THE NURSE'S STORY

"The general feels as you do," he answered. "Your American affiliations stand you in good stead. But the one fact which makes us consent at all to your going is that we are prepared to surround them by noon today. If you can get through and escape suspicion for several hours you will be safe. You may tell them the French 75's are being placed tonight by the big bridge. They will recognize the peculiar bark of that gun and know you are telling the truth. I need not go further. The less you know the easier your task will be, for you are wholly unsuited to such a despicable role," and he took my hand affectionately in his own.

He then questioned me minutely about Captain Frazer's condition and spirits and, looking at me long and steadily, said, "You are the fine"—But he broke off abruptly and handed me a khaki overcoat, puttees, shoes and cap.

"Put these things on over your nurse's uniform when you start. Now, get a few hours' rest and at dawn walk boldly out and down the road. Follow it for three miles—the lines break there—and when you see me showing a map to a sentry by the aid of my electric flash run quickly by and make for the open. A few shots may be fired, but have no fear, they will be for the benefit of any spies who may be around. The German patrols will be watching for you; however, take no chances; leave your coat and cap and approach their lines with your Red Cross uniform in plain sight. Don't wear even your own uniform coat; it is wiser. Once through you will report to the officer in command, and whatever else you do keep cool. A favorite method of theirs is to humiliate and insult a prisoner until they wear his nerves down and then trick him into a damaging admission. Tell your story, which is a simple one, and stick to it, and always keep in mind that a few hours at best and our men will be there. I don't believe they can connect you with the movement before that time, and their trumped up charge against Ian will hardly be considered valid by the officers higher up. After all, it's the hazards of war. God bless you, my brave child, and I feel we shall meet again, that this is not to be a tragedy."

I slipped back into the room. The old woman was awake and had missed me. For a moment I was frightened lest she had heard, but her words, hateful as they were, reassured me. "I have been wondering which of them your man was—now I know." I wondered when before in the world a good woman had been really happy at being accused of having a lover. But my mind was too occupied to dwell long on that subject and I began thinking of Ian's brother—he seemed so kindly, yet so detached, as if life were a river and he was sitting on the bank watching it go by. I vaguely began to recall incidents relating to him, only his name hadn't some way remained in my memory. About 4 I got up, slipped out into the hall and dressed, crept downstairs and out into the blinding snow. As I trudged along I ate my breakfast—a cake of chocolate which I had bought the day before.

For some time I had gone along, seeing no signs of life, and then, moving like ghostly shadows, I came upon a squad of bombardiers. They made a strange picture, recalling traditions of medieval fighters. Around their middle they carried some twenty or thirty bombs, little cylinders fastened on a long stick, around which fell streamers of ribbon. This clothing suggested a mixed breed of Scotchmen and red Indians, who had taken to wearing the Indian headdress as a kilt. I had heard many stories of what their work was like in the trenches. Crouching down among the barbed wire entanglements, with their supporting infantrymen, who carried fixed bayonets, they raised themselves a little from the earth and, seizing one of their rocketlike bombs from their belts, grasped it by the stick and hurled it high above the rampart. It twists and travels uncertainly through the air and finally by the force of equilibrium supplied by the streamers of ribbon plunges straight as a plumb line into the trench.

Not wishing to be observed, I stood motionless, watching them until they had passed quite out of sight.

A little way farther on I was wondering if I might not miss my way in the snow when suddenly from an inn there stepped into the road three khaki figures. One of them fell behind to light a cigarette, and by the flame of the match I saw it was Lord N. He didn't appear to see me, and the three went on talking about the best way to drain a trench without clogging.

It was still dark and snowing heavily, and I would undoubtedly never have found my way but for the starlike glare of the German rockets. I heard, too, the big guns as they boomed out now and then, but even they would have left me quite confused as to directions. I had walked hours before I saw any traces of the German lines.

CHAPTER XVI.

A Man's Life.

REMEMBERING Lord N.'s admonition, I had intended as soon as I felt the sentry was near to throw aside my khaki coat, but the snow was so cold and wet I was chilled to the bone and shivered at the thought of leaving it, so I was still wearing cap, coat and all when I heard the sentry call out, "Who goes there?"

