

CHAPTER III. THE GERMAN SHELL.

A THIRD rifle-shot rang through the night air, close to the cottage. Grace started and approached the window in alarm.

"What does that firing mean?" she asked.

"Signals from the outposts," the nurse quietly replied.

"Is there any danger? Have the Germans come back?"

Surgeon Surville answered the question. He lifted the canvas screen, and looked into the room as Miss Roseberry spoke.

"The Germans are advancing on us," he said. "Their vanguard is in sight."

Grace sank on the chair near her, trembling from head to foot. Mercy advanced to the surgeon, and put the decisive question to him.

"Do we defend the position?" she inquired.

Surgeon Surville ominously shook his head.

"Impossible! We are outnumbered as usual--ten to one."

The shrill roll of the French drums was heard outside.

"There is the retreat sounded!" said the surgeon. "The captain is not a man to think twice about what he does. We are left to take care of ourselves. In five minutes we must be out of this place."

A volley of rifle-shots rang out as he spoke. The German vanguard was attacking the French at the outposts. Grace caught the surgeon entreatingly by the arm. "Take me with you," she cried. "Oh, sir, I have suffered from the Germans already! Don't forsake me, if they come back!" The surgeon was equal to the occasion; he placed the hand of the pretty Englishwoman on his breast. "Fear nothing, madam," he said, looking as if he could have annihilated the whole German force with his own invincible arm. "A Frenchman's heart beats under your hand. A Frenchman's devotion protects you." Grace's head sank on his shoulder. Monsieur Surville felt that he had asserted himself; he looked round invitingly at Mercy. She, too, was an

attractive woman. The Frenchman had another shoulder at her service. Unhappily the room was dark--the look was lost on Mercy. She was thinking of the helpless men in the inner chamber, and she quietly recalled the surgeon to a sense of his professional duties.

"What is to become of the sick and wounded?" she asked.

Monsieur Surville shrugged one shoulder--the shoulder that was free.

"The strongest among them we can take away with us," he said. "The others must be left here. Fear nothing for yourself, dear lady. There will be a place for you in the baggage-wagon."

"And for me, too?" Grace pleaded, eagerly.

The surgeon's invincible arm stole round the young lady's waist, and answered mutely with a squeeze.

"Take her with you," said Mercy. "My place is with the men whom you leave behind."

Grace listened in amazement. "Think what you risk," she said "if you stop here."

Mercy pointed to her left shoulder.

"Don't alarm yourself on my account," she answered; "the red cross will protect me."

Another roll of the drum warned the susceptible surgeon to take his place as director-general of the ambulance without any further delay. He conducted Grace to a chair, and placed both her hands on his heart this time, to reconcile her to the misfortune of his absence. "Wait here till I return for you," he whispered. "Fear nothing, my charming friend. Say to yourself, 'Surville is the soul of honor! Surville is devoted to me!'" He struck his breast; he again forgot the obscurity in the room, and cast one look of unutterable homage at his charming friend. "A bientot!" he cried, and kissed his hand and disappeared.

As the canvas screen fell over him the sharp report of the rifle-firing was suddenly and grandly dominated by the roar of cannon. The instant after a shell exploded in the garden outside, within a few yards of the window.

Grace sank on her knees with a shriek of terror. Mercy, without losing her self-possession, advanced to the window and looked out.

"The moon has risen," she said. "The Germans are shelling the village."

Grace rose, and ran to her for protection.

"Take me away!" she cried. "We shall be killed if we stay here." She stopped, looking in astonishment at the tall black figure of the nurse, standing immovably by the window. "Are you made of iron?" she exclaimed. "Will nothing frighten you?"

Mercy smiled sadly. "Why should I be afraid of losing my life?" she answered. "I have nothing worth living for!"

The roar of the cannon shook the cottage for the second time. A second shell exploded in the courtyard, on the opposite side of the building.

Bewildered by the noise, panic-stricken as the danger from the shells threatened the cottage more and more nearly, Grace threw her arms round the nurse, and clung, in the abject familiarity of terror, to the woman whose hand she had shrunk from touching not five minutes since. "Where is it safest?" she cried. "Where can I hide myself?"

"How can I tell where the next shell will fall?" Mercy answered, quietly.

The steady composure of the one woman seemed to madden the other. Releasing the nurse, Grace looked wildly round for a way of escape from the cottage. Making first for the kitchen, she was driven back by the clamor and confusion attending the removal of those among the wounded who were strong enough to be placed in the wagon. A second look round showed her the door leading into the yard. She rushed to it with a cry of relief. She had just laid her hand on the lock when the third report of cannon burst over the place.

Starting back a step, Grace lifted her hands mechanically to her ears. At the same moment the third shell burst through the roof of the cottage, and exploded in the room, just inside the door. Mercy sprang forward, unhurt, from her place at the window. The burning fragments of the shell were already firing the dry wooden floor, and in the midst of them, dimly seen through the smoke, lay the insensible body of her companion in the room. Even at that dreadful moment the nurse's presence of mind did not fail her. Hurrying back to the place that she had just left, near which she had

already noticed the miller's empty sacks lying in a heap, she seized two of them, and, throwing them on the smoldering floor, trampled out the fire. That done, she knelt by the senseless woman, and lifted her head.

Was she wounded? or dead?

Mercy raised one helpless hand, and laid her fingers on the wrist. While she was still vainly trying to feel for the beating of the pulse, Surgeon Surville (alarmed for the ladies) hurried in to inquire if any harm had been done.

