

THE INVISIBLE BARRIER

A Romance of the War, Dealing With a Passport and a Love Affair

By MARION McCLURE STEWART

THOUGH apparently Madame la Comtesse was absorbed in playing Solitaire, a close observer might have noted the fact that her eyes met frequently and with a peculiar significance those of the young man who sat at the opposite end of the table. He likewise, while shifting his cards with a deft touch, was not slow to catch the passing glances that she bestowed upon him. Near them, seated at an adjacent table, two men in civilian dress and two girls in nurses' uniforms were engaged in playing Bridge in the light afforded by a solitary candle and an oil lamp that hung in a bracket on the wall. The room, singularly bare of furniture and ornaments, was redeemed from utter cheerlessness by a grate fire. The gilded French mirror and Louis Quinze clock which ticked on the mantel-piece, together with the tapestried wall that was adorned by two or three oil paintings in gilt frames, seemed to bear some faint resemblance, that was not without a suggestion of pathos, to its days of former splendour when it had been known as the salon of the house. Gaps in the walls, crumbling pieces of fallen plaster, and the shattered chandeliers were speaking souvenirs of the German bombardment which was, however, at an end, and the population of Lille had now settled down to its every-day life under the domination of German rule.

Suddenly Madame la Comtesse leaned slightly across the table and her lips formed a word that her companion endeavoured to catch. It was "To-night." Their eyes met for an instant, then he inclined his head and again bent over the cards. So absorbed, however, were the Bridge players in their game that there was no fear of critical inspection from that quarter. In the further end of the room another game of cards was in progress between men in tattered uniforms of greenish grey, whose battered and bandaged appearance proclaimed their recent convalescence. At this moment the clock on the mantel struck ten, and one of the girls rose promptly to her feet, breaking up the game. A chorus of adieux followed, and the young men who had the prosperous air of the wealthy merchant class, having made their bows to Madame la Comtesse forthwith took their departure. Hardly had they withdrawn, when the door opened to admit an officer, whose keen blue eyes and sweeping moustache, together with his haughty stride, betrayed his Teutonic origin. Instantly the soldiers, their game and wounds alike forgotten, stood to attention like wooden statues. The officer hardly noting their presence, meanwhile made his way towards the hostess, speaking in excellent French, though tinged with a guttural accent.

"Ah bonsoir, Madame. I am glad to see you relax a little after your labours. Your patients, how are they this evening?"

"They are all doing excellently well, Monsieur le Colonel. You must not give me too much credit, nevertheless. My nurses are all so devoted. Perhaps you would like to go through our hospital?"

He bowed with a tinge of condescension, favouring Madame's companion the while with a glance of the keenest scrutiny.

"I shall be delighted if you will be so kind."

SHE rose with a languid grace and led the way into a large room on the opposite side of the hall, in which two rows of beds met the eye, each holding a patient in various stages of progress. The presence of French, Belgian and German soldiers lying side by side, the objects of equal care and attention, was a sufficiently unique feature of the little hospital to have aroused a stranger's interest. Amid the beds several nurses hovered administering to the wants of the sufferers.

"Can you accommodate any more men, Madame?" asked the officer, abruptly, and while speaking his audacious blue eye took note of her slender grace and patrician bearing with unconcealed admiration.

"Not unless we get more beds, Monsieur, and add another ward to our hospital. We have about as many as we can handle now, as you see." Her quick eye catching an appealing glance flung her by a soldier in a nearby cot, she hastened to minister to his needs. She was disagreeably conscious meanwhile of a strict surveillance on the part of her visitor, who shortly after took his departure.

Two hours later, when Madame re-entered the salon, she found her former companion awaiting her. He stood, tall and straight with a soldierly bearing, the rays off the lamp falling on his fair hair, and revealing his clean-cut face half in shadow expectant and eager.

"You have a plan," he said, in an undertone.

Madame la Comtesse nodded slowly.

"There is great risk, of course, but what is accomplished without risk? It was unfortunate that you encountered M. le Colonel Von Gluck to-night. Nobody or nothing escapes his notice, and I saw him scrutinize you. Monsieur de Brisay, to-morrow night, you must escape from here."

"But the pass?" objected de Brisay.

"I have it. You may look it over." Her dark eyes shone, as she produced from her blouse a slip of paper. "See—I will translate—it describes one—Herr Hauptmann Karl Buchheim—six feet in height, chest measures 42 inches, eyes blue, hair fair (does the description not fit, monsieur?)—who has license to return to Boulogne on government affairs, by order of General Von Hindenburg, in His Majesty the Emperor's service. Hoch der Kaiser!" A cynical gleam of amusement flitted over her expressive face.

"Madame, you are a magician," exclaimed de Brisay. "How came you by this?"

"Hush, not so loud, mon ami. I will tell you. This pass belonged to a Secret Service officer, who died of a fever in the hospital only a few days ago. I found this pass in the pocket of his coat. I have also the uniform which you will wear, it having been thoroughly disinfected."

"Madame la Comtesse, I salute you," said de Brisay, looking into her eyes with laughing admiration as she stood before him. "You should have been a general yourself." Suddenly his manner changed, and a shade of anxiety crossed his face. "But you, Madame, are you not running too much risk? Will not the uniform be demanded—will you not be suspected?"

MADAME LA COMTESSE shook her head. "There are risks in everything we do, Monsieur, but is not the game worth the candle? There are the papers and plans to be delivered to your General—and yourself. I shall have given a brave man to the cause." For an instant they stood silently regarding each other, then he bent forward and kissed her hand.