"A friend!" I cried back quickly and advanced and gave the countersign. Evidently I was expected, as he directed me to go a half mile farther down, where I would find some one waiting for me. Passing a little inn, half dead with cold and fatigue, I went in to ask for a hot drink. The landlady was a French peasant, young and pretty. She eyed me curiously, but did not venture to speak. I had to wait, as she was getting breakfast ready for some soldiers. They were fresh from the trenches and were covered with mud from head to heel. I thought idly they looked like football players at the end of the third quarter.

I had just begun drinking my tea when the door opened and a familiar figure, bundled in a great coat, came in the room. In an instant I recognized him; it was Von Schulling. He came straight over to me and said very gently: "Fraulein, I've come for you. I am leaving tonight for home on leave, and I wanted to talk with you, and this seemed a good opportunity. As soon as you are finished we had better be off. They are anxiously awaiting you down there."

I no longer wanted anything, and he tossed a coin across the table, and we went out to the waiting motor.

I dreaded the ride. In fact, I shrank from it in a sort of nameless terror, but again I was to find the big black thing that loomed, only loomed and nothing more. We were hardly started before he began. Speaking English, he said:

"Miss Bleneau, first I want to ask you to forgive the many unthinkable discourtesies I have inflicted upon you. I think over and over how dear and kind you were to me when I was ill in your hospital. I am afraid you can't forgive what happened there, but I want you to know that I am sorry." He paused, evidently awaiting a reply.

I murmured that it was all forgotten as far as I was concerned.

"You are an angel," he said, with a catch in his voice, "to say that," and then he began anew. "I came to meet you today because you are in danger, and I want to help you. I know you far too well to believe for one moment that you placed those guns for us fairly. They," he said contemptuously, nodding in the direction of headquarters, "may believe you are a Latin and can love to the obliteration of all else, but I know you, and I told them so in the beginning."

I parted my lips to speak, but he anticipated my question. "Nobody has told me anything. Not one of us has any reason so far to suspect you played anything but fair, but I am as certain of it now as if I had seen your every move. You do love Frazer with all the strength of your soul. I know, but so love, no passion, no personal sentiment, would ever make you sell out your own. How you did it, what happened, I don't know, and," he hastened on, "I don't wish to know; but, whatever happened, we shall know it, and that almost at once."

Without waiting for me to speak he continued, "When the firing begins again, if theirs is not diminished, in fact, not almost annihilated, after our heavy fire day and night, they will know the truth—that their guns and gunners are safe, fresh for an attack, while we have been pounding away at dummies and—I don't know what may happen." After a pause, "Perhaps nothing until they know definitely, have actual proof, and then you will be"— He turned to me as white as death. "I can't bear to think of it. I've seen so much—things too awful to repeat—I shudder."

He paused, it seemed minutes, and then said gently: "Adele, dear, come with me—marry me—I am afraid I am done for as a soldier—we shall go away out of all sight and sound of war, back to your home in Louisiana, anywhere you say. I am sick of it." I had been so stunned at his words; he had said a great deal too much before I had sufficiently collected my wits to speak.

"Don't, please; it's useless and hopeless. I don't love you. Captain von Schulling, and that is the answer to everything."

"Is it Frazer?" he asked bluntly.

"Yes," I scarcely more than whispered. "Will they shoot him as a spy?"

"Perhaps General S. might have done so, but since you have left Prince H. of H. has taken command, and he doesn't 'play the game,' as the English say, that way," he replied with an attempt at a laugh. Then, soberly: "You are in grave danger; he is not. If you had only refused to go on this mad wild mission all would have been well, but that's past now; you did go, you did trick us, and now—what's to be done?"

"I've probably got to pay," I answered.

"Not as my wife," he said. "My father is not only a financial power, which is a very important consideration now, but one of the kaiser's nearest advisers. As my wife you will be safe, honored and, more than that, with God's help, happy. We may have faults, it is true, but no man can truthfully say we are not good husbands." I had tried again and again to stem the torrent of his words, but it was useless. Only by waiting until he had finished could I hope to be heard.

