has kept Maurie a prisoner. She wouldn't let him come back to the ship."

"He was certainly at liberty to-night," answered Beth. "Isn't this escape liable to be rather embarrassing to us, Uncle John?"

"I'm afraid so," was the reply. "We agreed to keep him safely until the authorities demanded we give him up; and now, at the last minute, we've allowed him to get away."

Anxiety was written on every countenance as they considered the serious nature of this affair. Only Gys seemed composed and unworried.

"Is it too late to go in chase of the launch?" asked Ajo, breaking a long pause. "They're headed for Ostend, without a doubt, and there's a chance that they may run into a sand-bank in the dark, or break down, or meet with some other accident to delay them."

"I believe it's worth our while, sir," answered Carg. "The launch we have is the faster, and the trip will show our good faith, if nothing more."

"Then make ready to start at once," said Ajo, "and I'll dress and go along."

Carg hurried away to give orders and the boy ran to his stateroom. Five minutes later they were away, with four sailors to assist in the capture of the fugitives in case they were overtaken.

It was a fruitless journey, however. At daybreak, as they neared Ostend, they met their stolen launch coming back, in charge of a sleepy Belgian who had been hired to return it. The man frankly stated that he had

undertaken the task in order to get to Dunkirk, where he had friends, and he had been liberally paid by a German on crutches, who had one foot missing, and a little Belgian whom he had never seen before, but who, from the description given, could be none other than Maurie.

They carried the man back with them to the Arabella, where further questioning added nothing to their information. They now had proof, however, that Elbl was safe with his countrymen at Ostend and that Maurie had been his accomplice.

"I would not believe," said Patsy, when she heard the story, "that a Belgian could be so disloyal to his country."

"Every nation has its quota of black sheep," replied Uncle John, "and from what we have learned of Maurie's character he is not at all particular which side he serves."