Mercy called to him to approach. "I am afraid the shell has struck her," she said, yielding her place to him. "See if she is badly hurt."

The surgeon's anxiety for his charming patient expressed itself briefly in an oath, with a prodigious emphasis laid on one of the letters in it--the letter R. "Take off her cloak," he cried, raising his hand to her neck. "Poor angel! She has turned in falling; the string is twisted round her throat."

Mercy removed the cloak. It dropped on the floor as the surgeon lifted Grace in his arms. "Get a candle," he said, impatiently; "they will give you one in the kitchen." He tried to feel the pulse: his hand trembled, the noise and confusion in the kitchen bewildered him. "Just Heaven!" he exclaimed. "My emotions overpower me!" Mercy approached him with the candle. The light disclosed the frightful injury which a fragment of the shell had inflicted on the Englishwoman's head. Surgeon Surville's manner altered on the instant. The expression of anxiety left his face; its professional composure covered it suddenly like a mask. What was the object of his admiration now? An inert burden in his arms--nothing more.

The change in his face was not lost on Mercy. Her large gray eyes watched him attentively. "Is the lady seriously wounded?" she asked.

"Don't trouble yourself to hold the light any longer," was the cool reply. "It's all over--I can do nothing for her."

"Dead?"

Surgeon Surville nodded and shook his fist in the direction of the outposts. "Accursed Germans!" he cried, and looked down at the dead face on his arm, and shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "The fortune of war!" he said as he lifted the body and placed it on the bed in one corner of the room. "Next time, nurse, it may be you or me. Who knows? Bah! the problem of human destiny disgusts me." He turned from the bed, and illustrated his disgust by

spitting on the fragments of the exploded shell. "We must leave her there," he resumed. "She was once a charming person--she is nothing now. Come away, Miss Mercy, before it is too late."

He offered his arm to the nurse; the creaking of the baggage-wagon, starting on its journey, was heard outside, and the shrill roll of the drums was renewed in the distance. The retreat had begun.

Mercy drew aside the canvas, and saw the badly wounded men, left helpless at the mercy of the enemy, on their straw beds. She refused the offer of Monsieur Surville's arm.

"I have already told you that I shall stay here," she answered.

Monsieur Surville lifted his hands in polite remonstrance. Mercy held back the curtain, and pointed to the cottage door.

"Go," she said. "My mind is made up."

Even at that final moment the Frenchman asserted himself. He made his exit with unimpaired grace and dignity. "Madam," he said, "you are sublime!" With that parting compliment the man of gallantry--true to the last to his admiration of the sex--bowed, with his hand on his heart, and left the cottage.

Mercy dropped the canvas over the doorway. She was alone with the dead woman.

The last tramp of footsteps, the last rumbling of the wagon wheels, died away in the distance. No renewal of firing from the position occupied by the enemy disturbed the silence that followed. The Germans knew that the French were in retreat. A few minutes more and they would take possession of the abandoned village: the tumult of their approach should become audible at the cottage. In the meantime the stillness was terrible. Even the wounded wretches who were left in the kitchen waited their fate in silence.

Alone in the room, Mercy's first look was directed to the bed.

The two women had met in the confusion of the first skirmish at the close of twilight. Separated, on their arrival at the cottage, by the duties required of the nurse, they had only met again in the captain's room. The acquaintance between them had been a short one; and it had given no promise of ripening into friendship. But the fatal accident had roused Mercy's interest in the

stranger. She took the candle, and approached the corpse of the woman who had been literally killed at her side.

She stood by the bed, looking down in the silence of the night at the stillness of the dead face.

It was a striking face--once seen (in life or in death) not to be forgotten afterward. The forehead was unusually low and broad; the eyes unusually far apart; the mouth and chin remarkably small. With tender hands Mercy smoothed the disheveled hair and arranged the crumpled dress. "Not five minutes since," she thought to herself, "I was longing to change places with you!" She turned from the bed with a sigh. "I wish I could change places now!"

The silence began to oppress her. She walked slowly to the other end of the room.

The cloak on the floor--her own cloak, which she had lent to Miss Roseberry--attracted her attention as she passed it. She picked it up and brushed the dust from it, and laid it across a chair. This done, she put the light back on the table, and going to the window, listened for the first sounds of the German advance. The faint passage of the wind through some trees near at hand was the only sound that caught her ears. She turned from the window, and seated herself at the table, thinking. Was there any duty still left undone that Christian charity owed to the dead? Was there any further service that pressed for performance in the interval before the Germans appeared?

Mercy recalled the conversation that had passed between her ill-fated companion and herself. Miss Roseberry had spoken of her object in returning to England. She had mentioned a lady--a connection by marriage, to whom she was personally a stranger--who was waiting to receive her. Some one capable of stating how the poor creature had met with her death ought to write to her only friend. Who was to do it? There was nobody to do it but the one witness of the catastrophe now left in the cottage--Mercy herself.

She lifted the cloak from the chair on which she had placed it, and took from the pocket the leather letter-case which Grace had shown to her. The only way of discovering the address to write to in England was to open the case and examine the papers inside. Mercy opened the case--and stopped, feeling a strange reluctance to carry the investigation any farther.

A moment's consideration satisfied her that her scruples were misplaced. If she respected the case as inviolable, the Germans would certainly not hesitate to examine it, and the Germans would hardly trouble themselves to write to England. Which were the fittest eyes to inspect the papers of the deceased lady--the eyes of men and foreigners, or the eyes of her own countrywoman? Mercy's hesitation left her. She emptied the contents of the case on the table.

That trifling action decided the whole future course of her life.