"I am sorry," I said, "sorrier than I can find words to tell you; but my answer is final. But in spite of the pain of it all, I wouldn't exchange what you have told me for much, very much. All my life I shall remember that you are fine and brave and—the man I like to think of you as being." We were before the steps of the hospital.

"Then—in spite of the danger, everything—this is the end," he asked sadly.

Holding out my hand, I said gently, "Goodby," and he looked into my eyes with an expression that hurt me.

Handing me a card, he said: "If you ever need me this will find me. I am going before they question me. Good-by, little girl. God bless you." His voice broke, and he turned, ran down the steps, jumped in the car and was gone. I looked at the card. It read, "Prince Hugo von Schulling, Captain —— Dragoons, Berlin."

As I climbed the steps, breathless, my anxiety as to Ian and my thought of Von Schulling were interrupted by an orderly calling out to me, "Fraulein, you are wanted at once by his excellency." I followed him. I had no time to get nervous or to think of what to say. Consequently I was calm when I entered. The commander I knew was no longer there, and in his place sat an erect dignified man with gray deep set eyes and square chin. He would have been handsome had his face been a little less heavy. All his sternness I felt was a mask.

"Is this the girl?" he said to an officer beside him.

"Yes, your excellency."

"What is your name, and what was your mission?" he said.

Telling him my name in full, I added, "To place the big guns of the English"—

"Have you succeeded?" he asked.

"Have I?" I questioned in turn. "I thought so."

To the officer beside him he said, "Has she?"

"Yes, your excellency, but"—

"Good," he said, interrupting. "What were you to receive in exchange for your—your work, fraulein?" and without stopping for an answer went on, "The stake must have been a rich one to tempt a girl like you," and he looked me over slowly from head to toe and then back again. I was still wearing men's shoes. He smiled as they caught his eye. "Yes, a very high price. What was it?" abruptly.

"A man's life," I answered, looking at him squarely.

"Who is the man and what is he?"

"He is Captain Frazer of the Indian army, son of Lord L., and he is my patient."

"Your patient!" and he smiled. "You were a very devoted nurse, I should say," with emphasis. "A life," he repeated. "Was his life in danger?"

"He had been accused of being a spy, and I was told that unless I brought back the location of the battery by tonight he would be shot."

"What had he done?" he asked, turning to the officer near him. Before the officer could reply to the question the telephone on his desk rang violently, and his excellency took it, or rather snatched the receiver from the hand of the man near him and began speaking. After a few monosyllables he paused in the midst of his conversation and said: "Fraulein, you are free. Go to your duties for the present."

Nobody stopped me or molested me, and I literally ran to Ian's room. He was standing at the window, and, even laboring under the great excitement that I was, I noticed he was wearing his uniform. I nearly reached his side before he realized my presence, so profoundly lost was he in his thoughts. When he turned and saw me for one brief moment the hard lines around his mouth softened, and over his face there came a fleeting expression of happiness mixed with almost bewilderment, and I heard him murmur, "Adele!" At that moment there came a sound as if a dozen guns boomed near us, followed by another and another in quick succession. The whole building trembled.

His voice shaking with emotion, he said: "All day and night they have been going. The din has been hell itself let loose. At first our guns replied, and then, as the enemy's fire grew heavier and more persistent, ours grew fainter and fainter, until now our batteries do not speak at all. Through it all I have sat here and watched their cursed taubes come in, circle around, signal and then sail away. At first it never occurred to me—I couldn't have formulated such a thought—that you, you of all beings in the world, were giving the range. Even when I overheard an officer tell another that some one had given it, I wouldn't—couldn't—believe it was you! But as I lay there, tortured like a man on the rack, with my soul torn out of my body, I began to realize that the only reason our Tommies out there were not returning the fire was because these devils must have been given the range or they couldn't have literally annihilated us. I began to wonder. I could see it all—the trenches pounded to pulp and those who were not dead or dying falling back before the deadly fire. Who had given it? For certainly somebody had done it thoroughly. Even then my reeling brain fought back the hideous suspicion that haunted me. And now—you're here. By the devil's own luck you were able to escape safely. No, it wasn't luck. It was because you traded on the decency in some man who believed in you—your childlike, wistful expression, your frank, innocent beauty! God! That's easy enough—men are like children, fools! I, the biggest fool of them all, for I adored you—in the whitest shrine of my soul I enthroned you. But, thank God, that has passed! I know you for what you are, and I hate you! Your soft, warm arms, your beautiful eyes—my God! How I loathe the night I was carried to that hospital! I would rather have died out there 10,000 times than to live and love you—and be loved by you. I don't want your kind of love. That is the sort low women have given since time began—a selfish longing for the pleasures that possession gives. You knew I adored you, worshiped you, and then if I lived you would be my wife. You wanted that, and to gratify your tawdry passion you bought my life with those of my comrades—my men, perhaps even my own brother! Great God! I am going mad! Leave me before I strangle you! My one prayer is that I shall never see you again!"