"I shall endeavour to do you credit, Madame. How little you realize what a source of inspiration the noble ladies of France have been to us in this war."

"Suffering purifies and elevates, when borne bravely, Monsieur, and our country's sufferings have been our own."

"Madame la Comtesse, a kind Providence has sent me across your path. I had dreamt of such women, but till now I have not had the privilege of knowing one. It is strange that we recognize affinity in another, and we trust blindly, unquestionably. I have only known you two weeks; yet I would stake my life on your word."

"And I mine on your honour. I must return to my duties. Be here to-morrow evening, Monsieur, at the same hour. Bonsoir!" A touch of the hand, a dazzling glimpse of dark eyes, a smile, and she was gone. De Brisay stood alone, his gaze falling on the pass, which he still held in his hand. Then, turning, he reached for his hat and coat and went out into the night. A town clock was striking twelve. The silent streets seemed to echo his footsteps as he strode along, and he was oppressed by the desolation that met him on all sides. Large gaps in the rows of houses, crumbling walls, fallen masonry and debris marked the site of what had once been the principal buildings on the little French town. Here and there whole streets were demolished, and he was forced to make a detour rather than pick his way through the ruins. From the cafes alone emanated an appearance of life and good cheer. Few pedestrians were abroad at this hour, and de Brisay was conscious of starting when a hand touched him on the shoulder.

"Monsieur, Madame wishes you to return. You have been informed against and it is no longer safe for you to go back to your lodgings."

De Brisay, turning, recognized the honest face of Jacques, Madame la Comtesse's faithful servant, who, acting in the double role of cook and orderly, was indispensable to the hospital staff.

"How does Madame know I am suspected?" demanded de Brisay, hesitating.

"Because of inquiries which M. le Colonel Von Gluck has made of me," answered the man. "Monsieur does well to heed the warning if he values

his life and a later chance of escape."

At the door of the house the pair were met by Madame la Comtesse, who beckoned de Brisay into a small room adjoining the salon where a candle threw out a dismal light.

"It is more dangerous than I thought," she whispered. "Here is the uniform—I pray it fits. Don it quickly, Monsieur, and get you hence. We have dallied too long."

She turned to leave him.

"May I ask, what has transpired to so alarm you?" he inquired.

"My faithful Jacques has just warned me that M. le Colonel tried to bribe, then to threaten Jacques into giving him information about you—your nationality—your business here. Jacques swore he knew naught of you, but suspected you to be a peaceful French citizen."

She threw him a laughing glance as she left the room.

A few minutes later an officer in a greenish grey uniform and long coat emerged into the shadows of the hall. Near the door of the salon Madame la Comtesse was standing, but a mist blurred her vision as she put a letter into the outstretched hand of de Brisay, who took hers in a long, tight clasp.

"To be read, Monsieur le Capitaine, when you have passed beyond the lines. The pass should take you safely through without question. Have you sufficient money with you?"

He bowed gravely. "I have, Madame, thank you. Do you wish to place me still further in your debt?"

Silence fell between them for a moment. "Were it not for Noblesse Oblige, I should long to stay. Are you not driving me into exile too soon?" The keen blue eyes searched the depths of the brown ones tenderly.

"Adieu, mon ami! No, au revoir! That is better." Her voice trembled a little in its intensity. "We will meet again beyond the danger zone if God wills."

"Beyond the German lines when we have them beaten, please God. You will be doing your bit here, I there. Au revoir!" Again he bent over her hand with the gallantry of a French courtier, and she was conscious of a thrill of pride in his fine carriage. A minute later she listened from the salon window to the echo of his footsteps on the cobblestones of the street below.

AN hour passed; the hospital was quiet as Madame la Comtesse sat at her post in the shaded candle light. One by one she has sent the tired nurses off to their hard earned rest, while she kept her lonely vigil with the sick. For herself, on this night at least, no sleep was possible, as she conjured visions of the difficulties de Brisay might encounter. Suddenly Jacques spoke her name, and turning she found him regarding her from the door-way with a significant glance.

"Madame, Monsieur le Colonel wishes to see you. I told him that you were on duty, but he says his business is urgent."

"I will be with him presently," she made answer, a shadow crossing her face as a forboding of trouble seized her. She found Herr Oberst Von Gluck, cap in hand, standing in the hall, and ushered him into the salon.

"Monsieur le Colonel does not usually honour me at so late an hour," she said, her eye-brows arching a little significantly.

"Your pardon, Madame, if I disturb you." He bowed and smiled with a suaveness that was not lost upon her, though his tones were abrupt, as usual. "In fact, Madame, I come to warn you that in future it is best not to provide strangers with passes to enable them to get through our lines."

Her face paled beneath his fixed, cold scrutiny, but she gave no outward sign of discomposure.

"I am at loss, Monsieur, to catch your meaning."

"Perhaps, Madame, I can make it clearer. Will you deny that you assisted to effect the escape from this town of a young man, presumably a Frenchman known as Monsieur de Brisay, who, no doubt, persuaded you that he is English. Be more careful in regard to whom you trust in future." A sardonic smile crossed his face.

"Monsieur." She flung back her head with a gesture of defiance. "I deny nothing, and I affirm nothing, but I do question your right to come here at this hour and so accuse me. Has my conduct in the past been so questionable that you wish to suspect me of assisting citizens to escape from Lille?"

(Continued on page 17.)