A dozen times I had been on the point of flying to him and screaming out the truth, but I was held back—not because I feared we might be overheard. That thought never once came to me. Had I been saner I would have known that it was for that very purpose I had been allowed to go to Ian's room. But at that time no thought of any such material thing came to me. I was so absolutely stunned, crushed, that I had no words with which to defend myself. Only one idea came and persisted: Ian had thought me capable of this heinous thing, while even Von Schulling had known better. I staggered from the room and fainted.

* * * * * * *

It was an hour later when the order had been given for the evacuation of the hospital, and I was desperately needed that I came back to consciousness and found a little German nurse bending over me. Afterward I learned that Ian's speech and my failure to defend myself probably saved, if not our lives, certainly for the time being, our liberties, for it never occurred to the listeners that I would have accepted his denunciations unless I had been guilty.

So much had happened, so much that was supremely vital in my life, that it was only when I heard the beginning of the last fierce onslaught that I remembered Lord N. had assured me there would be an attack in force that morning. Galvanized into life by this recollection, I struggled to my feet with some half conscious idea of finding Ian. I had staggered only a few steps when the commander of the hospital called to me that all the patients had been sent away in ambulances, motors and carts except half a dozen to whom an order for evacuation would be their death warrant. To attend these men he was leaving myself and another nurse, a German sister. As he turned to go I cried out:

"And, Captain Frazer, what have you done with him?"

"Oh," he answered, with a sneer. "His highness Prince E. says you have paid for his liberty, and that if he escapes the carnage of today he is free as far as he was concerned." He looked steadily at me for a moment and then said hastily: "We have a proverb in Germany, 'When thieves fall out honest men get their dues.'" He pronounced the word honest with biting sarcasm. "A spy who was desperately wounded in getting through the lines reported that you gave false information as to the guns, but several of the flying men maintain that you had not, because they had glimpses through the snowstorm, of the guns being placed. My personal opinion is that the spy was right and that the men were subsidized by that fool, Von ——, who ever he met you he generated into a sentimental weakling."

"And the prince," I asked, trembling, "what did he say to this?"

"Oh, he thought that as nobody could actually prove anything his order should stand."

To my great relief, he turned on his heel and disappeared down the stairs. A moment later and his motor flashed out of sight.

The attack was becoming furious, the bullets fell on the tile roofs like hail and again and again the old chateau trembled when a shell dropped near it. The ceaseless din terrified me. I experienced physical fear for the first time in my life. I longed to fly to Ian, not to comfort him, but to be comforted, but that was impossible. He did not want me. He hated me. He had said it, and besides the thought that he ever could have so misjudged me hurt too deeply.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Final Charge.

THE little German nurse, who had remained with me, came to say that the men were needing us, they were getting into a panic. I tottered down to the big ward, trying to nerve myself to be of some help, some comfort to the men. I am afraid the effort would have been a futile one had I not found the bishop there, dressed in his robes, his figure erect, his bright, black eyes flashing. He was at once a comfort and an inspiration. Passing from one man to another, German or French, Protestant or Catholic, he had a ringing word of cheer or a gentle phrase of comfort for all. His own courage was superb. From time to time he went to the window and looked out through the glasses to see how the battle was going. Suddenly he exclaimed:

"The bayonet charge has begun! My children, the danger for us is passed!" Saint though he was, he was still human. I ran toward him and asked beseechingly:

"Father, are we winning?"

"Look!" he said in a voice rendered calm by effort, and he pushed me to the window. I adjusted the binoculars, and there came before my eyes a picture that for all time is graven on my heart. It was the last terrible attack. The Germans had placed numberless machine guns behind hundreds of barbed wire entanglements. As our men advanced, sweeping all before them with a rush, the Germans fell back and allowed them to come on with hardly a shot until they were barely a hundred yards away. Then came the rattle of machine guns and the crack of rifles.

"My God, it's madness!" I heard the bishop moan. Above the din the command of an English officer was borne to us on the breeze, one word—"Charge!" The men responded with demon-like fierceness. I covered my face with my hands and prayed, but I was drawn again by an irresistible fascination. On our men came, but for every one that advanced two fell out. With machine guns firing 750 volleys a minute how could anything live? The line wavered, but only for a moment. Once again I heard that terrible command—"Charge!" And the men with quick precision made for the gaps in the barbed wire, where by some miracle some highlanders had lived for five minutes, cutting it. The snow had ceased, and the sun came out, picking up the bayonet tips until they gleamed like burnished silver.

Then came the last supreme effort—shots at close range, a desperate rush and finally cold steel at close quarters. I had always heard the Germans could not stand against the bayonet charge. Would it prove true today? Under the deadly fire of the machine guns the English line seemed once again to waver, but only for an instant; then, seemingly out of nowhere, came a rush of black faced, white turbaned Sikhs. How they yelled! And how they charged! Nothing but death could stop them. They were so close that through the glasses we could see their eyes flashing and their teeth glistening. As if in a dream I remember hearing the bishop saying: "It is the —— Sikhs. They are avenging their captain." Involuntarily my eyes turned to the room Ian had occupied. I was dumfounded at what I saw. He was on the balcony, his head bare, his hands folded. As he stood, tall and straight, his face white as chiseled marble, he seemed detached somehow, as one watching the fearful scene from a great height. A sudden clash of sounds recalled me. The men were very

"Surely, you don't hate me."

close now. I could hear their voices. It was contagious, inspiring. I, too, was a barbarian and longed to join them. We could even hear the men shouting, "That's one for Mons!" and as an officer fell I clearly heard his last command, "Come on, you highlanders!" But high above all else was the terrible yell of the Indians. They were no longer fighting for the mad joy of battle; they were going to the rescue of their captain.

The Germans were outnumbered, beaten, and they knew it, and by dozens threw down their rifles and held up their hands. The officers tried vainly to rally their scattered troops. Captain Sindhauf rode recklessly here and there. By some strange fate he had escaped. I saw him rein up his horse and heard him call to his men "Surrender," while he himself sat calmly, revolver in hand, awaiting death.

"They may be Huns," said the bishop sadly, "but no man can say they are not brave."

An orderly came hurriedly up and asked the bishop to go downstairs. He was wanted. I turned back to my charges. A German youth called to me for brandy. He had become hysterical. I was giving it when I heard the tread of heavy steps coming up the stairs and voices calling my name. I paused to listen, amazed and rather frightened. The next moment the bishop reappeared and behind him a handful of "Tommies."

"Come, my child," he called to me, "the men want to speak to you."

Lost in wonder, I mechanically went toward them. They were outside the ward in a long corridor. I had hardly reached the door before I heard again the shout, "Sister Adele!" I looked up at the bishop questioningly, but he only smiled, patted my hand, and said to the men, "This is Sister Adele." Two of them caught me up and started down the stairs. I probably would have fainted had not the bishop kept repeating: "They are only big children, humor them, humor them!"

They carried me out on the terrace of the chateau, and at a signal gave "Three cheers for Sister Adele." I was dumfounded. Then they told me it was something about the guns. I was embarrassed, confused, humiliated, for I had really done nothing. It turned out. When at last they left me and I pulled myself together I saw Ian leaning against a pillar gazing at me. His face was drawn and haggard. I don't remember how I got to him, but in a second I was there. I was no longer angry or even hurt. Self was completely forgotten. I was only frightened at what I saw in his face.

"Ian," I cried, "are you ill?" He did not answer, but looked at me with the most hopeless expression I had ever seen. "Surely, now that you know I didn't—you—you don't hate me?" Drawing me hastily into a little office near where we were standing, he said passionately:

"Hate you, dearest! The only hate in my heart is for myself. I have known you were innocent ever since I finished that vile tirade and you looked up at me—it was just a moment, but it was enough. I knew the truth. I rushed after you, but when halfway across the room the door closed, and I heard the key turned. Whoever had been listening had locked me in. I called to you. I pounded on the door. I rang frantically, but it was all useless. When the attack began I feared some awful thing might happen and I should never be able to tell you, to beg your forgiveness. I was beside myself in desperation. I broke through the window and got out on the little balcony in the mad hope of attracting the attention of some one who might find you. I was still there when the final charge began."

"Weren't they glorious, superb, your Indians"—

"They are as brave as the bravest," he replied. "I love every brown face of them. But, oh, Adele, I was too heartsick at that moment to care very much one way or the other. Will you ever be able to forget, dearest, the things I said? Can a lifetime of devotion atone?"

He paused, waiting for an answer. I tried hard to think of the right thing to say, but it was hopeless. Looking up into his eyes, all the veils were lifted from my own, and for an instant I felt my very soul was bared to him.

In spite of his long illness, he had strength enough left to crush me in his arms. I felt his heart beating furiously against my own, which sounded in my ears like distant cannonading. He kissed me again and again, while I clung to him as though I feared the next moment was to separate us forever.

The next day we went to Paris, and, although the train was an hour late, Ian's father and mother were waiting for us. I was still wearing my Red Cross uniform, which, of course, was old and worn, and I rather dreaded meeting them.

We were the last to pass through the station gate, but they had been watching us for several seconds. Ian kissed his mother, who said quite calmly, but with a little catch in her voice, "It's so good to see you again, my boy." The father and son shook hands, and neither spoke, but their handclasp lasted many seconds. And then Lady L. stooped and kissed me. The father looked at me searchingly, but kindly, then, holding both my hands, said, "Well, for at least once in my life I am not disappointed."

I was so happy that I longed to kiss this dear woman who had given my Ian life, but I was afraid. Englishwomen, I had always heard, were so cold. But, yielding to an impulse, I timidly kissed her on the cheek. In a moment her arms were about me.

At lunch we discussed our immediate plans. Ian wished to be married at once, and Lord L. in a very matter of fact way said, with men being killed off like flies, he thought the sooner we were married the better.

And so it was settled. We were married in Paris, crossed the channel and quietly slipped through London—home.

The days that followed were perfect, the weather was lovely, green trees, coming spring and happiness making Ian quite well again.

Several weeks later after I had finally decided to give up nursing Ian expressed a desire to visit Meirut hospital in Boulogne, where several of his Indians were ill, and we had passed through the big wards and stopped in one of the smaller ones to speak to a wounded Sikh when the nurse lifted the basket arrangement used to cover wounded limbs and exposed a terribly shattered leg. I had seen a hundred worse cases, but in an instant I felt myself going, everything swam before me, and then all was black. The nurse instantly put a piece of cotton soaked with alcohol to my nostrils, and Ian carried me out into the air. I was myself again in a few minutes, and after making our adieus we set out in a closed cab for our hotel. Ian was silent for a time; then he said very tenderly:

"Don't you think, dear, you had better see a doctor before we leave Boulogne?"

I felt the color come to my cheeks, but I turned my face to him and we looked into each other's eyes solemnly a moment, and then out of sheer joy of it all we laughed like two children. He caught me in his arms and kissed me until I lay stilled and quiet against his heart. Outside the rain dripped and splashed against the windows of the stuffy old cab. But then, it seems to me, it is always raining in Boulogne.

THE END.

The Angel.

Wife—I am trimming up last year's hat to save the cost of a new one! Hubby—How good of you! You're a perfect little angel, my dear! Wife—Am I? Then give me $10 to buy wings.—Exchange.